

Reflections of an advocate

Client objective: "I want to stay at home, I love my own bed".

My specialism is older people. They absolutely rock in my opinion - I know that advocates aren't supposed to have an opinion, but in that I do.

I have always referred to the people that I work with as clients. To me they are very important people, without them I would not have been doing what I considered to be the best job in the world. My clients told me they liked that feeling of importance, it made them feel that they were being taken notice of; being listened to - isn't that what it's all about?

As you will all know, advocacy is about enabling someone to have a voice, choice and control in their lives, whether they have a 'right' or whether it's a 'would like'. Sometimes, given the right information, people can go off and achieve for themselves - but that's not always the case.

We can voice someone's wishes, highlight rights etc., to appropriate people/departments/services and you can escalate rights through statutory service hierarchy/complaints procedures etc but in these times of 'cut backs' if the resources are just not there then achieving results can take a very long time. How does that help the client? How does this help an elderly person with a progressive dementing illness, whose quality of life is realistically time limited?

In scenarios where a person needs considerable support to have their voice heard in order to achieve an objective, then sometimes, what I refer to as 'advocacy plus' is needed. Advocacy plus can take on many guises and of course it should be tailored to your clients own unique situation so it doesn't dis-empower. Its done in such a way that the opposite occurs.

Quite rightly, as a profession we should be knocking on doors, highlighting what should be done because its that persons right - that is our job. We all know too well that statutory service wheels can grind into action painfully slowly at times!

I spoke for my client, I expressed her wishes in accordance with her instructions for as long as she could give them. I highlighted needs appropriately and then rather than leave her with what might be considered an unmet need, I assisted her to achieve..... advocacy plus. Advocacy plus fills gaps in service provision and ultimately, I believe gives clients a far greater voice.

My client had a amazing friend who was incredibly supportive but who didn't always know her way around the system, whether something was right or not!. In this situation, I provided advocacy support for my client. I provided information to my clients best friend which would enable her to provide complimentary support for her friend. This really was a team work approach. My client, my clients best friend and me..... all aimed at a very lovely lady achieving her wish "to stay at home, I love my own bed" for as long as she possibly could.

The poem written by Debbie is the story of our collective and collaborative journey from her 'carers' perspective.

As advocates we don't always appreciate the positive impact that our work has on people, because as far as we are concerned "we are just doing our jobs".

Chris Kitson formerly of Age UK Cambridgeshire & Peterborough

It was back sometime in 2010,
feeling hopeless and full of despair.
My friend had lost her husband
And had Alzheimer's clearly there

I'd tried my best to help her,
I just couldn't seem to win,
The first question anyone asked was
Are you her next of Kin?

Her brother was quite aged,
And lived 3 hours away
He'd very poor eyesight
But tried his part to play.

An advert for Age UK came on,
Answering my very prayer
Ringing my local office and
Suddenly Chris Kitson was there.

The most important thing she did
Whilst I let it all come out
Was listen with such understanding
I just knew without a doubt

That Chris from Age UK
Would be the one for us,
I could tell by the way she spoke to me
That nothing was too much fuss.

She quickly came to visit us
And over that first cup of tea
There was formed a special bond
With my friend and Chris and me.

She liaised with the social worker
Told us about protection from the court
Taking time with my friend
Staying much longer than she ought

She helped secure some care visits
Spread throughout the day
But sadly not all agencies
Do just what they say.

Each time there was a problem
If I said 'does this seem right?'
I'd barely put the phone down
When I'd see Chris within my sight.

If there was any injustice
Chris would be by my side
Over the years she's shared with me
A many bumpy ride.

Deborah Lively

When daily visits didn't work
Chris helped put me right
Before we look into a care home
Let's try care both day and night

She knew like me
My friend had said
Please keep me here for
I love my own bed

Again you've guessed
Soon Chris was there
To help us get
Great live-in care.

With so many needing help
We could now leave Chris alone
Knowing she would always be
Just at the end of the phone,

Soon it became apparent
For every one to see
The thing my friend missed most of all
Was that of company

As well as her illness progressing
Needing to never be alone
The time had come to help her
Find a wonderful care home.

I'm sure you don't need telling
Who drove me to choose a home
And offered me a handkerchief
As tears cut me to the bone

When we settled my friend
In the home that suited her best
At last I thought that Chris
from us would finally get a rest.

But someone like Chris
Never leaves you feeling alone
And regularly she could be seen
Just visiting the home.

No-one can last forever
And recently my dear friend's life did end
But Chris didn't hide in the shadows
Supporting as would only a best friend

An advocate Chris maybe
Following guidelines to the letter
But her support, compassion and understanding
Helps change lives for the better