

## Obituary: Gloria Ferris 1939 - 2024

We were saddened to hear of the death, aged 84, of our friend and colleague Gloria - Miss Gloria Shelia Ferris ("like the Ferris wheel") who died peacefully after a year of declining health. Oh Gloria! What a woman – small but determined and her life was an illustration of the best and the worst in the social history of learning disabilities in the UK.

She was one of over 20 children born in the East End of London. A genuine Cockney sparrow. Partly because of the war and partly her learning disability, she was sent to The Fountains Hospital and then a boarding school in West London. She came home for two years while attending a day centre/training centre, the Girls Craft Centre. She told her story of missing the bus and so walking the whole way home following the route of the bus which she had memorised. She was admitted to St Lawrence's Hospital in Caterham in September 1956 as her family were unable to continue supporting her. Here she spent the next 16 years, finding her niche as part of gymnastics team, a life long member of the Trefoil Guild (a branch of the Girl Guides) and an unpaid carer and advocate for one of the patients on the high dependence wards – her dear friend Muriel. When Gloria moved on (to work in another hospital) she remained Muriel's advocate (formalised through Advocacy Partners Citizen advocate scheme) up until Muriel's death. We found out and understood the importance of the citizen advocate for people with high support needs from Gloria's accounts of supporting Muriel which she feely shared with us at OU SHLD conferences.

Gloria was also a strong self advocate. Once out of St Lawrences and living in Croydon, in supported lodgings and then her own flat in sheltered housing, she was an active member of Mencap's London Consultative Group (one of the first groups for self advocates to have a real role in directing services in the UK) alongside Mabel Cooper (who she had met when they were both moving on from St Lawrence's and discovered they shared the same birthday in August). She became a Trustee for Advocacy Partners (and later VoiceAbility) bringing her lived experience to Board level of a National Charity. She helped the organisations to keep simple and stay grounded – to never forget who they were there for.

She had a spirit of adventure – I have memories of her stories of rafting, abseiling, holidaying abroad, as well as pulling a pint of Guinness and joining in the drumming on a holiday in Ireland. She had a deep personal faith. She loved her church and choir (St John the Baptist in Croydon) and was part of the welcoming/tea making group there. Actually she made many pots of tea – always very strong for anyone visiting her. She was a great crafts woman – knitting cardigans and blankets, as well as retaining the skills of rag rug making that she learnt in St Lawrence's. The crafts created on her Trefoil Guild Camp filled her with great pleasure and her flat with interesting plant pots and artworks.

When she moved into her own flat, she became a known and loved member of the local community – from her local hairdresser (Gloria had the best hair!) to the café round the corner who even offering home deliveries (sausages and mash) when she was not well. She continued to look out for others even as she got less able to look after herself. She struck up a deep friendship with Johanna through the OU SHLD conferences. Even when she moved to Heavers Court Residential Home, when she was no longer able to live on her own in the flat, she was always checking other residents were doing OK.

For her last 6 months she moved into part of the home able to give the nursing care she needed and she died peacefully on 5th Feb 2024.

Jane Abraham

