

My story begins with my return to England after 25 years abroad, newly widowed with 3 sons. I relocated back to the UK with my job and settled in London. Regrettably, after a year things didn't work out and I became unemployed at which point we relocated again to Milton Keynes to be near family. Unfortunately, this was the straw that broke the camel's back and my life fell apart.

Having gone from a high flying executive PA with everything under control I suddenly found myself without a home for my boys, no job, problems with school enrolments and everything totally out of control which resulted in a breakdown.

Fortuitously, I found W&W through friends at my local church asking me to go with them to attend an IPS course. This proved to be a 'light bulb' moment for me. One of the major benefits of the course style was that it was self-reflective and caused me to face the fact that I was having real problems and they weren't temporary. Through knowledge gained on the course I visited my GP which resulted in me receiving professional counselling amongst other things. Talking to W&W made me aware of a) that someone was willing to listen to me and b) helped me prioritise where I needed to start to sort out things i.e. money problems, school situation and others.

As a result of the Interpersonal Skills course I expressed an interest in voluntary work and attended a Volunteers Training course that Women and Work were running. The result was I began volunteering at Women and Work and taking many of the courses on offer. I then progressed to a mixture of paid and voluntary work with the organisation, adding a further admin role for the Parent & Child Project after 3 years.. I have now been with Women and Work for 6 years and continue this mixture as the voluntary part is still important to me. Doing voluntary work initially helped me build my confidence ~ I went from the dishevelled couch potato unable to keep appointments to the smart, articulate and confident woman I feel I am now. It's still an ongoing process as I continue to expand my horizons.

Through this combination of voluntary work and courses I realised I wanted a career change to become an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) adviser and, once again, Women & Work were there for me. Not only were they able to signpost me to get the relevant NVQ training and provide practical experience but ongoing encouragement as well. Last week I was given a 5 hour IAG Adviser post to add to my other part-time admin posts. This role will allow me to develop further on my new career path as IAG Adviser helping other women.

On my journey with W&W the thread for me has been the ongoing support I've received from staff and delegates, whether it's been when I've facilitated the Peer Support Group or attended courses. The fact that I met such different people, that I've learnt am not alone, that we all have similar stories and experiences to share can be very enlightening. As we shared our experiences and our knowledge it helped me put my own troubles into perspective and gave me hope.

When Women and Work started 31 years ago I don't know that they ever envisaged they would still be needed this far down the line. What they are doing today is every bit as relevant as when they started.

I would, have and always will, recommend Women and Work to everyone I speak to. A big thank you to Women and Work for helping me get my life back together.

Norma Runa