

## Stories from Welcare

Good morning – a brief glimpse of some of the stories I discovered, as the Association for Friendless Girls, as Welcare was originally called, evolved.

A quote from the annual report of 1983-84 remains true today:

*“The daily struggle to cope with the jumble of benefits designed to keep poverty at bay is one which requires the brain of an Einstein and the patience of Job.”*

Former volunteer, staff member and supporter Janet Wells, helped people manage their budgets at the time, and vividly recalls visiting around 20 people, from Southwark to Surrey, “trekking from flats in Clapham to a caravan in Coulsdon.”

Another long-term supporter, and former staff member, the Revd Liz Newman, told me about a woman, with a one-year old daughter, who had come to Woolwich to escape a violent relationship. She needed practical help with benefits as she had very little English but was able to turn her life around - her daughter qualified in medicine and today works for the NHS.

Former Vice Chair of Welcare, Marion Parsons, was at the Lewisham branch, when Welcare staff had to take a woman to hospital because of extreme domestic abuse. Marion later became one of the team who led on the 2006 merger of the 12 independent Welcare organisations to create today’s larger charity, capable of tendering for contracts in a new commissioning environment increasingly favouring larger suppliers.

But what of us volunteers?

Olivia, who provides admin support at East Surrey says: “The people you work with are always so encouraging, supportive and patient.”

Edna who uses her artistic gifts to create colourful notice boards says: “I don’t know why, but even though I’m tired, when I come out of Welcare I feel happy – you get happiness from volunteering.” I know that feeling myself.

The final words must go to two families we have been there to help.

A class entitled “Parenting a violent child” in Richmond helped Hosanna to manage the difficult behaviour of her seven-year old son, later given a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder. But she also realised that she needed to spend time with her teenage daughter and husband too, so the whole family benefitted. She feels that help came along just at the right time and says: “Early intervention is crucial for children with special needs and I’m now able to understand the journey.”

Welcare is particularly important because we have the flexibility to step in when social services cannot, and so can prevent a difficult time becoming a family crisis.

Sam told me his little girl said they were “the forgotten family,” as he struggled to feed them, and even to keep them warm. It was the first time he had ever been out of work, and he didn’t understand how to apply for benefits.

But Welcare provided immediate help, arranging for a crisis grant and access to a food bank, and was in touch every week. Sam said: “It was as if a weight had been lifted. Welcare’s help came at a time when no one else was there.”

Thinking of Sam, and so many others, I was struck by the continuing relevance of this quote from 1979, which could have been written yesterday:

“The comparative poverty of many single parents is an acknowledged statistical fact: what is new is the cumulative effect of inflation and cuts in Local Authority budgets on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable sections of society.”

But Welcare is there – and with your help will continue to be there - in a world where some things change but many stay the same.