



HEALTH *matters*



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The stories in these postcards came from a single day in Downham Leisure Centre. We were part of the Downham Health Matters event where we had a stall from which we collected stories. People came to chat and we asked them to tell us stories about health.

These stories show the great range of experiences that contribute to health and illness in Downham. Many of them talk about the importance of a feeling of belonging, the sense of being connected to other people, the importance of support and help from other people. Others talk about the impact of loneliness and isolation. Some of them recount powerful memories that still affect life in the here and now. All of them express expectations, hopes and fears that could not be expressed in any other way.

We hope that these stories show the contribution that storytelling can make to consultation about health. Stories express thoughts, feelings and judgements from a personal perspective. They don't just say what happened, they show what it meant. Health isn't just a concept or a state, it's an experience, and these stories show how each person experiences health and illness weaving in and out of their lives. We hope you will find them moving, interesting and thought provoking.

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With thanks to Joan Redding, Alan Morrison and Sue Court.*

*We've been in
Downham for
eight years, it's the
longest time we've
been anywhere...*

We moved all over the place in Lewisham. We've been here for eight years, it's the longest time we've been anywhere. What's Downham like? It has its moments. I've got everything I need here. The schools are nearby, you've got the shops close as well, and the Health Centre is here too.

*When my parents
came here it was
incredible...*

I grew up in Downham. I was born in 1932. My parents had already moved here. They came from Bermondsey. It was incredible for them, they came from a place where there were rats, lice, cockroaches. And Downham was in the open air, there were fields around, there was hot running water in the house.



When I got out
of the army I
went straight to
Beckenham Place
Park...

I did National service and I was posted to Palestine. It was the time when the British mandate was coming to an end, and there were riots, the Stern Gang were doing terrible things. I saw unbelievable poverty there as well, it was terrible to see it. We had to go into the Sinai desert, and dispose of any weapons that we wanted to get rid of before we left. It left a terrible impression on me, all that desert. When I got out of the army, I went back to Downham. I went straight to Beckenham Place Park, and I sat down on the grass. I sat down, just to feel the grass underneath me. Just to know that it wasn't the desert any more.

*Sometimes I feel
lonely because my
friend
doesn't come
around
to play...*

Sometimes I feel lonely because my friend doesn't come around to play. When we play we play soldiers on the X-Box. When I'm alone in my room, I try to read. But I can't read boring books. My mum says to me 'Just try to think of pictures when you are reading the words.' But I can't yet...



*People today are
worried about
everything. We're
all scared...*

I used to let my children play out in the street. I let my son go down the road to the Centre. But then I heard that a girl was going down that street, and someone came past in a car and tried to pull her into the car. So I won't let him go there anymore. People today are worried about everything. We're all scared....

*My gran said that
in her day they
just used to get
on with it...*

I'm a terrible hypochondriac, I got a book about medical conditions and I went through it and I thought I've got that, I've got that, I've got that... My gran was different, she said that in her day they just used to get on with it.



I was desperate to go outside, but I couldn't...

When I was six, I got measles and I had to go into quarantine. That meant I had to stay in bed, and they lit a big coal fire in my room and pulled the curtains. And it was the day of the Queen's wedding. There was a big street party but I wasn't allowed to go to it. I had to stay in my room. And my dad came and pulled the curtains aside, and I looked outside. They had painted the stones red, white and blue all the way down the street. And I was desperate to go outside, but I couldn't. I remember that so clearly.

I really hated the doctor while he was pulling her around, but I was really grateful when it was over...

My daughter was fine with the doctors. But one time she was playing with her brother and she put her arm through the bars alongside the bed, and then he pulled her back and she pulled out her elbow. She dislocated it. I heard her screaming and I ran upstairs. I took her to the doctors and he gave her a sedative until she was really sleepy. Then he told me he was going to put the elbow back. I asked 'is it going to hurt her?' and he said 'no, she won't feel anything, but to be on the safe side, hold onto her while I pull the elbow back.' And she really screamed and pulled and I had to hold her down. But once it was back in, she was running around happily in a few minutes. I really hated the doctor while he was pulling her elbow around, but I was really grateful when it was over.....

*You never tried to
stop it, you would
have been an
outcast if you did...*

There was a boxing club in Northover, and everybody went there to learn the rudiments, the Queensbury rules. And if there was a dispute, there used to be a fight to sort it out. You used to see big circles of children standing around, and two boys fighting in the middle. And you never tried to stop it, you would have been an outcast if you did.



*That's what
made me retire...*

I worked as a physiotherapist's assistant. I had to lift things and carry them and pull things around. And eventually I hurt my back. That's what made me retire. It hurts all the time now...

*You never forget
things like that...*

My mother had fourteen children. Three of them died in childbirth. The others survived. But two of my sisters died later, one was three and the other was eight. You never forget things like that. Now most of the others have gone too.

*I remember the
doctor coming
round once...and
he wouldn't take
our money....*

I had all the infections when I was younger – diphtheria, measles, scarlet fever – if it was going free I had it.....There were so many children in our family, we couldn't afford to go to the doctor, because it cost a shilling each time. I remember the doctor coming round once, it must have been an emergency, and he said 'don't worry about the expense.' He wouldn't take our money.

We had a GP
when I was
growing up...
he was a real
eccentric...

We had a GP when I was growing up who was called Dr. Drown. He was a real eccentric. He used to sing in the choir with my uncle, so we knew him well. I remember when I got married, I didn't change my name at his surgery, so he didn't know. And then nine months and nine days later, I got pregnant. And he stood at the bottom of my bed and said 'Does you father know about this?' It made me laugh, I said 'my husband doesn't even know about this...'

You might get a cuff on the way in, but you were inside, that was the main thing...

There was a fair at the bottom of Downham way called the Hospital Fair. There used to be a fence around it, but us nippers always had someone with some wire cutters, and we went round the side and snip, snip, we were in. You might get a cuff from a policeman on the way in, but you were inside, that was the main thing.

We actually got married over the phone....

We've been in England for 35 years. We came from India, and then it became Pakistan. We knew each other in Pakistan. He came to England first, to Rochdale. Then my sister went to see him, and arranged our marriage. We already knew each other for a long time. We actually got married over the phone. So I only have his word for it that it was him. Perhaps it wasn't! Now our children have done very well, they all have good jobs.



*I would leave
here if I could,
I hate it now,
I can't get over
what happened
to me...*

My story is that I took a ride in a cab and the driver attacked me. It was sexual assault in every way. I had to go into hospital for nine months. I was there for a long time, and then I had to go back. It's made me very depressed, I get really emotional and scared. Because when it went to court, they didn't believe me. He got off scot free. It was his word against mine.

I'm scared to go out now. I sit inside and I can't bring myself to go outside. I've got good support. My sister went absolutely mad when she found out what happened to me. She surprised me with the support she gave me. All my family have given me really good support.

The best time is when we go away on holiday. Then I can get away. We go down to Clacton. There was a party in the pub, and I got a ticket to go in and I got absolutely off my face.

I have a support dog. It's a Spaniel. She follows me everywhere, she even tries to follow me into the bath and into the toilet.

I would leave here if I could, I hate it here now. I can't get over what has happened to me.

*He still remembers
the music lessons
he did with me in
nursery school....*

I grew up in Hackney and I was evacuated to Cornwall. I remember we used to sing at school. And we did Country Dancing. On May 1st, we danced around the May Pole. When I was a nursery teacher, I made sure that I always sang with the children. There were twenty or thirty different languages being spoken there, and so I decided that we would sing together. I taught them songs, like Pete Seeger songs. That is what is missing in schools today. Music and dancing should be compulsory. I learned to play the piano accordion. I'd love to find a band to join, so we can play folk music together.

One of the children I taught must be about eighteen by now. I bumped into his mother the other day, and she told me that he still remembers the music lessons he did with me when he was in the nursery.

*I think we should
tell stories to each
other a lot more...*

When I was a child in Pakistan there were people who came round with a box with two eye holes in it. You looked through the eye holes and there was a scene inside. And the man tried to persuade you to pay to have a look. He told stories about what we could see. A whole crowd of children gathered around him. I remember that very clearly.

I'm retired now and I've taken up creative writing. I wrote a poem about Downham for a competition. It didn't win, but it got published. The poem got sent around to the head of the library service, and the head of the social services, and it got put up in the library.

I think we should tell stories to each other a lot more than we do. We've forgotten how to do it now, especially the children.



Stories
in the **S** Street

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