

DEBBIE'S DETERMINATION

WITH a beaming smile and rubber ring wrapped around her, Debbie Wise looks like she is having the time of her life.

Just twelve months ago Debbie was diagnosed with diabetes and told she would need regular exercise. Yet now, swimming in Bicester Leisure Centre's lengthy pool, week in week out, she has a confidence and enthusiasm for the sport not seen since her childhood.

Words By **ALEX JACKSON**

Photos by **IAIN GARRETT**

Debbie was first referred to one of the Trust's Community Team for People with Learning Disability (CPTLD) in January last year for healthy eating and exercise. Since then she has built up a strong friendship with Assistant Nurse Practitioner, Gay Hawkins, who reignited Debbie's enthusiasm for swimming and sourced the most appropriate pool to take part in activities.

Joining friends and familiar faces from the Bicester Day Service, which she attends throughout the week, "Team Debbie" dressed in black shorts and pink t-shirts exercise and splash in the pool. It's notable she has come along way since the early anxiety and trepidation first felt on returning to the pool.

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All smiles in the pool with Debbie and Gay

"I thought swimming would be a good activity for Debbie to participate in and one that she would enjoy," said Gay, who works for the City and South Community Team.

"On our first visit to the pool Debbie was quite anxious and we tried without success to use the hoist to get her into the pool. The only other options were to try the ladder or visit a leisure centre further afield with sloping steps. She did, however, try the ladder and I was so proud of her for giving it a go.

"From that day she has attended the sessions on a weekly basis and really enjoys it with her confidence gradually building in the pool where we do gentle exercises."

Through exercising and a healthy diet, Debbie has already lost 12 pounds, and away from her swimming has a very active working life. She is a popular and well known face around Bicester having worked in numerous shops and cafes including Help The Aged and the Courtyard Youth Arts Centre.

However one of her favourite and much loved hobbies, which she has made a constant commitment to for more than 15 years, is her role at Oxfam.

As we visit her at the state of the art charity headquarters at Cowley Business Park, she has, as promised, donned her new dress, and is working as hard as ever packing envelopes and leaflets.

Debbie has devoted much time to the charity and made many new friends in the process. One man, who knows her better than many, is Robin Diver who first set up the voluntary disability group within Oxfam 18 years ago. Robin faced a number of barriers in setting up the group, but has expanded the group of roughly around six or seven adults with learning disabilities, into a regular activity, which runs four days a week.

"I have worked with Debbie since 1995 at Oxfam and have seen her skills and confidence grow dramatically over the years as she has built up good relations with

fellow group members and staff alike," said Robin, Packing Unit Manager.

"The group are given a lot of independence and get through more than 5,500 letters a week for various campaigns and also thank you letters to customers for their continuing support of the charity.

"It is brilliant for those involved to be able to sample a large working environment and be given a number of different roles and responsibilities. Debbie always enjoys her time here and is a very committed member of the group who I always look forward to working with.

"It is such a rewarding scheme and shows barriers and opinion can be removed and changed."

And as we leave a contented Debbie both in the pool and at work, you get the sense she'll enjoy whatever challenge comes next.

Contact for further details

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Debbie hard at work

For further information on the OXFAM group
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HELPING A CHARITABLE CAUSE

FOR Leslie Hunt volunteering to work in a charity shop was a way of giving something back to a cause very close to his heart.

Having seen his father diagnosed with bowel cancer in 1997, he has witnessed the effects the disease can have on both family and friends. So last year, when looking for a voluntary role in Oxford, he approached the Cancer Research store in London Road, Headington. After a successful application and interview, he was given a shop assistant role starting in July 2010.

More than six months on, he is thoroughly enjoying his time there, working two hours a week, every Monday, facing the public and regular customers. Leslie can often be found working the till, putting tags on the clothes racks or indulging in conversation with a few familiar faces.

"It's a very personal thing and anything I can do to help a really good cause is worth my time and effort," said Leslie.

"It is rewarding and exciting and I always look forward to my shift on a Monday morning. It is a great way to start off the week."

Leslie, from Ridgeway's in-patient service John Sharich House, is very proactive and never shies away from a good couple of hours work. Not only does he help out with putting leaflets in envelopes at the Trust's headquarters, but is also keen to take on a part-time role one day soon.

"It is all a new experience and I've never handled such amounts of money in a shop till. I have got to know a lot of the customers and everyone has been very welcoming and not judged me in any way.

"I just get on with things and work my hardest when on shift and I've picked up a lot of new skills and enjoy helping tag the clothes and work the tills."

"I hope to continue doing this on Mondays and see it as a good step into part-time employment which is what I aim to do in the future."

Assistant Manager, Juliana Negreirds, said Leslie is a hard worker and valuable volunteer.

She said: "He is one of our most reliable volunteers and very good with the customers. He enjoys his two hours on a Monday when we are at our busiest and has strong customer service skills."

For further information about Cancer Research UK
www.cancerresearch-uk.org.uk



Leslie hard at work



Serving a customer