

# take part

## Advocacy in Action

Review (5th November 2010)

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This review was provided as part of the East Midlands Take Part dissemination process.  
The review was provided by the East Midlands Take Part Champions, the Workers' Educational Association East Midlands and the University of Lincoln.





## Introduction

Advocacy In Action (AIA) was set up in the 1980s in order to help disadvantaged members of the community and enable them to have a voice. The group supports them in difficult parts of their life – all four members of the group present at the interview have all struggled in life for various reasons at certain times. Advocacy in Action requested that we all share something about ourselves as this is the way they usually like to work. They shared the following experiences which show how they fit into the group:

### Kevin:

*'I have been with the group for over 20 years – people don't always know they have a voice, but I help them speak out'. Kevin was 'locked away' as he described it from 1960-1980, shut up in a room and largely ignored. He cannot read or write but instead tells his story in pictures. He is now a renowned artist with his pictures being used in books, publications and displays. In the picture he brought with him to the interview, Kevin has drawn himself lying in a bed in a small room with a person depicted walking away from himself. He explained 'I was left on my own for four days on that occasion'. He had shown himself in an institution and the person walking away was a member of staff.*

Today, Kevin is a Visiting Lecturer for the University of Nottingham (he was one of the first learning disabled lecturers in the country) and has also advised for the BBC. He also sits on numerous committees on a local scale.

### Julie:

*'I would describe myself as a disabled Irish woman who survived domestic violence abuse and homelessness. I work for Advocacy In Action and also the Friendly Irish Action for Nottinghamshire (FIAN) which was set up to help the Irish community in Nottingham'.*

Julie is an Assessor in General Education, has written numerous articles and books in education and also lectures at the University of Nottingham.

### Brian:

*'For the first few years of my life I lived in a caravan with my gran, but when she died I had to live in a house – I found it hard to cope with that (living in a house). I was put in a care home where I was abused at the age of nine. I ran away. While living on the streets I saw someone get killed, right in front of me. I shouted for help but everyone ignored me. I lived on the streets for 35 years until I met Stuart – he got me off drugs. He took me in and let me live in his house and locked me in a room to get me off the drugs'.*

Brian and Stuart now live together and have been in their flat for 5 years. Brian is on the committee at the South Church Court where he lives and also at the local church. He runs workshops to educate people about his life – he has written a book about his story ('I had a lot of poison inside me. Telling my story releases that poison') – and is an Assessor for Nottingham Trent University. Brian told us that every new member of the Nottingham City PCT was given a copy of his story as a case study.

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### **Stuart:**

Stuart was vaccine-damaged at birth, which left him with speech impediments and found it hard to talk to the interviewers. He explained that for a long time he found it too difficult to make people understand him and would get frustrated and give up. Now he has learnt to calm down and take his time. He explained a little bit about his childhood: *'I'm from Leicestershire. I went to boarding school and enjoyed it there, we went on camping trips and did rock climbing. My interest is in technology, I'm a good technician and that's what I bring to the group'*.

At this point Julie told us how each person in AIA brings their own unique skills to the group and this has helped them be, largely, independent as an action group – *'we don't take funding – if you take funding you can be controlled'*.



## A. Review and Evaluation

The purpose of the Take Part review and evaluation was to enable the participating groups to review and evaluate their progress over the last year and to generate a report reflecting this. The report can be used by the group to contribute to its external evaluation. Take Part in the East Midlands was also using the review to generate information about the skills and attributes of community organisers/active citizens. The team from Advocacy In Action led the interview process and spoke about what they wanted to speak about within the framework of exploring a) areas in relation to the service evaluation and review and b) the skills and attributes of a community organiser.

### Successes & Sustainability

AIA have had many success stories over the years. Some of their proudest achievements have come on a personal level, but such is the strength and unity of the group they all share this success. The highlights for the group include Brian putting his story together and sharing this with his students in order to help them in their life, be this through experience or through empathy. As mentioned earlier, The Primary Care Trust in Nottingham used the case study for every new worker and they in turn give feedback and help the learning process. Another success story is how Kevin was asked to be the Chairperson for the Stakeholder Board at De Montfort University in Leicester.

Currently, the group have been short-listed for the award 'Best Employers' Support to Social Care Workers' in recognition of the partnership work that they have been doing with Nottinghamshire County Council, Leicester City Council, Lincolnshire Council and De Montfort University and Kevin and Julie are travelling to the Dorchester Hotel in London for the ceremony, an event which the group are hugely excited about. *'I am wearing the full gear, black suit and tie!'* Kevin told us. But, just to show how grounded the group remain, he added *'but we will travel back home after the event. We talked about it and we cannot justify the expense of staying over for the night'*.

Julie's personal favourite of the groups' recent successes is the short film they made entitled 'Arise you Gallant Sweeneys'. She explained it is about a group of elderly Irish men who live in Nottingham and haven't been back home to Ireland since they left. The film is what Julie described as a 'journey of healing' as it follows the men and members of AIA organising a trip back and travelling to Ireland together. It is a moving and heartfelt story that highlights the pain and anguish that exists hidden away in many of our local communities. The film has been screened locally on several occasions at the Broadway Cinema in Nottingham and also at special screenings in Cardiff. It has recently received a positive review in the Guardian newspaper.

Another success is a project AIA have run which facilitated a group of older people in the local community who peer researched other elderly people centred around 'income-based home support'. The research was conducted alongside Leicester City Council and resulted in a report entitled 'Listen to Me – I Live Here'. Leicester City Council has adopted all of the recommendations. *"This is an example of what we call co-production"* Julie commented.

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### Strengths and Limitations: what could have gone better?

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Julie talked about how initially they met with a certain amount of hostility and negative feelings. They found it difficult to get support, but they carried on regardless. Then, in 1990, they won an award – Innovations in Community Care – from Social Work Today and suddenly everyone wanted to work with them. AIA refused many of them, believing they did not want them before so why now? They carried on running the office themselves, with no help and no funding. Independence and self determination are key to their successes. This means that sometimes their work is unacknowledged.

Advocacy in Action has *‘consciously stayed small. We almost lost direction in the early 90s because of the sheer amount of work that presented itself. We had people parachuting down onto us from all over the place.’* It nearly got the better of them and from that experience they have learned that it is better to stay underground. Kevin openly admits that he has had to take a *‘couple of months off’* recently as the stress and pressures of being involved with the group can sometimes take their toll – *‘people probably don’t think that volunteering is stressful. I can tell you it is. You push and you push in order to make a difference and help change things but eventually you burn out. I stepped back, the group supported me in this decision. Now I am ready to carry on again’.*

In many ways they do not promote themselves or the work they do (although due to the great work they do this has a habit of finding it’s own way into the spotlight!) and took the decision to stay off the internet – they don’t have a website. As Julie explained *‘maybe some would see that as a negative approach, especially in this day and age. But we don’t want to be swamped. In some ways that keeps things more personal – if someone wants us they have to pick up the phone or come down and see us’.* Despite this approach the group has had some amazing and groundbreaking achievements spreading far and wide - they have recently helped set up the first disability rights group in Slovenia and in Southern Ireland, and one of the first in northern Italy.

*“We are keen to work with anyone who is interested in sharing good power.”*



## B. Active Citizenship

What do the following words mean to you?

### Active Citizenship

*'I don't understand that word. Could you rephrase it please?'* was Kevin's comment and he summed up how so many groups carry out valuable and successful work in the community whilst finding the current jargon irrelevant or unknown.

The group added that they work from the bottom up – they want to be active and involved not because they are 'told' to. Julie commented: *'I use the word very purposefully. I have the right to live here. I have the right to be involved. However, I don't like the government telling us that we are citizens. I don't like any situation where they try to colonise us and impose their language or their ways on us because it's good for us or because it will save them money.'*

### Big Society

At this point, none of the group think it means much at all and don't understand the concept – two of the four members had not heard of the phrase before.

### Getting involved

Brian said for him it's *'getting involved, being committed'*. The group sit on lots of committees and believe in the idea of 'skill swapping'. However, they often find the committees use too much jargon and often have specific agendas. Kevin also made the point that, as a non-reader, he finds accessibility quite problematic. The way the group looks at it is that if after 6 months of being part of a committee nothing has changed or improved they come off of it, as they feel there would be no point in being involved with it any longer. They are in this game to make a difference and change things for the better.

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### C. Reflection

On reflection the group feel they need to somehow represent younger people more, but then as Julie commented *'if that's not your 'audience' why change yourself to fit in? Stick with what you know, what you are good at and what you were set up for in the first place'*. One of the regrets she has is that last year a fire at her home destroyed much of her life's work and a vast majority of AIA's materials were lost. The group are now looking at putting together 'material portfolios' that express their work.

Julie talked about the chapter she wrote for a book called 'The Ethos of Involvement as the Route to Recovery' (in *Mental Health: Service User Involvement and Recovery*, edited by Jenny Weinstein). For their organisation, this title sums up their purpose, their reasons for existing, and in many ways their successes. The Mental Health Review described Julie as 'an independent radical voice with a clear analysis of power.'

A final comment explained how the group are quite often sceptical about people's intentions and the reasons why they want to be associated with AIA: *'Some academics live off the raw edge of our anger and experience. They need to share the credit. Some 'partners' want you to be obedient, compliant: a guest at their partnership party'*.

*Julie Cassidy Gosling, Kevin Chettle, Brian Pendred and Stuart from Advocacy In Action were interviewed at the Hard to Find Café on Mansfield Road, Nottingham by Matt Beresford and Lisa Robinson on Friday 5th November, 2010*