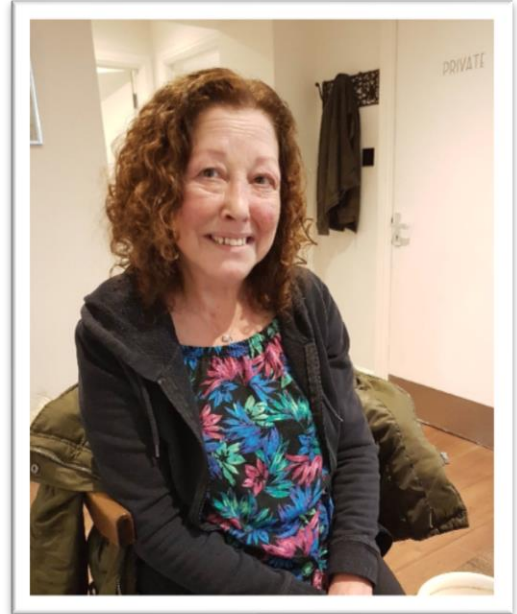


Building Bridges Case Study – Carol – Mar 19

Carol joined the Building Bridges programme in 2016. She was keen to tell her story in order to give something back and help others. She hopes that by telling her story it will encourage others to join the Building Bridges Programme and get the help that they deserve too. This is her story.

Carol joined the Royal Air Force as a Medic at the age of 19. Coming from a small fishing village in Cornwall, she knew that she wanted to broaden her horizons and see the world. She found her RAF role challenging but exhilarating, dealing with real life-and-death scenarios on a regular basis and having responsibilities that belied her age and experience. Covering the ambulance strike of the 80s and delivering babies were just some of the highlights of her RAF career. In particular she relished the comradery, spirit and feeling of belonging that the RAF gave her.



As is often the case, Carol's career ended with the realisation that co-location with her serving partner was going to be a challenge. With an aspiration to start a family, she left the service and had a successful career working in administrative roles within the police and medical services, whilst still relocating on a regular basis to facilitate her husband's military career.

Things were going well until 2013, when Carol became ill. She was diagnosed with lung cancer and had half her lung surgically removed, only to find out that the diagnosis had been incorrect and that she was actually suffering from tuberculosis (TB.) The mis-diagnosis combined with the effects of the operation and TB drugs had a negative impact on both her physical and mental health and, despite returning to work, she found that she couldn't cope. In 2014 she reluctantly left her job. This was the last time she worked. The following is what Carol had to say about the Building Bridges programme, including the Active Plus Employability and Wellbeing course that she attended.

How did you come to be part of the Building Bridges Programme? Before I found Building Bridges, I had a lot of anger and blame associated with my mis-diagnosis and subsequent deterioration both physically and mentally. This was holding me back and preventing me from moving on with my life and it was also having an extremely detrimental effect on my mental wellbeing. My 2 sons tried for a long time to persuade me to get help, but it took over 2 years before I accepted that I needed it. Through a referral to Wiltshire Mind I was referred on to Building Bridges.

How were you feeling when you first joined the BB programme? By the time I joined the programme I was extremely anxious and had lost all my confidence and self-esteem. I used to shake uncontrollably and felt like I had nothing to offer anymore. If I ever allowed myself to think about my previous military career, it was through a negative lens, "How did I ever do that? I could never do that now." That "Carol" was someone I didn't recognise as me. I had no self-belief and was depressed and felt detached from the world.



How has being on the programme helped you? I was assigned a keyworker, called Lynda. She was just what I needed - understanding and empathetic but also direct and forthright and she had belief in me, which really helped. With my permission, she referred me to the Active Plus Employability and Wellbeing course, whilst still working with me on a 1:1 basis.

Given how you were feeling, what made you give the Employability and Wellbeing course a go? Lynda, had previously had participants who'd been on the course and it had really helped them, so she suggested I give it a try. I had no idea what to expect but was willing to give it a go as I was desperate to improve my situation.

Was it as you expected? No! Although I didn't really know what to expect, I certainly didn't expect it to be what it was. We explored areas which, before the course, I wouldn't even have thought would be part of an Employability and Wellbeing course. I thought it would be more about job searching, writing CVs and looking at my skills, but it was so much more.

How did you benefit? We spent lots of time exploring my negative mind-set, barriers to moving forward and challenging my limiting beliefs. On the first session, I remember Meg highlighting my use of language when I made negative comments, such as, "I'm not a practical person" and other remarks during the team task. She also drew attention to the fact that, in my efforts to make others feel good, I would put myself down in the process. It was a real eye-opener as I had no idea I was even doing it or of the detrimental affect it was having on me and my mental health. Gradually over the weeks, Meg helped me to understand myself better and gave me tips and tricks to use to start to reverse some of the negative habits which had become so normalised that I hadn't even realised they were there. Each week, she would set us tasks which we could complete, but only if we wanted to, so there was no pressure. She explained things in a way that we could all understand and could apply to our own individual circumstances. The process was really progressive and empowering and meant that I could take responsibility for my own progress. The more self-aware I became and the more I practiced what I'd learnt, the more I progressed and this in turn built momentum and gave me the motivation to keep going. Within weeks I could feel the old Carol returning, it was like someone had turned the lights on. My best friend and my family noticed the changes too, which was really wonderful.

What made it such a good learning environment? The group was small and friendly and we built trust very quickly. Meg was full of energy and was direct and honest from the start. She was never afraid to challenge in order to help us to progress, but she was also funny and empathetic, which made us feel relaxed and supported. She kept in regular contact with Lynda, my Keyworker, which was really helpful as it really felt like there was a team behind me.

What did you learn/take away from the course? I learnt so much and am still applying it all now. I learnt that the only way to achieve your goals is to make them real – write them down so that you can see them, buy into them. I started doing positive affirmations and I still do them every morning in the mirror to set me up for the day. I see things in a different way now – whereas I previously looked at my RAF career with disbelief that I could ever have done the things I did, I now look at it with pride in the knowledge that the



Carol that did all those things is still here and every bit as capable as Corporal Carol! When I catch myself thinking or saying something negative, I gently check myself and amend it, for example by adding “yet” to a negative statement, to open up the possibility of growth in the future. I’m much more proactive now, and look for solutions rather than seeing the problem. One of the most important things Meg taught me was self-awareness and to work on myself from the inside out. When I came on the course I thought it was about finding a job, but it was much more than that. I now realise it was about building solid personal foundations – confidence, self-esteem, resilience – once those are in place the rest will follow.

How has life changed now? Things have changed a lot. I am now busy and feeling much more fulfilled and positive. I think I’m nicer to be around - I’m not angry, frustrated or lost anymore. This doesn’t mean that I don’t have down-days anymore, but I am more able to recognise how I’m feeling and get back on the right track quickly. On the course, we had a talk by the Building Bridges Volunteer Coordinator about the benefits of volunteering. Shortly afterwards, Lynda supported me to visit a local charity shop to ask about the possibility of volunteering. I thought I was just going for a chat, but by the end of the day I’d done a 3 hour shift and was already loving it! I now volunteer there every week. Then, a few weeks after the Employability and Wellbeing course finished, I was invited to go for an interview for a work placement at the Active Plus offices. I was really nervous, as I hadn’t had a proper interview for a long time, but I attended and was so proud to be offered the placement, which will be for 3 months, just as soon as all the relevant checks and paperwork are in place.

How do you feel about the future now compared to how you felt before joining the programme? If you’d told me 6 months ago that I’d now be leading a full and busy life, going to the gym, swimming, doing yoga, working in a shop, doing a work-placement and feeling good about myself I would never have believed you! I can genuinely look forward to the future now and have ambitions to do some of the things that I’ve never got round to doing, like going on a cruise, travelling with my sister and spending more quality time with my family and grandson. I’m hopeful that the work placement might lead to paid work, but even if it doesn’t I know that the skills and confidence I’ll gain from doing it will help me get the job I deserve very soon.

What would you say to others who might be thinking about joining the Building Bridges Programme? Just do it! It’s really hard to try new things when you are feeling down, but you can’t learn or improve your situation unless you experience things, so you’ve just got to go for it. Through Building Bridges, you have access to 40 different organisations who all work together and are all there to help you. You can also go on courses like the Employability and Wellbeing one that helped me so much. The programme is so beneficial and you’ll learn so much about yourself - it can only improve your situation, so what have you got to lose?