

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING NO UPPER AGE LIMIT AT SWOP

I have been at Cherry Tree Nursery now for just over ten years and have many vivid memories of my first couple of years at the project.

One incident that sticks very much in my mind, which I can laugh at now but at the time, was very serious to me, happened not long after I became employed part-time.

One weekend I was thinking how lucky I was to find paid work again after being so ill and feeling so very unemployable and totally worthless to myself and everyone else, when into my mind suddenly jumped an awful thought. What would happen when I reached 60 and normal retirement age! Would the Supported Employment Scheme I was on finish and would Jess expect me to leave! What would I do then?

I spent the rest of the weekend in a terrible turmoil inside. My mind was in a total whirl and my nerves were very bad.

On the Monday morning when I arrived at the Nursery I went and straight away asked Jess what was in store for me.

She could obviously see the stress I was in and she put her hands on my shoulders, looked right into my eyes, and said, "My dear Liz - You need never, ever, leave here".

Well at that moment all the heaviness lifted and I felt a terrific release of tension. I skipped out of the office and across the yard like a two-year old. Then I had a silly thought and came back into the office and announced that when I died I would be cremated and ask for my ashes to be scattered on the stock bed. I also added, "Then I can come back to haunt you all".

It was a stupid thing to say now I think of it, but the complete release of worry was so wonderful to me. I have the total reassurance that there is a place for me to be where I am needed and wanted and even when I have a 'down' time, there is always someone there who totally accepts how I am feeling and knows that with support, I will come through it.

I must just add that in recent times, with the fundraising for the project being so difficult and tiresome because of the lack of donations, when I have been feeling that the nursery will have to close down, all I have to do again is to think of what Jess said to me.

"Liz, the nursery will never, ever, close".

I am looking forward to being part of a project which will never, ever give up because there are so very many of us who are united in the same great need of just such a supportive place to attend, and who want to be able to do something useful to keep it open. I shall enjoy being part of the challenge.

Bob 63

Bob belongs to the literacy and numeracy classes

'If I wasn't at Cherry Tree, I would be sat at home being nothing. I have a purpose in life now, rather than just drifting from day to day. It helps me a lot being here and gives me an interest. I enjoy meeting with people which I wouldn't do otherwise. I have been here for eight to nine years and my illness has got better since being here.'

George 68

George has joint responsibility with David (another retired member) of being the Cherry Tree Nursery bookkeeper

'If I wasn't here I would be in bed or in hospital. I have freedom here and space to do my own thing. I like to chat, laugh and joke. I have been here for five years. I like the comradeship, sense of belonging and enjoy doing something useful in society. I like dealing with the public and seeing the end products being sold. I can now give advice to customers about pruning and the best site for plants, as I have learnt so much from being here.'

Jeff 68

'If I wasn't at Cherry Tree Nursery I would be bored stiff at home, thinking about old things and getting more and more depressed. Being at Cherry Tree does, me the world of good.'

David 61

David looks after the watering at weekends and delivers plants.

'Before finding SWOP I felt awful, it is hard to imagine what I would be doing without SWOP. If I didn't come here I would feel useless. Being employed here makes me feel needed. My life wouldn't be so full. It's a lovely feeling that I am helping SWOP. I really like it here and being able to chat to people. If I have any difficulties there is always someone here to listen. Jess helped me to fill in my DLA form – I couldn't have done it without her help. I enjoy all the outings. If I didn't have SWOP I would have an empty void. I decided to carry on past retirement age and that means such a lot to me.'

David 66

David has joint responsibility with George (another retired member) or being the Cherry Tree Nursery bookkeeper.

'I wouldn't exist if I wasn't here. If I woke up on a Monday morning and didn't have Cherry Tree I would be on the ground. Cherry Tree has given me a life, before that I just wanted to die.

Having a job has given me self-respect and Jess has given me confidence. I would do anything for SWOP. It has given me self-esteem. I have been here for ten years.

Liz 63

Liz has a lot of responsibilities which include secretarial work, creating and maintaining three databases, fund raising with Jess, organising outings, ordering plants, talking at Plant sales and advising people about what plants to buy.

'If I wasn't here I would do nothing. I like the company and enjoy working with the plants as I enjoy gardening. The people here are very friendly. I also enjoy the construction work and recently worked on the new greenhouse. I have been here for nine years.

Ernest 76

'If I wasn't here I would be staying at home and you can only do so much at home so being at Cherry Tree gives me something positive to do. I came here when I lost my mum. It took me four years to get over but Cherry Tree helped me through it. It means a lot to come and see people. I enjoy the company and am willing to talk to others who need a chat. I have been here twelve years and am willing to do anything – I recently laid the mypex and helped construct the new greenhouse. Cherry Tree gives me something to occupy my mind.

Ted 68

Ted is a team leader.

'I have been here since the beginning. To start with I dug trenches and helped plant the stock bed.

The people are nice here and I get plenty of fresh air. Being here is like belonging to a family. Jess looks after us and has always looked after me. If I weren't here I would lie in bed or wander around with nothing to do. There is no pressure here and everyone helps each other.'

If I didn't have Cherry Tree I would be at home doing nothing. I would be a dead loss.'

Richard 65

Richard is a team leader

'It is so good to be here. I have friends here. I have been here for four years and I would just be at home if I wasn't here.'

Brian 62

Brian belongs to the literacy and numeracy classes.

'It is very good at Cherry Tree because it is a healthy activity and I have been given the opportunity to do a gardening qualification. If I wasn't here I would just be wandering around the shops.'

Brian 67

Brian organises the quizzes between staff and volunteers and also between Cherry Tree Nursery and Chestnut Nursery.

'Cherry Tree makes me get up. I can't get motivated when I am not here. I would stay in bed and miss the company that I have here. I would just end of wasting time in bed or watching the TV.'

Maureen 62

'It is therapy to do work every day, it keeps my mind occupied. Everyone is so supportive. I get a lot of joy out of it and look forward to it. Coming here is like having a permanent job, spending the day doing something useful in the community. It keeps me healthy and has helped me a lot. I used to sit and worry about my illness. I find I have to work my problems away and by that I forget everything and I keep gaining health and strength everyday. I enjoy the trips out. My social life is here.'

Cecil 69 – as quoted on video

'It is beautiful here. I would be stuck at home if I didn't come here.'

Peter 60

Peter comes in at weekends to feed the cats and is responsible for locking the nursery up at weekends.

'I would stay in bed if I didn't have SWOP. It gives me something to get up for. I just wouldn't get out as much. SWOP means so much to me, the socialising, friendship, community spirit, relaxation, care, understanding and fun. The support I get is vitally important.

I am responsible for taking the minutes at the management meetings. Its great to be part of something so worthwhile. Being at SWOP keeps me out of hospital and gives me a sense of purpose.'

Pip 60

Pip is also responsible for doing the invoices for Hampshire bus fares.

PRELIMINARY REPORT OF A RESEARCH PROJECT INTO THE BENEFITS OF HAVING NO UPPER AGE LIMIT FOR ATTENDANCE AT CHERRY TREE NURSERY (SWOP) by Jane, a volunteer at Cherry Tree Nursery

People are relieved that they don't have to retire and that they can stay at Cherry Tree Nursery because other day centres don't allow people to stay past retirement age. These members make up 15% of the work force at Cherry Tree.

One of the things that Cherry Tree is respected for inside and outside of the nursery is that it doesn't exclude anyone. The wonderful thing is that there is no time limit or upper age limit.

Being at Cherry Tree dispels loneliness. Often people at Cherry Tree have little or no social networks outside of the nursery, therefore people receive mental and social stimulation from staff, volunteers and customers.

If people were told that they had to retire, it would be counter productive to the whole philosophy of Cherry Tree Nursery. SWOP was set up to help people with severe and enduring mental illness. Mental illness doesn't discriminate; it doesn't just affect young people, so anyone with mental health problems is to be welcome at Cherry Tree.

Cherry Tree is a safe place to be, where people can feel part of the community. If people of retirement age were excluded, where would they go?

People approaching retirement age would feel anxious about having to retire which will lead to their mental health becoming worse. It can only be a downward spiral, undoing all the good work that has been done by Cherry Tree: the staff and volunteers who support and care for each other. For some it is the only care and support they receive.

Some volunteers who have reached retirement age have been at Cherry Tree since the beginning. They have worked really hard building the nursery up, doing a lot of the hard and heavy manual work which were needed in the beginning. They now thrive on watching the nursery grow and seeing how much all their hard work has helped so many people.

Other large organizations e.g. B & Q and Marks and Spencers employ people of retirement age.

Many people at Cherry Tree who are of retirement age have a vast knowledge and many skills, covering many aspects of the work done at Cherry Tree. Thus knowledge and their skills are extremely valuable to SWOP.

Cherry Tree offers basic literacy, numeracy and computer courses. These classes are enjoyed by many people, rebuilding confidence and self esteem. These classes are enjoyed by older people too.

When new people begin at Cherry Tree, it is often the older members who show the newcomers what Cherry Tree does and the work involved. They help them feel at ease.

I have interviewed all the people at Cherry Tree Nursery who are of retirement age. I asked them what it means to them and what they would do if they didn't have Cherry Tree. The following are their accounts:-

'I don't know what I would do without Cherry Tree. Since coming here I haven't been in St Ann's – I started coming here seven years ago.