

A Tribute to Jim Mansell



Jim Mansell

Professor Jim Mansell died of cancer on the 13 March 2012. As a student in Wales during the early 1970's he challenged the concept of the institution and led the fight to make community living a reality for people with a learning disability. Adrian Roper offers a few words.

In a packed conference hall in Cardiff in 1996, organised to celebrate the closure of Ely Hospital, the speaker on the platform had been thanking all the local senior professionals who had helped to make it happen. Then, unscripted, someone in the audience slowly stood up in the middle of the hall and began to speak. He said that there was one person that everybody should be thanking and that was somebody not in the room. "Jim Mansell".

Working Miracles

Who was it that dared to speak up and say what was in his heart? It was Alan Duncan, a man with bad memories of life in Ely Hospital, having lived there from the age of eight to eighteen. He'd moved out in 1974. That was the year Ely closed for him. And the man who had done it hadn't been a professional in a suit. It had been a long-haired student who was capable of working miracles. That was Jim Mansell.

Jim had met Alan when visiting the hospital as a student volunteer. The students used to go to the Children's Ward, the urine-stinking Pine Villa, and try somehow to be useful to the "patients" on a Wednesday afternoon. The children and teenagers would be dressed in shabby clothes, afflicted with lice, and had less possessions than a

patient at a general hospital, despite this being their permanent home. There was nothing to do, and the role of the nurses, once they had clothed, fed and toileted everybody, was to sit at one end of the ward and make sure nothing too awful happened. But it was all awful. They just couldn't see it. But Jim could.



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Llais

Campaign

Within weeks of visiting Pine Villa for the first time, Jim began a campaign of meetings with local senior professionals aimed at persuading them to let some of the Pine Villa residents leave, and live instead in the community. Here in Wales, and across the UK, and across most of the planet, this was unheard of. Whole professions had grown up based on the firm belief that putting people with learning disabilities into hospitals was the best thing for them. Lots of people's jobs depended on the idea. In fact, the segregation of people with learning disabilities wasn't widely questioned by academics or policy-makers until the 1969 publication of Wolf Wolfensberger's book "The Origin and Nature of Our Institutional Models". And here was a student, in 1973, perhaps with a rare copy of Wolf's book by his bedside, displaying unbelievable presumption, and unshakeable compassion, challenging the whole idea of congregated, medicalised, and deeply abusive segregation.

Success

Some how he got what he wanted. The consultants and senior nurses allowed this quietly spoken, hippie-looking kid in jeans to take Alan out the ward

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front-door, and out the hospital gates, along with two other teenage boys (John O'Brien and Paul Evans) and two girls (Jackie Morgan and Heather Howard) to live instead with Jim in student digs in Cathays. And it wasn't just the health professionals that

Jim needed to persuade: there were Social Services, and the University accommodation manager, and all the mums and dads. The mind boggles as to how he did it.

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Sadly for Wales, Jim moved back after university to his home county of Kent and it was in England that he deployed his miraculous powers of persuasion for the rest of his life. But he had done enough to change Wales forever. Without that successful demonstration of community living in Cathays, there would have been no All Wales Strategy, and Wales would have spent the last thirty years trying to follow England's slow and erratic example. Instead we became world leaders, and have much to be proud of, and to build on.

THE PRIVATE CONSULTANTS



Inspiration

And build still we must. One of the challenges now facing us is the growth of new institutions: the privately run “Winterbourne Views” which masquerade as treatment centres, but which are, fundamentally, sources of profit based on the trafficking and segregation of people with learning disabilities. When the Panorama programme exposed the abuse going on in such places last year, who was the quietly passionate and powerfully

persuasive silver-haired figure who offered the clearest statement of condemnation of these new institutions? Of course. Jim Mansell. Now a professor and a government advisor and dressed in a suit. But utterly uncompromised, and striving still for people’s dignity and freedom. When asked his view on these new, private sector hospitals he said: “I believe there is no case for the institutionalisation of people with learning disability. They should be closed down”.

Could he have put it more clearly?

Let’s honour Jim in Wales for the great leader and inspiration he was, and let’s do it in a way that he would most appreciate. Let’s keep up the struggle. Let’s close them down. Writing in the Guardian, he said: “The real solution ... is to stop using these kinds of places altogether. Who will hold local health and social services to account to make that happen?”. Let it be all of us.

Adrian Roper, Cartrefi Cymru and Chair, Learning Disability Wales

(Below) David Felce, left, and Jim Mansell working together in Wessex during the 1980s

