Mental Health Action Group

Remembering our inspirational and much loved member

Gill Earl

Vice Chair of Derbyshire Patients Council
Treasurer of MHAG
Representative of MHAG
Official Observer at DPTAC
To trace the beginning of Gill’s work with MHAG you have to go right back into the depths of our history, further back than most of us can remember! This is because Gill first became involved with our predecessor – Derbyshire Patients Council (DPC) – way back in the mid-late 1990s. From the very beginning of her involvement she was full of enthusiasm and commitment to the work of making a positive difference to people’s lives. The fact that she served as Vice Chair of DPC for many years shows the level of her commitment to the group both in terms of time and energy.

Although her own experiences of mental illness were what led to her involvement in the Council she was always passionate about making a difference to other people’s lives. Gill brought a special touch of kindness and awareness of others to her work and was always one of the first to welcome new members.

Gill was a woman of action rather than words. This doesn’t mean of course that she didn’t use words effectively too when required. On several occasions she stepped up to the mark when someone was needed to make a presentation about the group’s work. But most importantly Gill wanted to see real changes and real improvements. We’re about action, not just words, she used to say. This commitment to action meant turning out in all weathers and at times when she herself felt less than well.

Gill was Vice Chair of DPC during the time of its Personal Allowance Campaign and was always at the forefront of any work that needed to be done. Whether that was standing on the street collecting petition signatures, meeting with MPs, sending out letters, travelling to Westminster etc. She was always willing to put in whatever it took to make change happen, on one occasion accompanying an MP on a shopping spree in London to see what he could buy for an allowance of £14.30! She was totally committed to changing a situation which left long-stay patients using bits of string to hold up their trousers and begging money for cigarettes.
When Gill believed in a cause she wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer and never lost heart throughout that 5 year campaign. It’s not easy to keep going when there is little encouragement along the way but Gill always stuck at it and always believed we would win through in the end. And win through we did when the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in 2005 that he recognised the injustice of the situation and changed Government policy. This success changed the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of people up and down the country and meant for the first time they were not being treated as 3rd class citizens.

When Derbyshire Patients Council moved out from its hospital base and became the Mental Health Action Group in 2006 Gill was one of the few original members who came with us. She took on the role of Treasurer which she continued all the way through and did a fantastic job for us. Those of us who have tried to take on her mantle since then have quickly appreciated how organised and adept she was at it! She was also a Representative for the Group and in that role she was exemplary. Not only did she continue to help spearhead all our campaign work she was also very good at taking new members ‘under her wing’. Several of them remember being encouraged by Gill in their early days of involvement and for them she became both a mentor and friend. She would also be the one to stay in touch with members who were no longer able to get to meetings, visiting them regularly and providing transport when needed.

When we launched our Gold Card Campaign in 2008 it was no surprise that Gill travelled down to Westminster to point out this latest injustice about bus concessions. Her watchword when speaking to the Government officials and commissioners was always “We don’t want anything more than other disabled people, we just want equal recognition of our needs”.

The fact that Gill was open and honest about her own difficulties enabled others to grasp a better understanding of the impact of mental
health conditions. She had a very natural way of sharing with others so that people could feel free to ask questions. She used this to great effect when helping to train new recruits to Derbyshire Constabulary. By sharing her own experiences of being sectioned she helped them to see how they could make a positive difference to people experiencing a mental health crisis. Her ability to communicate eloquently and warmly was very effective at breaking down the taboo of mental illness and freeing people to talk and ask questions about it naturally.

Gill was to use this openness to good effect again when MHAG was rewarded for its campaign work on transport issues by a place as official Observers on DPTAC (Disabled People’s Transport Advisory Committee) at the Dept for Transport. Gill travelled down to London to attend these meeting every other month. This meant an early start and a long day but to Gill it was all part of the job. She soon developed warm relationships with other disabled people at DPTAC, taking particular pleasure in the working dogs! An opportunity to provide mental health training for DPTAC and officials at the Dept for Transport proved a great success, not least because of Gill’s presence and her willingness to describe her own symptoms and experiences. Here is a tribute from one of DPTAC’s long standing members, Will Bee:

“Over the years of my involvement in DPTAC there have been previous attempts to involve users of mental health services but sadly they have struggled to cope with our focus on issues of physical and sensory impairment. Gill has stuck at it and with your support has made a real change.”

Real change was what Gill desired and thanks to her hard work and dedication she certainly achieved it. There are hundreds of people across the country whose lives have been improved because of her work. We will miss Gill more than words can say both as a warm and loving person and as an inspirational colleague. But her inspiring spirit of determination will stay with us and spur us on to do all that we can to keep making a real difference in people’s lives.