

See ME rather than my dementia – Promoting Personhood and Dignity in Dementia

Ben Bano is Director of a Community Interest Company – 'Welcome Me as I Am' – which is a member agency of CSAN and provides training and support for staff and volunteers in person centered approaches to dementia care

CSAN's campaign in Dementia Awareness week is right to focus on the importance of working conditions and training for those working with people whose lives are touched by dementia. Its only through providing the best possible care and support that we can focus on two of the most important aspects to caring for the 'whole person' – promoting personhood and dignity.

Personhood

The term 'personhood' has been developed to counter the stereotype of the person with dementia gradually losing their physical and mental functioning and their personality as dementia advances. The concept of personhood reinforces the image of the person with dementia as someone who is able to experience emotions, both positive and negative, as well as the ability to share these emotions to those who are able and willing to be present in what might be a bewildering and confusing situation. It is at the root of all the work with people whose lives are touched by dementia and is a core value for my own organisation – 'Welcome Me as I Am' - as well as for CSAN's member agencies working in the field of dementia care.

Dignity and Empowerment in Dementia Care

The promotion of dignity and empowerment has a natural place in dementia care as well as a special place for CSAN's member agencies whose work is underpinned by Catholic social teaching. This is because dignity and empowerment are linked inextricably linked with our view of a person with dementia as a person who can and should lead a full life in spite of their diminishments.

The well known author and columnist Daniel O'Leary speaks movingly of the 'power of presence' in promoting dignity as dementia advances:

'The role of your body in revealing Presence is central; the graciousness of your eyes – windows out and windows in; the touch of your hands – extensions of your heart; your body – the dignity of composure; your body betrays the inner state of your soul; the dignity of your voice, a radiance from your physical presence, a reverence for

*the Presence of the other. Then you release a healing Presence in the other.*¹

For those close to a person in the advancing stages of dementia, diminishments need to be put in the context of a person whose life story needs to be seen in the context of lifetime of achievement and fulfilment. As a person with dementia loses their sense of reality, visual and other memories are needed to remind them – and even more importantly, their loved ones, of the person that they have been and will continue to be. The promotion of spiritual needs, which is a focus for the CSAN member agencies working with dementia, becomes particularly important.

This is the challenge before us and it is why we need to support, train and nurture those involved in providing care and support in person centered care. This work is an act of compassion, sensitivity and humanity. It is so easily diminished by some of the working conditions which are the focus of the CSAN campaign for Dementia Awareness Week.

¹ O'Leary, Daniel. From a talk given at the Conference: 'The Journey of Hope – Catholic Chaplaincy in Mental Health Services' - Liverpool, March 2012. Available on: <http://www.welcomemeasiam.org.uk/the-journey-of-hope-conference-03-2012.html>

