

A powerful example of how a person living with a mental health condition can be empowered by using a one-page profile to ensure her voice is heard.

Written by: Marianne Selby-Boothroyd

Sandra's story

Forty-seven year old Sandra likes going to church, listening to instrumental Jazz music, going to college, meeting new people and spending time with her cat, Molly. She doesn't like it when she has flashbacks, feels paranoid or when the voices in her head take over and she can't hear her own.

Born in Lancashire, Sandra moved with her mother, brothers and sister to the Caribbean when she was three. At 13 she returned to the UK and it was whilst living in London and attending secondary school that Sandra began to feel really isolated. As a child she was described as quiet, caring and overly sensitive. She was bullied at school where she felt she was not as clever as the other children. Leaving education at just 16 to escape the bullying, Sandra went to see her GP about her problems for the first time. But instead of getting the support and understanding that she craved, Sandra was prescribed sleeping tablets for anxiety and depression.

Sandra first tried to kill herself at just 20 years old by taking an overdose of sleeping tablets, thinking "If I just go to sleep and never wake, it will all be over". This began a cycle which lasted throughout her twenties and thirties. Sandra's life was mapped by frequent suicide attempts and admissions to hospital mainly under section. She experienced periods of mania followed by extreme lows and would also hear voices.

In recent years Sandra was introduced to person-centred thinking tools and was supported to produce a one-page profile. The aim was to regain control over her life, find new ways to manage her mental health (other than medication) and start looking to the future again. Sandra wants to get back into paid employment. She wants to travel. Move to a bigger house. Look into fostering. Spend more time doing the things she enjoys such as writing poetry. Much like anyone else, Sandra's hopes for the future are all about leading a happy and fulfilled life – something that she now knows is possible by clearly communicating to people how best to support her in the here and now.

Of the profile Sandra said: "It has had a big impact on my life. It is so important to me to help others through my own experience but I find it really hard to speak in public or be in large groups. Doing my profile helped me understand the kind of support I need to prepare to be with others, being able to share this information with others has meant I have gone from strength to strength – last week I spoke at a conference full of medical professionals – I got a standing ovation!"

In 2000, there was a turning point in Sandra's life. She was allocated a black social worker. For the first time she felt listened to – particularly in relation to her cultural needs. It was her social worker who found Fanon Resource Centre and who stuck with her for the eight months that it took Sandra to build up the courage to go there.

Sandra credits her social worker and Fanon Resource Centre for not judging her on her past, instead focusing on the present and the future. Through Fanon, Sandra started to get involved in groups and even completed college courses. For the last year she has acted as an Ambassador for Southside Partnership – which has involved speaking at public events and supporting others to identify the support they need in their recovery.

Struggling with a mental health condition is incredibly hard. The one-page profile has helped Sandra to communicate who she is, what she likes, what she doesn't like, and how best to support her. She shares it with the important people in her life, her friends, family, doctors, mental health professionals and new people that need to understand her. With this support in place, Sandra has lots of good days and fewer bad days where she feels down and is hearing voices. She is doing a lot with her life including a three year college course learning British Sign Language with the plan of becoming an interpreter.

Sandra is now at a stage where she feels she is in recovery. She is moving ever closer to fulfilling her dreams. She still hears voices. But having her own voice carried through a one-page profile means that it can never be lost in the noise.