

Medal of the Order of Australia, Australia Day 2014 Honours List

On the morning of Australia Day this year I woke with a shy but joyful feeling knowing that my name was on the Australia Day 2014 Honours List for the award of a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for “service to families affected by Asperger’s Syndrome”.

Asperger’s Syndrome - my passion, my life, the beginning of my journey to become a Counsellor, the reason why my personal world collapsed and my family broke, my inspiration to make a difference and help ensure that other families had information and support much sooner than we had, the hope that eventually awareness of Asperger’s Syndrome and knowledge about the subtle but significant effects within relationships would have filtered through every part of society and that stigma could be overthrown, with Asperger’s Syndrome being viewed as a “difference” affecting at least 1 in 100 individuals and normal families rather than a “disability” that affects only a rare few.

My “service to families affected by Asperger’s Syndrome” began in October 2000 when I asked our psychologist to *please* put me in touch with any other women she came across who also had husbands with Asperger’s Syndrome, the condition my own husband had just been diagnosed with following 17 years of a marriage and family life that I can only describe as a confusing nightmare. Always trying, always hoping, always seeking knowledge, always trying to find someone to hear me, to help me, someone who wouldn’t view me as just trying to discredit my husband. Suspicion and silence were the typical responses. We had 5 beautiful children.

It was just a few months later that the psychologist was able to put me in touch with one other woman, and the seeds were sown for the establishment of a support group for partners of adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. This group began formal meetings in 2003 and continues to meet monthly in Sydney under the name ASPIA (Asperger Syndrome Partner Information Australia Incorporated), drawing 15-25 people to each meeting. Our strength continues to be in providing information and education, along with validation and support, both through our meetings and also our website at www.aspia.org.au, which attracts an average of 200 visitors each day.

It has been my privilege to co-ordinate and be the driving force of this support work for which I’ve just been recognised with this Medal of the Order of Australia. I am humbled because it was never about being recognised, but I am also delighted because of the personal validation this has provided for me, strengthening my confidence and sense of credibility which I have continued to struggle with at a personal level since those early experiences of being disbelieved and silenced.

Counsellors know the value of hearing and believing our clients. That joy of building rapport, of validating their personal truth, knowing that the therapeutic relationship must start on this firm foundation if our client is to have any hope of benefiting from the counselling journey. The joy we experience as we observe life returning to their eyes, a smile to their faces and resilience to their spirits.

It was in May 2000 (prior to my knowledge of Asperger’s Syndrome) that I sat for the first time in a professional Counsellor’s office in Ashfield Sydney. My Counsellor’s

Article – Comments about receiving OAM

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name was Julie. She believed me. Then she validated me by saying “This is definitely not normal”. Then she expressed concern at my level of fear for going outside of my church community for help (even to another Christian organization). This was education, providing me with a benchmark for a societal “norm”. The forming of that alliance in the counselling room with Julie began a powerful journey for me planting in me the desire to one day train as a Counsellor so I could become the one that broken people could come to and find validation and support.

It took me until February 2009 to begin my Counselling training and December 2011 to complete it due to the detour that Asperger’s Syndrome took me on but I have now been working part-time as a Generalist Counsellor for a rural health service for more than two years and I love it.

And I am absolutely grateful for my understanding and experience of Asperger’s Syndrome because I know I am far more open to “difference”, accepting of people in general, non-judgmental and calm when clients behave strangely or speak abruptly, open minded when someone describes scenarios that seem implausible, empathic when clients don’t understand why their relationships fail or they can’t cope in social situations, alert when someone seems “too good to be true” or exposes inconsistencies, etc. That’s the beauty and power of knowing about it. It’s a tool in my Counsellor toolkit, without ever having to mention it. I might just be the one that can be an ally for a disenfranchised soul and a reference point for their pathway forward.

Carol Grigg, January 2014