

Verity Champion

Volunteer, Wellies-On, Essex

Background

Verity Champion has been affected by severe anxiety for several years. It began as a teenager and was precipitated by her beloved grandmother developing vascular dementia and being unable to remember her family. When her grandmother's condition deteriorated and she was unable to care for herself any longer, she came to live with her family. Sadly, as her dementia became more aggressive, the decision was made to place her in a residential care home. Verity found this very difficult as her grandad had recently passed away in a residential care home and Verity struggled the second time around with Nan this time, who got worse, and eventually passed away. Verity felt intense sadness when visiting her and also felt for the other residents, many of whom never had visitors.

As a consequence of this, Verity struggled to cope at school and developed social anxiety and depression, which led to her being unable to attend school. She was home-schooled, until a place was found for her in an Educational, Emotional and Wellbeing Unit, NEEPAS. The dedicated support from the staff at the Copford Centre, and small class sizes, enabled Verity to get back on track and she was able to complete her GCSE exams. Another of their successes was introducing Verity to horses, and she was able to attend weekly riding lessons. *"I enjoyed horse riding so much," she says. "I felt healthy and confident around the horses."*

But when she then pursued her equine interests further by enrolling on a course at college, the social and other pressures of being back in a larger institution built up. Once again things got too much for her, and the anxiety returned. Only this time she suffered anorexia. *"I returned to where I was before," she says. "And I didn't leave the house for five months."*

How care farming helped

Searching for ideas that might help her daughter, Verity's mother suggested that she visit a local social



farm/care farm, called Wellies-On. Her mother knew of it from having dropped in on their Post Office and café from time to time; and she had asked the manager if Verity could come along, as a volunteer.

"I struggled to get myself there at first, but they were so welcoming," says Verity. "They said I could come whenever I was ready – and gave me opportunity after opportunity."

"I would sit with the animals for hours," says Verity. "The joy of having them on your lap, would make all my stresses go away."

But it wasn't just the animals or being outside that helped her. Verity also praises the staff. She says they gave her opportunities and, very gently, brought things out of her by involving her in activities on the farm. She was also now part of a team and was building relationships beyond just her family and her confidence began to flow back to her.



Wellies-On have also given Verity opportunities through their 'Flat Pack' farm – a mobile service that takes animals and staff to children and care homes, for whom transport to their care farm may be too hard to organise. Initially Verity wasn't keen on helping here at all – returning to a care home and working with people with dementia – but very gently they encouraged her into becoming involved. *"I thought I would never enter a care home again,"* she says. But Wellies-On thought she was ready, and to Verity's surprise she didn't have any problems. Indeed, she enjoyed being in the care home so much that she has got herself a weekend job working in one.

Verity is now 19 and is working three days a week at Wellies-On. Although she started working exclusively with animals – walking ponies and doing the milking – she has now progressed to being a group facilitator of up to ten co-farmers, and once a week she works on a one-to-one basis with a co-farmer.

Verity's anxiety has not completely gone – far from it – but working at Wellies-On is definitely continuing to help. *"If it wasn't for the care farm, I don't know if I would feel as happy as I do now,"* she says. *"To be honest, I want to work here forever."*

Messages to others

Verity has two messages for others facing similar challenges:

"If you are struggling in some way or another, give working with animals a go – even if they don't excite you. They can bring you so much happiness, and make you feel a lot better and more confident about yourself."

"Also, push yourself to be brave. You will feel so much better for it once you have tried. Get involved. Trust people; the opportunities they can give you, can help."

For more details:

Contact: **Ellie Goff, Managing Director**

Email: ellie@wellieson.com

Tel: **01206 735453**

Website: www.wellieson.com

Wellies-On care farm (near Colchester, in Essex) is for anyone who can benefit from being out in the countryside and taking part in the daily life of a working farm. Their helpers/co-farmers come from many different backgrounds and have varying needs and abilities.

Social Farms & Gardens, in partnership with Thrive, are delivering the Growing Care Farming project. See www.farmgarden.org.uk/GCF for more details.