

The story of Joan Hughes (1928 - 2008)

Joan Hughes was a scientist and peace campaigner who helped build unions of mental patients and became one of the first historians of the survivors' movement. Social historian Andrew Roberts has used her writings to describe her as she saw herself, and as he remembers her.

The Joan you saw depended on whose eyes you used. She was ordinary - she was flaky - warm and friendly - an embarrassment - reliable - a mental patient - a pioneer of women in science - a peacemaker - a radical - a cat-lady - a Catholic - the list could go on. But Joan

knew who she was. Here is a short fantasy obituary that Joan wrote about herself in 1989, and which the priest read out at Joan's funeral.

"Born in 1928 in a warm working class street where all the children played together. Did well at school. Remained

child-like all her life, because that was fun, but had an adult side. She did some original work in chemistry. Had great fun in doing laboratory work... after a breakdown, became concerned about other people with breakdowns in a house for homeless people from mental hospitals... The policies worked out in these houses later became Government policy, and people who had breakdowns, when better, were able to have community care and live as equal members of the community... Joan had a lot of friends, who were of all different types. Almost everyone came to the funeral.... The cat was also brought to the funeral, and scratched for joy on the grave."

Science

As a little girl Joan developed a passion for measurement. Her delight was using the family thermometer on the open coal fire - snatching it away before the red alcohol line hit the top. At eight years of age she "did this once too often, and the thermometer was broken". Tears followed, but her father said it indicated her interest in science and bought her a Pears Cyclopedia to study.

But not everyone was so encouraging. Joan had to fight to be a woman scientist. When she became a Government Chemist, even the aunt she lived with complained "that is a man's job!" Many older Catholics Joan knew "wholly distrusted science", but "1959 was a time of change" and Joan was asked to speak in the parish hall on the positive relationship she saw between religion and science. There were also conflicts within science when Joan fought for ethical research which



Joan in the 1950s, when she was working as a Government Chemist

safeguarded consumers.

Joan became a graduate member of The Royal Institute of Chemistry in 1962 and her work as a government chemist led to her research at Birmingham University on Trace Methods for Sulphate and Nitrate, for which she was awarded her M.Sc. in 1966.

Just before, and after, her research, Joan was detained in several old-style mental hospitals. She was both a scientist and a mental patient and, sometimes, people found it convenient to dismiss her claims for scientific ethics as the ravings of a lunatic.

Breakdown

In the early summer of 1965, Joan's doctor decided to send her "to Horton Hospital for a rest". "They tell me that I'm unlikely to be here for more than three or four weeks," she said to a fellow patient. "They told me that, when I first came," he answered, "but I've been here for 23 years." Joan, however, went through the "revolving door" of repeated admissions and discharges.

One of Joan's breakdowns was of special significance for her as a chemist, because the most severe part of it was brought about by a psychiatric drug her G.P. gave her for depression. The first dose was an injection. On the way home, Joan went to see a film, during which she became "incredibly depressed". "The world was slipping away". Everything "appeared to be taking place in another world". Psychiatric medication continued as tablets, which she took "automatically" for the next two years. These were two years when she "did not initiate any activities for myself". She lived in "a shadowy world" where she "could observe what people were doing, but not act for myself, except in a desperate way". She eventually arrived in Goodmayes Hospital, where the doctor stopped the tablets she was on. Six weeks later, on November 29th 1971, Joan wrote in her diary "suddenly my periods returned. With the first flush of escaping blood my depression was cured, and I resumed normal life."

Joan had been prescribed an alternative drug, but she was always convinced that her recovery was the result of stopping the first one. Like other patients who later formed the Mental Patients Union, she had taken

medication uncritically and only learnt from stopping it what a "side effect" is.



Joan's painting of her room in the Mental Patient's Union House. The multi-coloured bedspread was knitted by Joan. The picture is consciously modelled on one by Van Gogh.

The Mental Patients Union

In her Short History of The Mental Patients Union (1986), Joan describes how "groups of psychiatric patients and sympathetic mental health staff began to make political comments on their situation in society". In August 1973 she read a small advertisement in a socialist newspaper that said: "The Mental Patients Union are meeting once a week in Prince of Wales Terrace." On October 12th 1973 she moved all her possessions into the house that the union had established in Mayola Road, Hackney. In May 1974 she wrote "during the last six months, I have painted and wallpapered my room, given a lecture, published an article in Science for the People, painted pictures, written letters for the union, cooked my own meals and gone to socials and a film. I never did any of these things on drugs. Why do doctors make these mistakes?"

I met Joan at Mayola Road and we worked together on the Directory of the Side Effects of Psychiatric Drugs, a ten page pamphlet published in October 1975 that shocked people because it was so carefully based on pharmacological sources. It was almost certainly our most important publication. Burnt by his earlier experience of the union, the Director of Mind prohibited it being mentioned in the association's magazine and it was confiscated from our members in Rampton secure hospital, but it was reported on the front pages of medical journals and received enthusiastically by patients who could read, for the first time, an objective account of which of their symptoms could be the result of their medical treatment. Joan kept the

Directory in print for several years, revising it in 1977, drawing a picture for the cover, and printing it by hand on a community duplicator. She continued to work with other patients for the rest of her life.

Cosy corners

On one side of Joan's bed was her own painting of her room in the Mental Patients Union House. On the other side she had a chart describing the scientific discovery of the elements from which matter is made. Joan was the thinker and the home maker.

Joan called her autobiography *Cosy corners in war and depression - The story of one person's nests*. She was someone who made safe, comfortable homes in the midst of turmoil and distress, a streak of sanity in our lives. When the rest of us were fruitlessly agitated about one of our members being taken into a mental hospital, Joan was sorting out clean underwear to take to her.

Joan and Andrew Roberts worked together in the Survivors History Group, which often meets at Together. Parts of Joan's autobiography can be read at <http://studymore.org.uk/arcjoan.htm>



Joan Hughes, Tony O'Donnell (the founder) and David Kessel prepare to leave the Old Fire Station, Stoke Newington, for a Hackney Union of Mental Patients expedition to Walthamstow Marshes. The Hackney Union of Mental Patients was formed in 1987 to "devise useful and gainful ways of work" and an active life for patients.