



Press Release

Immediate Release

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### **“This is what I was meant to do” – Nicole’s apprenticeship journey**

A mental health worker from Barnsley has praised the apprenticeship opportunities available at a leading health and social care provider after she became the first Occupational Therapy apprentice to secure a qualified position.

Nicole Kenyon is sharing her experience at Cygnet Health Care as part of National Apprenticeship Week, which runs from 9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> February.

Ten years ago, Nicole joined Cygnet Oaks, a 35-bed high support inpatient rehabilitation (level 2) service for men, as a bank Support Worker.

She said: “I had no idea that this single interview would change the entire trajectory of my life, leading me on a path I didn't even know existed.

“At that point, I was a Criminology student who knew little about mental health care. Cygnet saw something in me that day, something I hadn't yet seen in myself. They took a chance on me when they didn't have to, and I carry that gift with me every single day.”

Nicole worked at the Cygnet Health Care service for four years before becoming pregnant with her daughter.

“I had to balance my work with my family. It was one of the hardest times of my life. But Cygnet didn't just accommodate my needs, they protected me, cared for me, and made sure I was safe,” she said.

“After my daughter was born and I returned from maternity leave, that support never ended. They helped me navigate the terrifying but beautiful challenge of being a working mum, adjusting my shifts so I could be both the employee and the mother I needed to be.”

Her career soon changed when she took on the position of Activity Coordinator, part of Cygnet Oaks' Occupational Therapy Department.

"I applied, thinking it would just be another job. But watching patients transform, seeing someone struggle daily with social anxiety take their first unescorted trip into town, witnessing that moment when they realised they could do it, something inside me shifted. This wasn't just rewarding. This felt like purpose," Nicole explained.

"I remember the exact moment I thought: 'Where has this been all my life? Why didn't anyone tell me about Occupational Therapy? This is what I was meant to do.'"

Nicole flourished as part of the Occupational Therapy team and worked on creating a service user support group to help with their progress towards discharge.

She said: "When the Occupational Therapy apprenticeship opportunity came, I didn't hesitate. I became Cygnet's first Occupational Therapy apprentice.

"Balancing work, university, and being present for my family was difficult. But then everything I learned in lectures suddenly made sense when I applied it with real patients. Those 'lightbulb moments' when theory became reality, when I finally understood why we do what we do."

Nicole recently became a Band 5 Occupational Therapist at Cygnet Pindar House, a 22-bed neuropsychiatric care service for men with acquired brain injuries.

Reflecting on her journey, she said: "Cygnet gave me opportunities I never dreamed possible and made me feel part of something bigger than myself."

"Even as I transition to this new chapter, Cygnet continues to support me. This is why I tell everyone considering an apprenticeship to do it with Cygnet. The support isn't just professional, it's personal, and life-changing."

Vicky Wisniewski, Director of Occupational Therapy (North) for Cygnet Group, praised Nicole's success.

She said: "Nicole's reflection reminds me of why we do what we do. It has been a privilege to watch her grow not just in her clinical skills, but in her confidence and leadership over the last decade.

"Nicole represents the heart of Occupational Therapy – someone who found her purpose in helping others find theirs. Being our first apprentice to qualify and secure a post with us is a historic achievement for our department."