

Pauline Fairbrother

Pauline Fairbrother was born in 1923 to a Jewish father and Catholic mother, both of whom were atheists. This radical background was the foundation of her approach to life. My sister Diana Fairbrother was born in 1950. She was diagnosed 2 years later as an 'imbecile' and Pauline was advised to put her away. A visit to a subnormality hospital made Pauline determined not to put Diana there, but to keep her at home. She was then faced with the problem of what was available for Diana. At that stage there was precious little, attendance at a church hall with largely untrained staff was the best available.

With a strong socialist background and a feisty character, my mother was not going to accept the situation as it was and was determined to change it. She joined the Association for Parents of Backward Children in Surrey and so started a lifetime of campaigning for people with a disability. She fought for proper facilities, for learning disabled people to be taught in schools, and for those subnormality hospitals to close.

She also worked for the acceptance and respect for people with learning disability. The recognition that they have sexual and social needs as well as care and education was important, and even with the sexual liberation of the 60s, the idea of disabled people having sex was quite shocking. She never forgot that having a handicapped child had a huge affect on families. To meet the needs of people with a learning disability, you also had to meet the needs of the families. Parents of newly diagnosed babies, needed support particularly from other parents, and so she started a mother and baby group. Pauline also talked about the effect on siblings leading to the establishment of groups and support networks. Pauline always questioned what was accepted practice and belief, campaigning for things to be better.

She got more and more involved in the National Society for Mentally Handicapped Children as it was called, and later in Mencap, locally, nationally and internationally. She worked tirelessly: campaigning, fund raising, talking to groups, lobbying – the list is long but the aim was always clear: to make life better for people with a learning disability.

Her view was always that the community through the local authorities should provide the services needed and that the role of the charity was to argue, demand, campaign, research into alternatives. Mencap was there to ensure that people like Diana, got what they deserved, it was not their job to provide it. To advise and campaign for what was needed and even more importantly what was wanted. Pauline dared to dream. She was chided for asking for the impossible, for not being practical – you'll never get that she was told. Her response was quite simple, 'If we hadn't dreamed all those years ago, we wouldn't have the facilities we have now'.

Mencap was an important part of her life, but she also managed to be our Mum and best friend. The last years were difficult with the onset of Alzheimers, but her spirit survived. Her husband died 6 years ago, and she will be remembered by her 3 daughters, 4 grandchildren and 9 great grand children.

Ruth Sharratt