

History is made when our personal stories come together. The Survivors History Group sometimes meets at Together. It is a way that people with experience of mental distress can share with others their accounts of their achievements.

Here, Andrew Roberts, 65, a social historian who has suffered from suicidal depression since he was only eleven years old, tells the story of Valerie Argent (1948-1991) and how she made history. Valerie's story may seem remarkable, but she did not think so. Like many people who suffer from mental distress, she had a very low opinion of herself and the significance of her life. The Survivors History Group assumes that everyone's life is remarkable and that we all have a story to tell. Why not explore your own story and how it relates to what other people have been doing by joining Andrew and the team?

The story of Valerie Argent

I met Valerie on Wednesday July 7th 1963. We were both patients in the Ingrebourne Centre, Hornchurch. Valerie was only just fifteen, a shy girl with long black hair who, at that time, walked with a limp. She told me that she had been in Ingrebourne since she was fourteen and that she was not very clever. She had moved into Ingrebourne from a mental subnormality hospital in January. Before that she had been a grammar school girl, but that, she said, had obviously been a mistake.

According to a letter (January 1963) from her Ingrebourne doctor, Valerie "had been an in-patient of the Royal Eastern Counties Hospital, Essex Hall, Colchester, which is a hospital for mental defectives. She was sent there as other suitable accommodation was not available, following an attempt at suicide by holding her head in a basin of water. She is an intelligent girl with an IQ of 120 and has been attending Hornchurch Grammar School."

According to Valerie, Essex Hall had diagnosed her as suffering from an unusual mental disorder that reduced people to mental defectives and meant they could no longer respond to language and reason. Whatever the medical story, the reality was a back ward where patients were considered to be human vegetables. Valerie often re-lived her experiences, sometimes as states of mental withdrawal, like being trapped in a nightmare, sometimes on paper, when she could come to terms with it. Here is one of Valerie's re-lived experiences of Essex Hall:

Spoons and tin plates. The cold. Chapped sore thighs and buttocks, and the skin sloughing when they washed the shit off. Soreness there, and on my wrists, where I'd scratched and bitten

them. And bruises everywhere. The casual way they slapped you. The way no one, dad, the doctors, the chaplain, ever protested about them hitting us. The doses of laxatives for punishment, the ones that thought it funny, or got annoyed if you protested about scalding bath water, shampoo rubbed in your eyes as well as hair, pushing me over when I was doing dirty linen in the sluice so it went all over me, and then wouldn't open the washroom for me. The shame of doctors rounds, and all the students being taught on you.

Valerie and I were married at Islington Registry Office on my 21st birthday. Valerie was not yet seventeen. Although our friends and relatives supported us, we were the only two people in the world who thought our marriage was a good idea.

We wanted our home to be an open one, with friends staying, and without tight family walls. Many of our friends were mental patients with experience of different kinds of treatment and we heard many contrasts between caring, loving and rational treatment, such as we had experienced at Ingrebourne, and cold inhuman treatment such as Valerie experienced at Essex Hall. But it was not a simple contrast between good

neurosis centres and bad old hospitals. One day we went with a friend (Christine) who was entering a neurosis centre. Christine threw a glass ashtray at the centre wall, smashing it to pieces. If you had heard the way the staff spoke to her, you would understand why. When (at her own choice) Christine was moved to a locked ward in the old hospital, the matron greeted her with a hug.

In 1973, Valerie and I were approached by a group of people who wanted to form a mental patients union. At first, this appeared an extension of what had already been happening in the lives of people like us. In reality, it was much more dramatic than that, and for many years the mental patients union took over our lives.

With our young daughter, we started the first mental patients house. This was in Hackney, a few roads away from where I now live. Valerie's warmth and work helped to hold that community together for almost three years, but the experience was traumatic for all three of us. Through it, however, we formed some new and lasting friendships.

After the collapse of the Mental Patients Union, Valerie took part in a series of community care courses, run by



Valerie with our daughter in the garden at our home in Swanage, Dorset in August 1967. Valerie was 19 years old and I think this was the happiest period of her life.

Hackney Workers Educational Association (WEA). Her experience as an inmate of a mental handicap hospital, left her with strong feelings about the way people with learning difficulties are treated, and she was an active member of Hackney Action on Learning Difficulties when it started in 1982, as a result of one of the WEA classes. She also belonged to Hackney Mental Patients' Association and as a representative of this and the WEA, she was an active member of the City and Hackney Community Health Council (CHC) from 1982 to 1988. Amongst the many issues that she raised at CHC meetings was the fact that, in Hackney, adolescents were admitted into the adult psychiatric wards.

There was a great deal of pain in Valerie's life, but even in the midst of pain there was beauty and laughter. After a suicide attempt in January 1982 she wrote a poem about "the sparkle of laughter amid tears". Such an experience, she said, would outlast depression and emerge in memory like a diamond sparkling in darkness. The stimulus for this poem was a nurse in the intensive care unit who made her and the other patients laugh.

For three years, from 1985 to 1987, Valerie was a part time lecturer in Social Sciences at Middlesex Polytechnic. She worked as a lecturer some days and attended a psychiatric day hospital on others. She was a patient at Hackney Hospital from 1984 to 1987, and then

attended Shoreditch Day Centre from 1987 to her death. She died peacefully in her sleep in the early morning of 26th September 1991. Writing her obituary from the autobiographical materials she had left was one of the ways that I attempted to come to terms with my loss.

To join the group and share your history, write to Andrew at:
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