Irene van de Giessen

My story

In December 2010 I wrote my application letter for a new job. I wanted to become a Coordinator Recovery and Expertise by Experience in a psychiatric hospital called Haagstreek (**powerpoint 1**) near The Hague, Netherlands. This hospital is a sub-division of a large Mental Health organization which consists of six psychiatric hospitals and several institutions specialized in disorders such as personality -, eating - and panic disorders and so on.

I applied to the job simply because Haagstreek is one of the hospitals that wants to pay a decent salary to experts by experience. In most cases hospitals only pay a legal minimum salary plus € 200 every month for a job that almost requires a Phd.

In February 2011 I was invited for a first round of selection talks. I must confess that after two/three months interval I had fully forgotten what it was all about. But I was saved by the bell. The item SEND of my mailbox solved this problem. So I travelled to Leidschendam (**powerpoint 2**) and after two very intensive and long talks I got the job.

A few days after my appointment I was requested to attend a kind of briefing in psychiatric hospital Endegeest about the company and its rules. Reading the invitation I felt that I became pale. Was this a sick joke? Were they playing games with me? Did I have to go back to the place where I once was admitted and wanted to die? Did this mean that Endegeest, like my new workplace, was also a sub-division of the large mental health organisation that I was going to work for? Years ago I had sworn never to go back to that horror site. My aversion against this place was so enormous that I was ready to say to the love of my life, if he had lived there, that he had to move and say goodbye to his family and friends if he wanted to continue his relation with me.

Confused I phoned my foster father and said to him: ‘You never know where the first meeting for my new job will be held.’ ‘Usually in the same place where you have to work, I assume,’ I heard him say. ‘No,’ I yelled. 'in Endegeest.’ ‘Endegeest of all places.’ For a moment there was silence at the other side of the line but then I heard his roaring laughter as he said ‘The circle is round Irene, the circle is round.’ Yes, perhaps for him in his twisted mind but for me his beautiful circle seemed more like a square. (**powerpoint 3**) This because of the fact that my stay as a client in Endegeest had been very traumatic. However after a few days I started to realize that it indeed was very special to get an opportunity to make this circle round.

In spite of all my positive reasoning I stayed behind with some uncertainties, some questions. How would my mind react in that situation there? Would it play games with me as it had done in the past? What if my voices had not gone and were playing hide and seek in hidden caves in my brain? If they were still active would they have power over me? To get answers to all these questions and if necessary to cope with them I left early in the morning for Endegeest.

The night before D-day I woke up with the feeling that there was a burning ring of fire round my mouth. (**powerpoint 4**) I ran to the mirror in the bathroom but all there was: No ring of burning fire. Nothing wrong, nothing unusual. Was this a joke of my brain, or was it a message of my voices to let me know that they wanted to become active again? I did not know, but because I was nervous and uncertain I left for Endegeest early in the morning. So I arrived at seven instead of nine o’clock

I parked my car near the hospital. The weather was wonderful. The sun was shining already. During my Endegeest period I had the feeling that everything was grey and dark. I saw rabbits playing on the lawns (**powerpoint 5**) and I heared birds singing in the trees. It almost looked like a commercial for sanitary towels. You feel totally rotten when you have your period and the commercial shows happy women that are able to dance because of there sanitary towel. I sensed a parallel with this moment because what a difference recovery can make. Is this really the place where I once was a patient? The castle must have been there too. I didn't notice it then.

Where was my ward? It must have been near the entrance of the park. From there I could not see the castle, otherwise I would have noticed it. (**powerpoint 6**) In Endegeest I lived with my voices. Now they were no longer present to 'help me'. I realized that many things had changed over the last few years. There was nothing to be afraid of anymore. That day I passed my Endegeest examination 'with honour'. There was even space to enjoy the weather and my walk in the park. In spite of all my good feelings and positive impressions I thought with compassion of the young woman I once was, here in this hospital.

In the past an ambulance brought me in the middle of the night to this psychiatric hospital. I was in a very confused state, with a cacophony of voices in my head. I asked: 'Where am I?' A nurse answered: 'You know that.' But I really didn't. 'You know that' seemed to be their standard answer to all my questions. So my challenge became to solve the riddle: What in heaven's name I should know. (**powerpoint 7**)

The ward, with locked doors was a mixed one. Horseshoe shaped. The left wing for women, the right wing for men and in the middle an office for the nurses. This mixed novelty was not a happy place for a young woman who, among other things, had been sexually abused in her youth. Some fellow patients ran naked through the corridors. Others mutilated themselves while crying for help. And last but not least female patients were not save and sometimes got raped. In this atmosphere three of my most important voices decided to escape. The situation in this ward was even worse than that in my family of origin. There at least I had my hobbies (for instance playing football), here I could not go anywhere. The voices tried to kick themselves to freedom. But on the blink of success six persons jumped on me, undressed me and put me in a separation ward with a paper chamber pot, blanket and something to hide my nakedness.

In Endegeest the nurses had special rules for deviant behaviour. Separation was their first sanction, later they took away my blanket and if that was not enough, they didn't react when I pushed the alarm button. Last but not least they undressed me, so I had to spend the rest my separation days in full bloom. All this happened under the banner of Mental Health Care. I consider these measures as acts against humanity.

Because I was not informed about the reason why, my voices got more and more confused (**powerpoint 8**). They also became more powerful. Consequently I lost more and more control over myself in those days. Especially my voice called 'Angry' took over. He saw no light at the end of the tunnel. He also wanted to protect me and his fellow voices. Last but not least he wanted to end my imprisonment. To regain my freedom he saw just one solution. I had to commit suicide. So he started to save enough medication to kill himself. Angries voice was so strong that I took all the pills. Just in time I was found and I survived.

For my recovery I needed and got help from outside the Mental Health System. A social worker and a hypnotherapist did wonderful jobs. My foster father helped a great deal but was never taken seriously by the professional caretakers. For instance when he suggested taking my personal history into account they refused to do so. The reason was

that I could decompensate. It was nothing special because I did that normally at least twice a year.

My opinion was not interesting at all. They seemed to think ‘She is crazy, so she can be ignored’. There was no difference in the way my parents and the Mental Health Care System approached me. My voices disrespected this approach thoroughly. The neglect, humiliation and so on almost made me cross the line of life and death. Nowhere, not even in my family of origin my life was more meaningless than in that psychiatric hospital called Endegeest.

In spite of all these reminiscens I returned to Endegeest. I returned to be informed about the organization structure and other important subjects. It was very special to return as a recovered, former patient in a place where a ten years earlier I had been separated, humiliated and ready to commit suicide.

This all made me realize that the choice I made six months earlier to apply for a challenging and demanding job in the Mental Health Care system had been a good one. I am the pioneer I always wanted to be. All my explorations give me energy and have a positive influence on me, fisacally, as well as mentally.

There in that park of Endegeest there was time to think of the person I have been. A human being helped and haunted by twenty five voices. I lived two lives; a normal one and the other in the Mental Health Care.

Nowadays I live a normal life as an employee in a psychiatric hospital, but there are moments that I miss my voices and the possibility to be “not normal” for a while. (**powerpoint 10**)

Thank you very much.