

Speech given by Princess Diana

"Does the Community Care?"



ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

FACULTY OF TEACHER TRAINING AND EDUCATION

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For many people in our society, the idea of talking with someone who has been in care, whether it be a juvenile offender, a person who has suffered from mental illness or perhaps someone with learning difficulties is too awful to contemplate. I can assure them, it's not so bad! Not one of those I've met ever hurt me, was rude to me or treated me as though I was mad.

We now recognise that many of those who were put into long stay institutions need never have been put there in the first place. One woman I vividly remember meeting had been 'put away' thirty years ago, suffering from post natal psychosis, after the birth of her first child. Yet if the right support and resources had been available to her, she could so easily have continued to live in the community. Continued to enjoy what we all take for granted. Being able to go to bed when she was tired, not when the shift changed. Eating what she wanted, rather than being given food which offended the fewest taste buds. Being able to be private when she needed to, rather than having to share a room with four other people. No space, no privacy, no life!

Care in the community has made all the difference to this woman's life. She is now being helped to return to the community she left so long ago. Living in a homely environment with a small number of others, she is relearning the skills which had been lost to her. Savoring again the delights of a life she could barely remember.

Recently a great deal of publicity has been given to a tiny number of people who have damaged themselves or others when they returned to the community from hospital care. It has raised very real concerns in many people. It's true there is a small minority who are rightly seen as a potential danger to the community

who need greater levels of care and understanding. But however terrible these tragic cases are, they cannot be used as a way of dismissing the needs of thousands of others who are no threat to the community whatsoever.

But again the circle of ignorance, fear, and prejudice spins to condemn. Casting them in the role of the untouchables - the people to be avoided at all costs. Disabling them, for being different. Denying them their God given right to be included, to be part of their community. Denying them their right to live without fear of ridicule, hate, and exclusion.

Finding the right kind of care in the community for each individual can never be seen as the soft option. Nor is it cheap! It requires the specialist skills of many different experts and organizations. A partnership, between doctors, health and local authorities, the voluntary and private sector and the police, all working together. Sharing their resources and undeniable talents to create an environment in which a person can develop and grow. But it's also a partnership between these dedicated carers and the person being cared for.

However, being asked to help decide what is best for themselves can leave the individual overwhelmed and frightened. Building on the work of 'Citizen Advocates', who defend the rights of people with learning difficulties, perhaps we could also learn from the help being given to people with AIDS.

Very early on it was realized that they needed a very special kind of support, a very personal kind of attention to help them face their difficulties. Family and friends were sometimes too close to the problems to be able to really see what was needed. While the experts didn't always have the time to see beyond the symptoms. What was needed was an ally, a 'Buddy' to give them one to one attention. Someone who could listen and be there for them. Being a 'Buddy' is not easy. But from those I've met the exchange of basic human kindness enriched not just the person being helped but also the person who did the helping. By sharing

the successes and the disappointments, a 'Buddy' could really make a difference to the lives of those taking their first steps back into the community.

Wherever I go I'm privileged to meet so many people who are trying, in so many different ways, to improve the quality of all our lives. Volunteers and professionals, individuals and groups, from the old to the very young, all bringing people together. All attempting to build, in whatever way they can, a happier community, a better society and a healthier nation. But despite the remarkable work they're doing, there still seems to be a deep concern that something is missing in our society today: a real belief that the community cares!

There seems to be a growing feeling of discontent, of emptiness in many peoples' lives. While an overwhelming sense of loss and isolation undermines their efforts to survive and cope with the complexities of modern life. They know something crucial is lacking.

Deep within us all is a need to care and to be cared for. We all have that right. Yet many people, in their attempt to build a life for themselves, lose touch with their own sense of belonging, of being part of something greater than themselves. They no longer believe they have the time or energy to give back to the community they live in, by helping those around them to build a happier life. Yet a community can only develop when individuals remember how dependant we all are on one another and reach out to those around them. Yet we continue to hear how people who live in the same street don't even acknowledge their neighbor's existence, let alone stop to say hello!

A community is made up of individuals. Everyone has their part to play in building a caring community. Virtually everyone at some point in their lives will need to be cared for by that community. The community is us. If it's denied the nourishment it needs for survival it will fail to flourish. A plant without water will die and so too will the spirit of our community.

Care in the community is a partnership. A partnership between skilled and caring professionals and a concerned and caring community. Working together, to find new ways of helping these people who've been excluded and connecting them with neighbors who will understand and accept them. By providing, proper funding for the homes they will need and the support they so rightly deserve, we can show them how much we care.

Every single one of us needs to demonstrate how much we care for our community, care for each other and in the process, care for ourselves. Perhaps, we're too embarrassed to change, too frightened of the consequences of showing that we care. But why not risk it anyway! Begin today! Carry out a random act of seemingly senseless kindness! With no expectation of reward or punishment. Safe in the knowledge that one day, someone, somewhere, might do the same for you.

Thanks for coming and God bless. (Applause.)"

