Activity: Harry Maher’s Story

|  |
| --- |
| Harry Maher’s storyHarry Maher came to adult literacy classes with a group from a psychiatric hospital where he had been for nearly 40 years. Since writing this story Harry has left the hospital and moved into sheltered accommodation. Read his story on the next few pages and imagine that Harry comes to your class.  |

## The Old Days at Prestwich Hospital

By Harry Maher

#### The Room

They used to strip you, throw a shirt in then lock the doors after. Used to have a thick, short shirt, and two thick sheets, sleep on floor, on t’mattress. That was cold at night time. They didn’t bother, the nurses, didn’t bother with us at all. Kept under with one sheet, that’s all. They call it rugs now. Just had to get in bed, on my own, empty room. They leave you there, locked up. If you wan ‘owt you can’t have it.

Some of them have two doors on – so they can’t hear you. That’s why they got two doors on, ‘cos you’re a bad patient, that’s why they put you in the room with two doors on. They put bad patients what can’t behave from the ward, when you’re bad. Some of them had one door, if you’re not so bad. They have a small thing on the door to look through, to see if you’re all right.

I used to shout a bit, that’s all. Put you in bed if you can’t behave. Used to break windows at one time. I used to be a bad patient. Put my hand through a window.

In the room, they’ve got doors on the windows. You can’t break the windows in there. That’s why they put you in a room. They’ve got two doors on so they can’t hear you, when they’re shouting and banging on the doors.

I used to bang on the doors a bit, not much, not the same as them though. More bad than me. The badder patients – put them in a room, fighting. They do a lot of fighting, some of the patients. That’s why they’ve got rooms for them – fighting and that, make them behave, get them on their own and make them behave. They let them out when they behave themselves. They put them back again, put them straight back, if they don’t behave. Leave them there. They used to leave me there, till I behaved proper, and then let me out. Some of them likes it in the room. I did. Quiet. Used to like it in the room.

They used to fetch the food in the room to you. I used to have bread and milk when I was in the room. I couldn’t eat in a bed – only bread and milk, because I was losing weight, I was gastric. They used to bring a big basin of tea.

Stayed in the room for over a week, over a week, till we have to behave ourselves. That was Four ward.

The Yard

We used to have a walk around to keep us bloody warm, with overcoats on. We had to keep walking about, to keep us warm.

We had to stop when it was raining. We used to have to walk about under the verandah. Used to come in about four o’clock, for our meal, because the nurses had to go for their meals, tea and that.

I was 19 when I come into Prestwich. I’m 57, I was at Withington before I came here. I’ve been here since I was nineteen years old! I’m 57, I’ll soon be 58. The doctor got us out, he got us up here to the open ward – two years ago.

Family

Used to make rugs – they were hard, rugs, making rugs. Used to make them with one hand. I made my mother and father one (my brother’s got it now). My mother and father are dead now – been dead for bloody years, years. They died when I was in Four ward. My father died first, then my mother died after, when I was in Two ward. One of my brothers died after. It did give them a shock – ‘cos he died. He was the oldest. There are two younger than me. There was five of us – I’m in the middle. Two younger than me. Two younger, one married, with a little girl, and one of their girls married. She’s only been here once. My two brothers keep coming. They’ve about finished writing to me. They’re about to, after Christmas. Too much money, the stamps and that. They told me they were going to stop after Christmas. If it’s too much for them they won’t come at all. I won’t be able to see them at all, if they stop coming.

**Extract from ‘Opening Time’ reproduced by kind permission of Gate House Books, Hulme AEC, Stretford Road, Manchester M15 5FQ** [**www.gatehousebooks.org.uk**](http://www.gatehousebooks.org.uk/)

### Possible answers to Harry Maher’s story

1. Devise a group contract to ensure that all your students are aware of and have agreed to standards of acceptable behaviour towards each other. Talk with the group about their past experiences in a completely non-judgemental way. Ensure that everyone is listened to respectfully. Ensure that Harry is included in all class activities and that he is paired with different people so that he can make friends. Choose the pairs yourself so that Harry is never the last one to be picked. Give Harry the chance to ‘star’ in the class from time to time, ensure that his achievements are acknowl-edged and celebrated. Sit with your group at break time and include Harry in the general conversation. Model complete respect for Harry and everyone else in your class - your students will copy the example.
2. If he is on medication he may have trouble with concentrating for long periods of time, make allowances for this and vary the activity often. Think about the fact that he has been severely hurt by authority figures and may have some distrust of you as a result or may have an ‘over’ trust of you. Encourage him to develop trusting relationships with everyone in the class by making sure that all students, including him, have the chance to be ‘teacher’ from time to time. Learning is a two-way process and he has things to teach as well as to learn.
3. (For example – adult literacy). It is possible that Harry would not relate to the same cultural knowledge as others in the class. Most of his personal history reference points would relate to his experiences in the hospital. It would be important (as it is for every student) not to make assumptions about what he knows or doesn’t know in terms of current and historical events (e.g. the war in Afghanistan, who Marilyn Monroe was, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, etc.). Be sensitive but not over-sensitive to Harry’s past experiences (i.e. do not sensationalise them).
4. (a) (examples) Panic about not knowing what to do, not having met anyone with Harry’s particular experiences before, not knowing how to ensure Harry is accepted by the rest of the class, etc. Irritation if he is slow. Not being sure how to introduce him to the rest of the students – should you encourage him to tell his story or not? Will they all think he is just mad and avoid him?

**These feelings can be overcome by listening carefully to Harry and to other students and by working with the class on issues of inclusion and social justice as part of the curriculum.**

(b) (examples) Similar to 4(a), plus anxiety about whether or not they were being assumed to be the same as Harry.

**These feelings can be overcome by listening carefully to Harry and to other students and by working with the class on issues of inclusion and social justice as part of the curriculum*.***

(c) (examples) Possible disrespect shown to Harry by support staff, students in other classes, etc.

This can be dealt with by a whole college policy on inclusion and by all staff being required to undertake training on inclusion. It may be helpful to introduce Harry personally to support staff that he will be encountering regularly (e.g. receptionist, canteen staff, etc.).