

## A JOINT ADVENTURE

### SALFORD CMHT/MERSEYSIDE YOUTH SERVICE SUMMER ADVENTURE HOLIDAY FOR YOUNG WOMEN 1985

Salford CMHT has been running adventure holidays for young mentally handicapped adults for some years now. Until recently the format had been that of a fairly large group of mentally handicapped people, volunteers and staff going away together for a week camping or staying in basic accommodation and taking part in various outdoor activities. More recently the groups have been getting smaller but have still centred on being "specialist" holidays for mentally handicapped people.

The thinking behind the adventure "holidays" is to offer more than providing a holiday, with the emphasis on adventure. Adventure can mean anything from capsizing out of a canoe to burning your own sausage over a campfire, both being activities which mentally handicapped people tend to be "protected" from. The holidays have a strong ethos of allowing freedom of choice and taking "risks" in terms of freedom of movement and discovery of new skills in potentially "dangerous" outdoor pursuits type activities such as canoeing, horse riding, rock climbing. And in the background of course is the adventure of the relationships built up, leading at times to a kind of euphoria which rarely occurs back in the "normal" working situation.

Through talking with friends who are youth workers it struck me how similar their objectives on "residential" were to our objectives on our adventure holidays. This led to the obvious suggestion of organising a joint venture.

Marie, a youth worker in the Whiston/Prescot area, had already been thinking of organising a residential holiday for the group of unemployed young women she had been working with over the past year. The previous summer I had been away with a group of young mentally handicapped women and we agreed on organising an adventure holiday for 10 young women, the number being decided by the number of minibus seats.

Within the Youth Service work with girls and young women is a fairly new and developing area of work. It is recognised that until recently the youth service has neglected the needs of girls, particularly in the area of outdoor pursuits, and there are strong arguments in favour of activities and space for girls only.

Mental handicap services on the otherhand appear to be behind the times and my organising girls-only activities is sometimes seen as "reactionary", perhaps because it is relatively recently that the sexes have been de-segregated within many mentally handicapped services. However within both services the arguments are the same: in mixed company girls can often be inhibited and unconfident about trying out new activities, especially in the area of outdoor pursuits which have a traditional image of being "male" activities. Too often girls' experiences of certain activities have been marred by male ridicule or patronising.

As well as the shared aims of providing a residential experience with the opportunity to taste new activities and gain satisfaction and confidence from this there was the additional aim of providing a new experience for both sets of young women. For the mentally handicapped women it would provide the opportunity to be with 'normal' young women, sharing ordinary things such as music, clothes, chatting with friends on an "equal" basis. We hoped to get away from the helper/helped type relationship between young women and volunteers or staff, which is more often the only way presented to our young women to relate to "normal" young women.

For the "normal" young women it was an opportunity to overcome their fears and prejudices about mentally handicapped people.

We stayed in the Karabiner Mountaineering Club hut in North Wales, which is economical, ideally placed for outdoor activities, has excellent self-contained facilities and one communal bunkroom. The programme of activities included canoeing, horse-riding, walking, visits to a slate mine, as well as more familiar outings to a cinema and a disco, and numerous cups of tea in the famous Pete's Bats of Llanberis.

As was to be expected, at first there was little interaction between the different groups of girls. For the first couple of days the "normal" girls sniggered at the handicapped girls behind their backs.

When we drew up in the minibus the doors would fly open and the girls jump out, leaving Diane who is physically as well as mentally handicapped left stranded forlornly in the bus. It was hard for the staff to restrain from rebuking the girls for their unsympathetic and inconsiderate behaviour, and hard not to be "protective" towards the mentally handicapped girls. However, the turning point came. As always on such holidays some incident occurs which unites the group. In this case two of the mentally handicapped girls went "missing" late on the second evening, a very dark, wet and windy evening. The search party soon rescued them in the minibus, but the incident served to make the girls aware of their different responsibilities towards each other and the fact that already the safety and well being of any member of the group was a collective, group responsibility. And indeed the two who had gone missing gained in "status" in the eyes of the other girls.

The three mentally handicapped girls started to be accepted into the group on the strengths of their individual personalities. Angela, one of the quieter mentally handicapped girls, fell in with a couple of the quieter "normal" girls and this little group would be discovered writing postcards on the top bunk or playing cards by the fire. Lynn, the extrovert, homed in on the "naughty" set, the adolescent "rebels". And Diane, who perhaps had less choice than others, found herself in the "core" group who were the ones playing a full part in domestic chores and cooking, who preferred a walk up to see the waterfalls to an afternoon around the shops. We ended up with three sub-groups according to personalities rather than abilities.

Gradually the girls gained confidence in handling the wheelchair or helping Diane dress. The girls started swapping and borrowing clothes to go out in in the evening. They started telling Lynn to sit down in the minibus, just as they would shout at each other, rather than complaining to a member of staff about her behaviour. And they started asking questions about each other, sharing stories of their experiences, their opinions. The girls' mental handicaps didn't disappear and weren't ignored, but they were accepted as part of an individual's personality, just as the other girls were recognised as moody, or loud-mouthed or with emotional problems. But, best of all, the "normal" girls included the mentally handicapped girls because they were fun to be with, or pleasant company, and not out of a sense of duty or a desire to help. And it only took a week to achieve this.

Having been on this holiday, having seen "integration" work so well, I wouldn't want to organise another "specialist" holiday again. There were so many added benefits for everyone - the "normal" girls provided a model for such things as saying what they did or didn't want to do, what to wear to the disco. The mentally handicapped girls were exposed to teenage culture to the point that at times their ears and eyes were popping out of their heads, and to a point that in the rest of their lives their carers and professionals effectively ban them from experiencing. If we really mean what we say in

mentally handicapped services about the benefits of normalisation, then we have to stop sheltering mentally handicapped people in "specialist" settings. And, in turn, the Youth Service needs to start looking at the needs of mentally handicapped people, and not seeing them as a specialist "problem" outside of their area of work. The three mentally handicapped girls were no more or less of a "problem" than the other seven girls who came on the holiday and I can only thank them for their contribution in making it all such a rich experience.

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