

... Liza Dresner, Resources for Autism director

Kathy Brodbeck chats to Liza

On the corner of Finchley Road and Willifield Way – on the very edge of the Suburb – is a redbrick building. Resources for Autism says the nameplate on the door.

Many people will be totally unaware of the activity behind that door and the way the people there help youngsters – and many adults too – whose lives are utterly defined by the word autism.

The figure presiding over the activities and support provided by the organisation is its director, Liza Dresner, who is no stranger to Hampstead Garden Suburb.

Born close to the Suburb and having spent much of her childhood in this area Liza left to explore other places but the lure of HGS brought her back.

Liza attended the Garden Suburb School and one of her earliest memories was sitting with her class on Willifield Way whilst her treasured teacher read to the children as she gently dozed off in the sunshine! Her mother took her there for picnics, she took her children there to do the same thing. It is now the route she walks with her dog.

Liza spent 14 years as a social worker and then decided to train as a teacher before her career plans were put on hold

when she gave birth to her daughter, Rebecca.

At this point she became a full-time mother to her daughter and went on to have her son, Alex. But nothing could stop Liza from getting involved in other projects. She was and still is very interested in cooking which led to her volunteering for an HIV food charity where she eventually became a trustee.

"I applied for the job as director of RFA, little knowing that the headquarters were at 858 Finchley Road, which I knew well from my childhood. It was a happy return," she said.

The charity was set up to support children, young people and adults and their families with autism. Her brief was not only director but fund-raiser as well and to help with the growth of the organisation.

From their beginnings in a room at Avenue House to another two venues, RFA was expanding and needed more space. Number 858 was originally a GP's surgery. The local MP for Finchley, Hartley Booth, was the pioneer of the organisation and was moved by the plight of families needing support for their children with autism. Booth had succeeded Margaret Thatcher as the Conservative Member of

Parliament for Finchley from the 1992 general election. He was the co-founder and first chairman of the organisation and his driving force got things moving.

Local loans funded the cost of the alterations to the space at 858 which includes offices, sensory room, art and music rooms and a playroom with a small back garden space.

"The Suburb's involvement has always been supportive – volunteers help us and local people work with us. There is a volunteer who does the gardening, for example, and we have received grants from the Garden Suburb Trust to help finance plants for the garden," said Liza. When she arrived at 858 the garden was in a dreadful state but now it's admired by people who enjoy sitting there and having their lunch. "The building matters and it reflects what the suburb is about – a caring community," she said.

Resources for Autism offers so much: play services, holiday play schemes, art and music clubs, young people's evening clubs, a befriending home service for families who may have a family member with autism. They provide one-to-one support from paid staff, a volunteer team who give up to three hours a week support and a youth service.

But what exactly is autism? Liza explained: "One person in 100 in the UK has autism – or is somewhere on the spectrum. Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people and the world around them.

"It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all people with autism share certain areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in different ways.

"Some people with autism are able to live relatively independent lives but others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist support. People with autism may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours.

"Some people barely communicate and are lost in their own world. Others are relatively able. It is a lifelong condition but those affected can be supported and guided to manage their lives more effectively. We try to provide an anchor for them and their families, for whom things can be very tough."

This anchor is not exclusive to Barnet – many boroughs across London and also Birmingham are now receiving help. Birmingham became part of the action in 2007 when Liza was approached by a mother and daughter who asked to visit 858. The mother told Liza about how her daughter had been excluded from various support organisations due to her challenging behaviour. Things grew from there, a strategy plan for the Midlands was written and RFA expanded yet again.



Liza works tirelessly for this organisation – determined to give the very best to all who need the support. Her energy is astounding whether she is addressing a group of staff, travelling back and forth to Birmingham, talking to families, supporting volunteers, writing bids for grants, writing policies, carol singing outside Marks and Spencer. It goes on...

One of the most important aspects of resources for autism is that it provides support for

anyone on the spectrum regardless of age or level of need and to families as well. It's a life-long journey.

Willifield Green was an important place in Liza's childhood. Now Willifield Way is the centre of her professional life.

"These days I love to wander in Bigwood," she says. "I visit regularly with my dog about three times a week. I have so many memories of treasure hunts and parties in this special place with my

children – it's a haven of peace and tranquillity."

858 Finchley Road is not a haven of tranquillity – there is too much going on there for that. But with Liza Dresner at its centre, it does provide hope and support for all those whose lives are touched by autism.

Resources for Autism are always looking for volunteers. If you have time to spare and would like to help their work, please ring 020 8458 3259.

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