



Press Release

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For Immediate Release

Mental Health Sufferer Returns to Hospital Where She Was Treated to Help Others

A former mental health patient from Gloucester who has received support from the age of 13 is now working with the same healthcare company which oversaw her treatment in order to help other women struggling with their mental health.

Natasha Lowe, 24, of Gloucester, was an inpatient at Cygnet Alders Clinic, on Podsmead Road, after she was officially diagnosed with personality disorder.

She has now begun working for the Lived Experience Network as an Expert by Experience - someone who has personal experience of using or caring for someone who uses health, mental health and/or social care. She will be supporting people hospitalised due to their mental health at Cygnet Health Care services.

She will use her experience to talk with current service users and share their feedback with senior staff so that necessary changes can be made to ensure the service provides the best care to those who need it.

“One of the most powerful things I’m able to do as an Expert by Experience is help someone that is in the same place that I once was by saying ‘I understand, because I felt that way too’”, she explained.

Natasha was first admitted to a mental health service when she was 13 years old, spending time at different services, including Cygnet Hospital Sheffield, before she was transferred to Cygnet Alders Clinic when she was aged 18.

She explained: *“Being admitted to Cygnet Alders was the first time I felt truly safe. They made it easy for me to do the hard work and they put plans in place for me to reach the goals I had for myself.*

“With their help, I achieved something which seemed so far out of reach; independent living. In my eyes, it is the place that built me up to be the best version of myself that I am today. It was life changing for me.

“Now I feel it’s right to give something back.”

Cygnet Alders Clinic, part of the Cygnet Health Care division, is a 20 bed rehabilitation service providing assessment, treatment and rehabilitation for women with personality disorder and complex needs. Natasha spends one day a week at the hospital as part of her role.

She said: *“I want to spread this hope and help other people recognise that no matter how bad your situation may be, there’s a light at the end of your tunnel. Things can, and will, get better if you accept the help at hand.*

When you're in a mental health service, sometimes you just don't have the strength in yourself to speak up about what you need. I've been there and I know what helps and what hinders. I want to share that expertise to help get others into a good place.

"I can't change anything bad that happened to me or that has happened in the past for anyone else. But what I can change is the future and improve other people's experiences. I want to create an environment where people feel safe to talk to me and have the confidence to know I will listen non-judgementally and with a sense of empathy having walked in their shoes."

"I can relate to service user experiences on a deeper level and that makes sure the trust is there, and I can get better responses out of them.

"No one struggles in the same way but I'm definitely able to empathise a lot more. I'm able to guide them through their difficulties and create a clearer path for the future."

In 2018, Cygnet Health Care, which operates services for individuals with mental health needs, learning disabilities and autism, became the first independent provider of healthcare services to invest in a full-time Expert by Experience Lead.

It now works with more than 300 Experts by Experience to help ensure the voices and opinions of service users are heard and considered across the organisation and that feedback is actioned upon to improve its 150+ services.

"Things have turned around for me, and it can for everyone else. I want to show that to them and prove that life doesn't have to be a cycle of mental health getting better and then worse again. There's so much more to live for," added Natasha.

Raf Hamaizia is the Expert by Experience Lead at Cygnet Health Care and he works alongside Directors to shape and enhance service user service user experience on both a local and strategic level. He relies on more local Experts by Experience like Natasha to listen to the opinions of service users to ensure he is best representing their voice at Board Meetings, Steering Groups and when it comes to reviewing and developing policies.

He said: *"I am so proud to see our Expert by Experience programme growing and going from strength to strength. The programme is about bringing in a new lens regarding how we can work with service users and learn from them effectively.*

"Natasha who can help us drive real change and make a huge difference to so many people.

"In my experience, these roles are incredibly powerful. Being able to sit down with a service user and tell them you've been through and that you understand the place they are coming from is a real privilege. You see the moment their shoulders relax when they realise you have shared experiences.

"I have a fire in my belly to want to change the status quo and I have no doubt Natasha is the same."

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Notes to Editors:

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