



Zellany Neal

Creative Practitioner

“As Sister Sledge said... ‘we are family’!”

What is your job title, what does it involve day-to-day and how long have you been working in that role and/or at the Trust?

I am a creative practitioner and have worked at the Trust for more than two years. My role works in a collaborative manner with service users, clinicians, practitioners and community organisations, in taking a holistic approach to people’s mental health needs. It focuses on recovery and taking a strength-based approach to supporting people to move on from secondary mental health services. It is about enabling and empowering those using services to take ownership and control of their own mental wellbeing.

Why did you choose to work for the NHS?

I started working within the NHS 33 years ago as a domestic assistant at Ham Green Hospital on the outskirts of Bristol. It was previously a sanatorium with long sweeping verandas and had infectious disease wards with an isolation bubble to treat Lassa fever. Its history and architecture enthralled me. I was 17 at the time. The two main local employers in the area were the Trust House Forte motorway service station on the M5 and the local hospital. As my mum worked at Ham Green Hospital as a nursing assistant, and having spent my school holidays working at the service station, I felt it was time for a change. When I started I was struck by the camaraderie of my colleagues and the compassion of the nursing staff. It wasn’t just a job it to them it was a vocation and their commitment and care shone through.

I went on to train as a biomedical scientist working in hospital diagnostic microbiology laboratories in Bristol and Leeds and eventually retrained as a mental health social worker in 2007.

Having struggled with my own mental wellbeing I became interested in the ‘diseases’ of the mind. There has always been lack of parity between physical and mental health service provision. From my own experiences of accessing and working within these services, the services and interventions provided have often felt oppressive. It was more of being ‘done to’ rather than having any say in what would be most appropriate in meeting needs.

What's your favourite part about your job?

My favourite part of the job is seeing someone achieve their potential, recognising they have the power and control to manage their own mental wellbeing. My social work values and ethics underpin what I do with in my job role. The medical model of mental health care may have its place. However, I'm very much an advocate of the model of recovery and take a holistic and strength-based approach to my work. People are the sum of their parts, our experiences shape us. It's these experiences that have an impact on our mind and who we are. It's about supporting people to recognise their resilience and strengths. I enjoy developing partnerships with service users, other professions and other organisations.

What's the most challenging part about your job?

I feel we are always fighting the 'system'. The NHS has become such a massive organisation, but one size does not fit all. Each locality has its own diverse population with varying health needs and an ever changing third sector service provision. Trying to navigate systems and access support for our service users can lead to a level of frustration and what feels like unfairness. This is especially apparent in the current time of austerity where the 'bar' for accessing services has been set higher with people falling between the gaps and eventually entering in to a 'crisis', when perhaps this could have been averted. This at times creates a sense of hostility and resistance which makes it so much harder to engage those people who require our support and intervention.

Tell us about:

a time you were really proud of your work

I am really proud to have developed the creative practitioner role within the South, South East Community Mental Health Team and develop the Staying Well course which has enabled people to identify their strengths, become empowered and take control of their mental wellbeing.

I was also proud to hear of a service user who attended the course with the perception and attitude that nothing would change for her. She had been in and out of services most of her adult life and felt this would generally be her life course. She had no confidence or self-esteem and appeared dependent on secondary services. However, by the end of the course she felt empowered to make changes. She became assertive to accessing the interventions she felt she needed. She ended up seeking and gaining employment and she'd previously thought she would never work again since becoming unwell.

your fondest memory of working at the Trust

My fondest memory was actually attending my interview for the job role of creative practitioner. My now line manager interviewed me and I was struck by her energy, enthusiasm, vision and passion of both her and the team. The creative practitioner role was a brand new role, there was no benchmark. It has been empowering to work with people who are progressive and innovative in their thinking and willing to listen and engage in developing new ideas. Those memories continue to motivate and influence me in my day to day work.

What do our values of integrity, simplicity and caring mean to you? How do you show these values in the work that you do?

The Trust's values of integrity, simplicity and caring are core to what we do and how we deliver our services. We need to be able to reflect on our own practices and the practices of others, as well adhering to our own professional values and ethics base. My social work values underpin everything I do within my job role. For me it is about enablement and empowerment. Using language and fostering communication which is compassionate and non-judgemental, brings equity to the caring relationship and enables trust and growth to happen.

How has the NHS made a difference to you/how have you seen the NHS help people?

There have been massive changes in the way services are delivered by the NHS since I started 33 years ago but there is still the fight of ending mental health stigma. A current work colleague referred to the team as her 'work family' and there is a real sense of being valued, mutual respect, compassion, commitment, integrity and support. As Sister Sledge said... 'we are family'!