



## Everyday Impact Award

### Name of organisation or individual nominated

Megs Wilson, Willow Foundation

#### 1. What were you trying to change? (maximum 200 words)

Help us understand the vision, aims and objectives

When our daughter Anna was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 26, normality went out the window and in its place was a new normality of doctor's consultations, treatments, medication and hospitals. She decided that quality of life and quality of time were to be her priorities. Where she could she would always have something special in her diary to look forward to, enjoy and talk about afterwards. The days out provided her with something to plan with friends and family and if she had a smile on her face then we too had a smile on our faces. The events would result in an adrenaline rush for Anna that would disguise the symptoms of her illness sometimes for many days at a time. During Anna's 5 year journey with her illness it became clear that apart from the back up of the local hospice there was little or no support for those facing life threatening illness between the ages 16-40. In the last days of her life Anna asked me to use what I had learned to help others. After she died I realised that if special days worked for Anna why shouldn't they work for others.

#### 2. What did you do to make change happen? (maximum 200 words)

Tell us about what actions you took, who you worked with, what resources you had to use etc.

I was keen to set up something in Anna's memory but didn't want to replicate something already in place. I arranged a meeting with the CEO's from the local hospitals and hospices. I asked, 'What is it the National Health cannot provide' and the answer was 'quality of life'. I decided to set up a charity that would provide and pay for special days of the recipients choosing for seriously ill young adults between the ages 16-40, giving them quality time with friends and family. The charity was intended to serve North East Hertfordshire where Anna had been a community nurse. I asked the editor of the local paper if he would promise to print a story about the Willow Foundation every week for the first year, encouraging the readers to raise money in whatever way they could. My husband agreed to work with me and on August 25

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1999 we launched the charity and began raising money and giving special days, from theatre visits to sky diving, all organised from a spare bedroom at home using our home computer. In year one we provided 17 special days with the help of trustees and a few volunteers and raised £200,000.

**3. What were your tangible results?** (maximum 200 words)

Outline what happened as a result of the work and the impact it had

After 6 months the Sylvia Adams Trust provided an office and payment for a PA. In year 2 we provided 29 days and in year three 57. The service spread beyond Hertfordshire as medical professionals began to look upon special days as another tool in their bag. For the first 4 years I worked as Chair of Trustees and unpaid Director. After 4 years we appointed a CEO who began to grow the charity to keep up with demand. I continued as Chair until last year. In the first 6 years we gave 600 special days throughout the south-east. The next year we moved to larger premises, declared ourselves a national charity and provided another 600 special days throughout the UK. Willow is 10 years old with a staff of 40, providing 1500 special days every year needing an income of £3.5 million. To date over 6000 families have had a special day and each letter of thanks echoes the positive effect on recipient and family that Anna experienced. Willow is unique and is recognised by medical professionals throughout the UK as having an uplifting and empowering effect on the seriously ill, helping alleviate the stresses of diagnosis and treatment.

**Name of organisation or individual nominated**

Megs Wilson, co-founder of the Willow Foundation (nominated by other)

**Why are you nominating this organisation/individual?**

Explain what it is that makes this organisation or individual stand out from everyone else, what is the impact that they have on everyday life? (Maximum 200 words)

Megs Wilson and her husband Bob lost their daughter, Anna, to cancer aged just 31. Anna was diagnosed aged 26 and spent six years undergoing multiple operations and ongoing treatment. During this time Anna always had a date in the diary - pop concerts, football matches, shopping trips, and more. These days gave her something to look forward to, a chance to feel normal and even some relief from her symptoms, as well as precious memories for everyone.

Soon after Anna's death, Megs set up the Willow Foundation which aimed to recreate Anna's special days for others living with a serious illness. In particular, for those aged 16 to 40 – which she recognised as a neglected age group. In its first year, Megs organised 17 special days in North East Hertfordshire, operating from her home.

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Within six years the Willow Foundation became a national charity providing its service nationwide.

This year, 2009, the charity celebrates its tenth anniversary and has recently provided its 5,000<sup>th</sup> special day. Over the ten years, special days have been organised for 16 to 40 year olds living with a range of life threatening conditions including cancer, cystic fibrosis, motor neurone disease, muscular dystrophy, organ failure, Huntington's, amongst others.

From the thousands of thank you letters the charity receives, its clear that special days deliver the same benefits as they did for Anna – a chance to feel normal, boost morale, quality time with family and friends, relief from symptoms and precious memories.

The charity today employs 40 staff and continues to grow to meet the increasing demand for its special days. The charity's ultimate aim is to provide a special day for every seriously ill 16 to 40 year old in the UK.

Megs is an inspirational individual who turned a devastating situation in to a positive for thousands of young adults whose lives have been affected by serious illness. Megs remains Founder President of the charity and is still heavily involved in the running of the charity.

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