CLASSROOM VOICES

"I should at least have a go..."

Having struggled with her mental health since starting secondary school, **Liz Gee** went on a residential trip in Y10 that changed everything

I'm 16 and I live in Camden with my mum and dad; I come from a large family, where I'm the middle child of five. When I first started secondary school it was rather difficult and I didn't have the best experience there. I was being bullied. I was easy to wind up and little things would trigger me off. I'd get very anxious, aggressive or upset about something and often just a slight comment that was said in the classroom would really hurt me. I think I was entertainment for the pupils in my class.

So I dropped out of school towards the end of Year 7 and didn't attend for about six months. Social services tried to encourage me to go back to the classroom, but it didn't really work. Then I went to a temporary school for about a year – the main aim of that place was to either get you back to your old mainstream school or for you to start at a new one. Eventually, towards Year 9, I went back to my mainstream school, but I dropped out again because it was too difficult for me. I was referred to the Royal Free School in Year 10. I met the staff and head teacher Alex, had my trial, and became a full-time student in September 2016.

Open conversation

At the Royal Free School they don't just listen, they actually do something about tuning in to mental health issues and needs. So they organise workshops, and have people come in and talk about those topics as well. It's really encouraging, and makes us feel like we're not alone in that sense. It helps us not to think that just because we have mental health issues – or any health issues – that we have to be put back educationally or socially. We can still pursue different things, and go after opportunities, such as trips and residentials. We don't have to let our mental health get in the way of that.

Nevertheless, when I first heard about a planned residential in June 2016, I wasn't keen at all. I had a lot of fear; I didn't really want to go and I was just feeling hesitant because of sharing a room with people that I hadn't known for a long time. I worried I wouldn't be able to do half the activities and that I wouldn't be able to cope mentally. But I still went.

Time for the self

When we stepped off the bus at Outward Bound's Howtown Centre in the Lake District, it definitely felt very foreign. No air pollution. It was really amazing just to be out of the city and see the countryside.

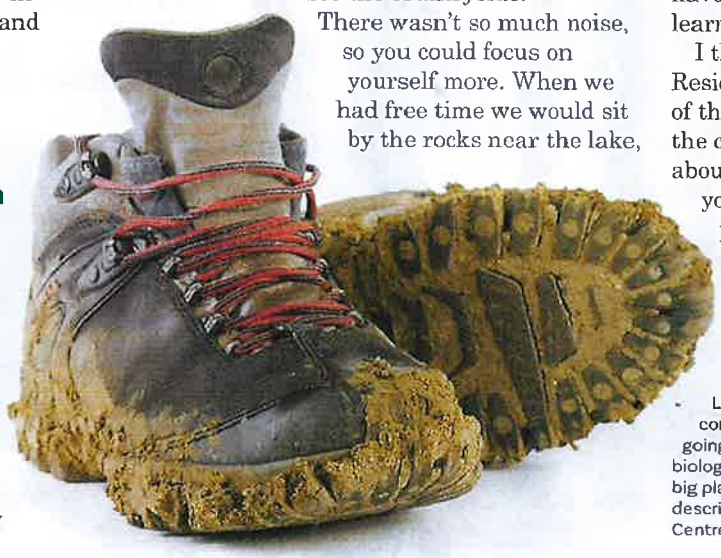
There wasn't so much noise, so you could focus on yourself more. When we had free time we would sit by the rocks near the lake, and the mountain view was really nice. Sitting there in utter quiet – no one talking – and watching the lake, and the boats go by, was really amazing. It kind of bonded everyone together as well.

We did canoeing, gorge-walking, hiking, camping overnight and a lot of teamwork activities as well. I had never done canoeing before and I can definitely say I would love to do it again. It was probably the best experience I've ever had, and I'm not a fan of water. I was really scared but when I was doing it, it was amazing. I had all the instructors and all the students encouraging me and they could see in the end that I was very happy I did it.

Healing and growth

I definitely got a lot of self-belief from the trip. I'm more ready to try things now; I feel like I shouldn't be negative and shoot things down straight away because of fear, or because I think I don't want to do it. I should at least have a go, and maybe I will like it or learn something from it.

I think nature is quite healing. Residential visits and day trips outside of the city when you are surrounded by the countryside give you time to think about and focus on yourself, and make you see things in a different perspective. Overall, it just helped with my anxiety, making friends and bonding with new people, and being a bit more open.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liz [not the author's real name] completed her GCSEs in summer 2018, is going on to study 'A' Level English literature, biology, psychology and sociology, and has big plans for university. The residential trip she describes was to Outward Bound's Howtown Centre in the Lake District.