



Volunteer Case Study- Stephanie Cobb **Stephanie volunteered between 2007-08**

I applied for a position as a volunteer at Headway East London when I was about to start a postgraduate conversion diploma in psychology at the University of East London. I wanted to gain experience interacting with people who have had brain injuries as I had been interested in Neuropsychology for some time. I was hoping that this experience would both help me with my studies and also make it easier for me to find paid employment after I finished my degree.

The first day I came to Headway was a real eye-opener for me. I don't know why but I made a common assumption that a centre for recovering brain injured people to be a quiet and subdued place, maybe with a few people sat in easy-chairs not doing much. I was so wrong! I was immediately welcomed by a couple of volunteers and members who were chatting outside the building and soon someone was making me a cup of tea while I waited to be shown round. My surroundings were so far from what I had imagined. The walls were covered in artwork, produced by the members themselves; big, bright, colourful paintings, murals and handy crafts such as necklaces of a quality you would be pleased to find in the shops. There were many noisy activities going on and everybody wanted to speak to the new person. I had such a wonderful welcome and it wasn't long before I had found out a little bit about everybody.

When I arrived at Headway my first instinct was to take on a care-giving role. That instinct was crushed immediately I arrived when I was told not to make everyone a cup of tea. Most members make their own tea! I quickly learned that care-giving is not needed at Headway. What is needed is acceptance, support and companionship and all of those work in both directions. I spent ten months coming to Headway every Friday and I got as much, if not more acceptance, support and companionship from the members there as I gave out. I learned so much from everyone I met, from history and culture to local knowledge and obviously some things about brain injury too! I really enjoyed the arts and crafts activities and was inspired to enrol in an art evening class so that I can continue that interest. I also enjoyed the games and learning all about the other people there. I thought that some people may find it difficult to talk about what had happened to them but I found that people generally volunteered quite a lot of information about themselves and how they feel about their situation and with a little sensitivity most people were keen to talk and most importantly, be accepted and understood. It is amazing what the human spirit can overcome and achieve and I would be proud to say that I know any of the people I spent time with at Headway.

I finished my psychology degree in February and graduated with distinction. I have found my experience at Headway invaluable. I conducted some neuropsychology research for my dissertation which has led to an appearance on BBC's The One Show and a potential publication. Although that was not based on my work at Headway, I am sure that it would not have been possible without my spending so much time at Headway indulging my



interest in the subject and learning from everyone there. I am now working as an Assistant Psychologist in Lewisham. I have been very lucky to get this job as they are extremely competitive. I do owe much of this success to Headway as I was able to refer in my mind to an example of someone I worked with at Headway in answer to every single interview question I was asked!

I was very sad to leave Headway as Fridays had become my favourite day of the week. I always looked forward to coming to Headway, spending a day in such a positive place and being reminded how valuable life is. What started out as a means of gaining experience for future employment quickly became a wonderful adventure for me and I made some amazing friends, both amongst my fellow volunteers and members.