



Denise- An Inspirational Woman

Denise Collins talks to Niamh Davis from Lifetimes



In honour of International Women's Day, Lifetimes would like to celebrate inspirational women and take this time to raise awareness about women and homelessness. We spoke to Denise Collins a football enthusiast and coach, a talented photographer and a woman who has been affected by homelessness, to talk about her life.

In 2003 Denise was the joint owner with her partner, of a small business that sold cards and gifts. For many customers, she was the agony aunt of Spitalfields, where people would come to buy a card and end up staying for a chat. On the surface everything was fine, but unfortunately stressors such as an ill partner, financial concerns, a mounting workload, her own physical health problems and past traumatic experiences resulted in Denise having a breakdown. Denise became a member of what is referred to as the 'hidden homeless', moving from one family member to another. However, this became increasingly difficult due to worsening mental and physical health. As tensions rose between Denise and members of her family, Denise began temporarily sleeping rough. We asked Denise what this was like and how a women's experience of rough sleeping differs from men's. She described how women are more vulnerable living on the street, how she would often sleep in the day and stay awake all night, for fear of being raped and how rough sleeping is an absolutely terrifying experience. After gaining a space at a women's hostel, Denise received support and therapy which alongside her faith, has enabled her to 'become a better version of herself'.

We asked Denise for her thoughts on homelessness, where she feels more work is required and what she felt let her down. The lack of training of her support staff, the pressure put on her by psychiatrists to take medication, the threat of benefit sanctions, the disparity of power between herself and health care professionals and the mistakes made surrounding diagnosis, or lack of, were huge challenges and hindered Denise's progress, rather than helped her.



This however, did not stop Denise from becoming the inspirational woman that she is now. As a child, Denise was a football fanatic and the star player for her girl's school team. Disguised as 'Dennis' she also played for the boy's team. As she got older, pursuing her passion became harder, being told she should take up 'more feminine past times'. Now, she is back on the pitch, training to become a football coach, re-igniting her obvious love for football and her enthusiasm is infectious and exciting to be around. Denise is also a talented photography who is able to capture the beauty of every person she photographs resulting in many successes, including her own photography exhibition.



Denise cares deeply about improving the system and talks about her own experiences in the hope that women who may find themselves in a similar position know 'not to give up' and that there is 'a light at the end of the tunnel'. Giving back to the community and helping people is so important to her and she still visits the women's hostel where she stayed.

Denise Collins, believes that her journey to where she is today happened for a reason and feels lucky to be able to do what she loves. Denise is one of the friendliest, most positive people one can meet, she is undoubtedly an inspirational woman and it was a privilege to meet with her.

Denise's story illustrates how lives can change dramatically in a short time and how people can be helped if the correct systems are in place. Mental health, physical health and homelessness are intrinsically linked, feeding into each other, becoming issues that cannot be addressed separately. To effectively tackle Homelessness, a holistic approach is often required by people who see people rather than a problem. In one of the richest countries, stories like this are common but they are not inevitable. By raising awareness, putting pressure on the government and supporting homeless organisations we can start making small changes that will have a massive impact.

***Lifetimes** is a small charity that has been active in the borough of Wandsworth for 30 years. We are currently running two homeless projects, **Woman 2 Woman** and **Men Matter 2** that aim to address the issues of hygiene and period poverty individuals experiencing homelessness face by providing care packages. For more information on these projects and Lifetimes charity, please visit our website www.life-times.org.uk visit our twitter handle **@LifetimesNews** or call us on **0208 875 2849**.*