



# Jenny Bennett

**From long stay  
hospital...  
to nightclub!**



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# Introduction

Hello, my name is Jenny.

This is my story of how my life has changed since spending 19 years of my early adult years living in institutions, and my journey to become the strong, independent woman I am today, living in my own home.

It is important for me to share my story with you, to show that all people with a learning disability can live an ordinary and independent life. An ordinary life is one where I make my own choices and have control over what I do and where I go, just like anyone else.



## How it was then

## My life in a long stay hospital



When I was 17, I went to live in St Margaret's long stay hospital. This was a place where people with learning disabilities were taken to live, it was a hospital not a home. Before this, I lived in a childrens home for 7 years.

St Margaret's was not a nice place, looking back to how I lived then is upsetting. No one there seemed to be happy; everyone used to moan or cry about the place. I remember everywhere being locked so you could not get out. I knew a few people who tried to escape but they were never successful. I will always remember the beautiful lake at the bottom of St Margaret's. We were never allowed to walk around the lake because we were told it was too dangerous.

St Margaret's was a place where no one had choices. I had to stick to a strict time schedule from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to bed. I remember the big clock in the main room that told the time of my daily routine. It was a boring place, every day was the same and there was no excitement. I had to eat at the same set meal times even if I was not hungry. The food was awful! I never had a choice of what food I had, I just got given it.

I used to stay in a shared dormitory with other women. I remember the dormitory always being cold, with lines of single beds and curtains on the windows. I never had a warm duvet like I have now, we used to have blankets and that was it. You could not choose who you lived with at that time so I was stuck with people I didn't like and they used to get on my nerves.

In the day I used to go to an activity room in St Margaret's where I did art and music. It was something to look forward to at the time, because when I was not doing music there was nothing to do, or you were just told to watch TV and that was boring. Everyone watched the same TV so I could not watch what I wanted.

We were never allowed to go out to the shops when we wanted. We were always told what we were going to do. I used to get so angry because I couldn't do what I wanted to do! The main thing I looked forward to was seeing my family. Sometimes they would come and pick me up and we would go out together which I really liked. They could not pop in to see me when they wanted to because they could only visit at certain times.

I remember on my 18th birthday I just stayed in my room. I can't remember now if I got birthday cards or a present. I can remember making myself a wooden key as a birthday present. Staff had the keys in the hospital. I never had my own key and I wanted one. I didn't celebrate my 18th birthday with friends because I didn't have friends there. I just made sure I kept myself to myself. Some people were not nice to me, I got a black eye from someone who lived there. The staff were nasty too.

I used to play up because I thought it would help me to get out of there, but that never worked. My family wasn't happy with me being at St Margaret's. My mom and my sister had a meeting with the staff and I got moved to a little cottage on the St Margaret's site where I lived with one other person. I still didn't like it.

When I was 21, I left St Margaret's for a year and lived in another place and then moved back to St Margaret's, so I didn't end up leaving the hospital until I was 23. Then I was moved to another hospital, called an assessment and treatment centre for a couple of years as I was told there was no where else for me to go.

This was another place where you lived in locked wards, where no one could get out.

I had my own room on the ward, but it didn't make a difference to living in the dormitory at St Margaret's, as people used to come and steal from me and mess up my room. Living with people I did not want to live with was the worst thing of all. I used to be physically assaulted and have my personal objects stolen from my room. I hated it there and the food was disgusting.

After that I moved to a building in the community that was run by the hospital. This was called an NHS Campus. I lived there until I was 29!

So 19 years of my life was spent living in institutions!

My life back then was not a happy time and it all seems to be a bit of a blur now.



# What it's like now

I have completely turned my life around. My life now is BRILLIANT! I am a more chilled and relaxed person and I live my life to the full. I make my own choices, I eat what I want and go where I want to go. I can see my family when I want and I can invite them round to my house.

Since being 40 I have done things in my life that I have never done before; simple things that some people may take for granted.

I went clubbing for the first time last year. It was so much fun, I went shopping for a new outfit, dolled myself up and hit a club in Walsall. The music wasn't great but I still danced the night away. By the time I got home in the early hours of the morning I realised I might have had one to many WKD's!

The New Year of 2016 was the first time I went out partying for New Year. I stayed in a lovely hotel and celebrated the New Year with my support staff. I really enjoyed myself and wore a beautiful purple dress.

I have now taken control of my life and I work closely with my staff in Dimensions to make sure I keep achieving outcomes and stay the independent woman I know I am.

My health has improved and I take less medication now. I am even going to the dentist, which is something I would have never done before.

I even take control of the little things like having my own cat, I would have never been allowed a pet in the places I used to live. Now I do and I love her to bits!





# My own home

I have lived in my home 11 years now and it is great. I live in a ground floor, two bedroom flat. The other bedroom is for the staff to sleep in. My flat is rented from the council and they have given me a tenancy agreement that I've signed. Dimensions have given me an easy read version of my tenancy agreement and they are both kept in my folder.

I really wanted to live on my own, but my mum wasn't too pleased with where I moved to. In the end she understood that this was the best thing for me. My mum can be very protective of me and does not realise how independent I can be. She's only protective because she loves me so much, but this is my life now and I want to live it the way I want to. I see my mum and sister a lot and we have a close relationship.

When I moved in I chose the decorations for my new flat and everything in it is mine. I am planning to have my whole house redecorated by the council soon. I am having a new kitchen, new bathroom and new wiring done. The council have been coming round to complete tests on my home to get it ready for the work to start. I made sure that I stayed in the house until they had finished their work. This is something that I would not have done before, I would have shouted at them and told them to leave me alone.

I live in my home with my cat Thumbs. She is called this because her paws look like they have thumbs. I have always wanted a cat and she is my first. I had her last year off my neighbour. The staff I had before didn't want me to have a cat because if I went on holiday there was no one to look after her. So I have made arrangements with my neighbour that when I go on holiday he will look after her.





# Being Independent

I've become much more independent in recent years. Recently my outside light by my front door broke. This made it dangerous at night because I have steps into my home. I took it upon myself to phone the council and get them to come and fix it. I did this with no support from my staff, which I feel really good about. I also phoned the chiropodist to do my feet on my own without support. This is something people would have thought that I would never have done and I would have just asked the staff to do it for me.

But I keep proving people wrong, which makes me smile!

I have my own front door key, I answer my own front door, I cook my own food and I am very independent now. Every decision about my home is my choice. I now have control of my own life and I love it!

I have come to learn that things go wrong in life - like being late or burning the dinner. I never had to deal with these small challenges as everything was done for me. If things like this happened to me before I would get upset and angry. I now know it's part of life and it happens to everyone.

I am confident in making complaints in all areas of my life. A while ago my neighbours were being really noisy and it used to make me annoyed, but with support from my staff I complained to the council and it got sorted out.

I look after my own money with support. This is something else that has changed in my life. It used to be difficult to get hold of my own money. I used to have to bring receipts back for everything that I bought, even if it was a loaf of bread. I did not like this and I thought it was silly. If I couldn't find my receipts then it would make me feel anxious and I thought I would get into trouble. This made me feel angry. This is different now, as Dimensions have supported me to change this. I now have money for each day and this works for me.

I live a full life and make sure that I am part of my community. This is really important to me, as I like to have friends and be out socialising, meeting different people. I like to do lots of different things with my day and I do not have a set routine. I have tried many different community groups. I tried a jewellery making class at the local library. I went there on my own as well and I really enjoyed that. I also tried a reading class on my own. I didn't like it though because it was boring.

I like going to the cinema and shopping. I like buying jewellery and I used to collect things like jewellery. I found it hard to throw things away and this got to be a bit of a problem. I have now learnt to have a good sort out and take things I don't use or wear to the charity shops. I am slowly getting better at this.

When I go out shopping I like to have a meal out. I travel independently to most places. I go to different supermarkets and meet my staff there instead of meeting them at home. I phone my staff and tell them to meet me at a shopping centre. This means that if I am out and about I don't have to come back home to go back out with my staff.

I like lots of things like musicals and going to the cinema and going to pubs but I go there with staff. I like to go to a disco as I love music. My favourite singer is Olly Murs, he is really good looking and I love his music. My favourite celebrity at the moment is Danny Dyer, he is gorgeous! I have my eye on a man who I met recently. We are not in a relationship, we are just friends at the moment, but I have got my eye on him. My sister has said why don't I meet someone who would buy me an engagement ring, which would be nice.



# My own staff

I am supported by Dimensions. I have a staff team that works around what I want, not what Dimensions wants. I have staff work with me when I want them to. They work hours that suit my life style best. I am glad that I can have flexible hours so I can do what I want to do.

I feel happier with my life now I am independent. I feel like I have more control over what happens in my life. I think I have changed now because I have had to. Before my staff just used to do it for me, I never had the chance to prove myself.

They now realise that I can do things for myself and they push me more to become even more independent. Don't get me wrong, sometimes when I feel a bit lazy I will ask my staff to get my breakfast ready for me!

To make sure I have a staff team that I am happy with, I work closely with Dimensions to recruit new staff. When I have new staff, Dimensions send out an advert and when the people come for interview they are matched to the people who use the service. I have told them the type of person I want to support me. They have to be funny, bubbly and girly. They have to be happy to work with me and of course make a nice cup of coffee! I like my staff to have the same interests as me like going to the pub and shopping for girly things. I just love girly things!

Once a new staff member has been matched to me I will go and meet them and have the final say about whether they will work with me or not. I have recently met a new member of staff who I really like. I met her in a Costa Coffee and we had a long chat about the things we liked and what we like to do. I really clicked with her and I said that she had got the job. We made plans to have a girly night clubbing.





# Overcoming challenges

I used to have 105 support hours a week and I would have staff with me most of the time. I would still go out on my own in the community and the staff would stay in my home. So an independent social worker came and did an independent review. She assessed me and she said I only needed 35 support hours. When I had a meeting about my hours getting changed I got very upset and angry and it took me a long time to get used to this change. At the time I didn't understand that reducing my hours was for the best, it seemed like I could not live without the extra support. Looking back now, oh how I was wrong! From the reduction of my hours I have realised and proved to myself the strong independent woman I am. Not only did I prove this to myself but other people too.

As I go out and about on my own, I have come across some challenges that I now deal with on my own.

Recently, I was approached by a member of the public who asked me if I needed help carrying my shopping bags. I felt nervous and anxious about a man I did not know approaching me. I just carried on walking but I felt scared. So I decided to go to the police station to explain what had happened. They have now given me a personal alarm and bells to put on my bag. I feel really proud that I was able to go and do this without support. I feel a lot more comfortable with my alarm now. Plus I even got a cheeky ride in the police car!

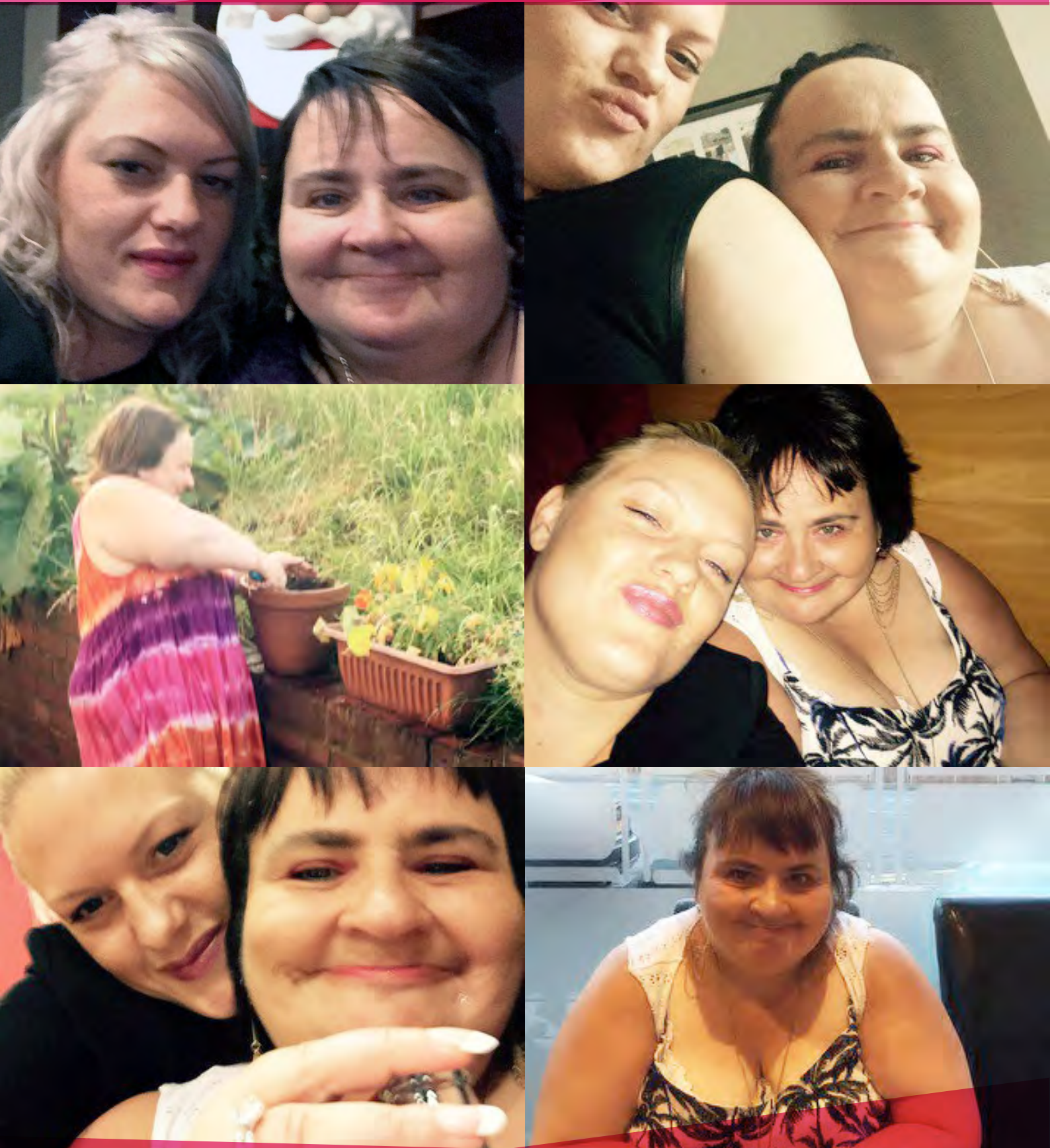
My life has really changed from what it used to be and I am one happy woman now! I could not imagine living my life how it was all those years ago in institutions. I am part of my community now, which is most important to me. Life is a precious thing and I will carry on overcoming challenges and most importantly living life to the full.





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