

Wednesday 31st May 2017

Introduction by Jamie Bennett

I am honoured to have been asked by Ted to say a few words about Gill's work and to offer a reading.

I knew Gill in her role as Chair of BACO. This role she had undertaken since 1996. When she took up post John Major was still Prime Minister, the European football championships were just about to be held in England, and Gill and Ted were tearing up the local dance floors to the sounds of Oasis, The Spice Girls and the Macarena.

When I was preparing before arriving at Grendon & Springhill in late 2011, I remember reading about BACO and wondering to myself what on earth they did. Their name sounded like something from another age. When I took up post, however, it was very quickly apparent to me what a major contribution Gill, Ted and other BACO members make.

In April this year residents at Grendon held an event to celebrate the work of BACO and to give testimony to the contribution of Gill and Ted. This was a powerful and heartfelt tribute that they wanted to make. The stories they told revealed the many ways in which their lives had been touched.

Those who received hardship grants for clothing or stereos described how this helped to lessen the painfulness of prison, how it improved their self-esteem, and helped to improve their connection with their families.

Those who received art and hobby materials said that this enabled them to use their time constructively and nurtured their talents and self-expression.

The support for the Six Book Challenge encouraged the love of books, including some men who were learning to read.

Assisting those who have caged birds and fish gave them something to care for, and a way of expressing and developing their emotions.

Those who received funding for education and training stated that this could help them to change their lives for the better.

The work of BACO, and that of Gill, also brought people together. Supporting Diversity events and Social occasions such as quiz nights strengthened bonds within the prison. Visiting on Social days, bringing visitors and befriending those in Grendon & Springhill, developed links with the Communities, reduced isolation and built mutual understanding.

At the Event in April I was struck by how many of those who spoke seemed to have a sense of bewilderment about why such a nice and respectable person would chose to do this? Why would they want to spend their time in prison, with prisoners? The fact that Gill did this, and did so without any apparent agenda, made them feel loved. They felt that they were being unconditionally invested with trust, shown care and they had someone who believed in them. For many, this made them feel whole again.

Although many people were unsure of why Gill did this, the reading chosen reflects what I believe were Gill's motivations.