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Rhiannon is a founder member of Brecon Dementia Friendly Community and Dementia Matters in Powys.

What was it that got you involved in making communities more dementia friendly?

I was a pharmacist working for Powys Teaching Health Board. I got involved with a Public Health Wales initiative looking at the use of anti-psychotic drugs in care homes. I became increasingly aware and frustrated about how little we were doing to support those living with dementia within our communities.

In October 2012, I went to an Alzheimer's Society Conference and heard Ian Sherriff speak about how they were developing Plymouth as a Dementia Friendly Community. It was the first I'd heard of such an initiative, and it struck a real chord with me.

As I was driving home with a colleague, I said "we could do that in Brecon. We're a caring and compassionate community..." and everything started from there. I informed Powys County Council, made links with the Town Council, and gathered a group of like-minded individuals together. We soon realised we were pushing against an open door, which was hugely encouraging. What stands out is that from the very beginning, it's been a genuinely grassroots initiative. Everything that's been achieved has been a result of all of us in the community working together.

What changes have you seen in people's attitudes to dementia locally in the five years you've been working in Brecon and Powys?

One of the things we recognised from the start was how important it was to get people talking about dementia. Starting conversations with groups locally and getting information into the press helped us to challenge some of the myths and stigma that surround the word dementia. It's about normalising it as a disease, and giving those people living with dementia, and those people impacted, either as a family member or a carer, a voice that can influence what understanding, support and help they receive within the community.

There's been a huge culture shift, there's no doubt about that. We've had such a great response from individuals, shops, businesses, statutory and voluntary organisations and community groups in Brecon, wanting to get involved and take joint ownership of the initiative. A big part has been down to some of the fantastic work that has been taking place in schools locally, which my colleague Joan Brown has played a major role in. When you hear children talking about dementia, and realise that they have a good understanding of the disease, you know that social change is happening.





You've received a lot of recognition for your efforts. What are your proudest moments?

We've been very fortunate in having our work acknowledged. Brecon was the first community officially recognised by the Alzheimer's Society in Wales as 'working towards becoming Dementia Friendly'. In 2015 Brecon Dementia Friendly Community was runner-up in the Alzheimer's Society National Awards for Outstanding Contribution towards Dementia Friendly Communities. Then in 2016, I won the PAVO (Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations) Volunteer of the Year award. All of this led to funding to develop a Powys-wide organisation, Dementia Matters in Powys, which continues to go from strength to strength with the support of the Big Lottery .

While these things are important, and give everyone involved in the project a sense of pride, the proudest moments for me are those times when I hear from those living with dementia what a huge difference their community becoming dementia friendly has meant to them; socially, practically and emotionally.

There are many magic moments that I've been privileged enough to be part of. It's so exciting and powerful to see people living with dementia really having their voice and influencing a change in attitudes within society. If I've played a role in encouraging, supporting and enabling this, it's where I get my biggest pleasure.

What difference has this made to your personal life?

I have learnt so much through being part of this initiative and have met some remarkable people. It's proved to me that we all have the capacity to make a difference. It might begin with one individual, but if we share a common aim and vision, and work together, we can achieve anything. There's so much goodness out there.

I've also learnt a lot about myself. My strengths and my weaknesses. I'm no different to anyone else. I'm not extraordinary. I just want to do my bit. What's exciting now is that I'm seeing people coming forward with the skills, the drive and the passion to take things on to the next stage. Knowing I was there from the beginning is a privilege, and I'm so glad that when I was given the opportunity to do something, I took it.

Do you have any tips for anyone looking to make a change where they live?

It's important to have commitment and passion. It's about recognising possibilities and potential, and believing that something is possible. It's really important to make good connections. Reach out to existing projects and initiatives. Learn from them and form alliances wherever you can. Acknowledge what people are doing and celebrate your successes, however small they might feel. Make sure everyone feels valued and respected in what they do, and always be grateful when people give their time and energy to make things happen.

It's about all of us doing our bit. However large or small that might be. All of us could perhaps be a little more understanding, loving, caring and respectful. It's by working together that we can truly make a difference. If you're motivated to make change within your own community, find other people who you can work with, and support each other.

Some people might look at what's been achieved in Brecon and Powys and say that they couldn't possibly do anything similar. But everything starts small. When I first set off on this journey five years ago, I had no idea what would happen or where it would take me. Just look to others who have taken an opportunity to influence society, whether in a big or small way, and realise that you too have the power and potential to do this.

You can find out more about Brecon Dementia Friendly Community at www.dementiafriendlybrecon.org.uk.

For more information on dementia Matters in Powys, visit www.dementiamatterspowys.org.uk or phone 01874 611 723.

For more information on Dementia Friendly Communities, visit www.alzheimers.org.uk.

To find a Dementia Friends session near you, visit www.dementiafriends.org.uk.