



Gateshead Youth Worker shortlisted in The National Diversity Awards.

On Friday 22nd July, the shortlist for the National Diversity Awards was announced on social media, the awards that until accidentally coming across on Twitter I hadn't heard of. After reading through the award categories- I knew that there was one person who stood out from everyone else I knew and I had to nominate for an award, the most prestigious and competitive award of them all- The Life Time Achiever award. I nominated Valerie Ender, my youth worker from when I was fifteen, who has had more impact on my life than anyone. I knew, that for all she's done for young people across the borough of Gateshead, Valerie needed to be recognised. I wanted others to know about the valuable sanctuary that Gateshead Youth council provides for young people and how proud I am now to call her a friend.

I first met Valerie when I joined Gateshead Youth Assembly, as a shy, timid fifteen year old- with incredibly low self esteem and an anxiety disorder that I didn't have a name for yet. I was also in denial about being Dyspraxic, a neurological condition that affects everything from my coordination, visual perception to short term memory, making me very unsure of myself and the world around me. However Valerie saw past this, and through to a girl who desperately wanted to be included, to break down those barriers so that I could participate. She adopted a very caring and encouraging approach with me, offering an ear when I needed it, a gentle hug when things got too much or simply just a push in the right direction when I had to do something. She was always there, and Gateshead youth council became my second home- Valerie believed in me for one of the first times in my life, something very special for a girl with Dyspraxia who was constantly told that I wouldn't be able to do things, or achieve academically. Valerie was different to everyone else who came before, she knew that I would get there and I was finally able to prove it when I travelled, with Valerie's support to Slovakia after winning a writing competition to get there. It was on this trip that I finally understood who I was for the first time, and through the tears, anxiety attacks and lack of vegetarian food- I blossomed. The one woman who has been instrumental in helping me get there is Valerie Ender, coordinator of Gateshead Youth council and a brilliant youth worker and friend to everyone, who simply lets young people have a go, without being worried about being different or standing out. This seems miles away from the world many know at school. She really did make a difference to mine (and many others) lives and I want everyone to know this, so I nominated her for this award.

The NDA'S are about equality, diversity and inclusion- and Valerie has really shown that this is at the heart of everything she does, by bringing young people from diverse backgrounds across Gateshead together. Diversity is the backbone to everything she did when I was a young person, and still does today- making reaching the shortlist for the life time achiever award even more special. She is one remarkable woman from Gateshead, who through her humble and passionate ways has done extraordinary and often life changing things for the young people she works with. I was inspired so much by Valerie that I went on to study for a Masters in Community and Youth work at Durham University, so that I could encourage young people just as Valerie did for me. When I finally completed the Masters, and it came around to graduating in the iconic Durham cathedral, Valerie was

on the top of my list of people I wanted to be there, and I was honoured when she accepted my invitation. I do everything I do now, because I joined Gateshead Youth assembly when I did, at a time in my life when I really needed to be accepted and understood. I am over the moon that my youth worker and friend, who was so instrumental in me becoming the young woman I am today, capable of standing up and taking the lead and with the confidence to support others in the same way as Valerie did when I spent more time in the Youth Councils office than I did at home, has been shortlisted for this award.

Valerie writes: 'I have been incredibly lucky to work in an amazing organisation for most of my adult life. I have worked with colleagues, parents, carers and most importantly young people who are amazing, inciteful, funny compassionate, confused, overwhelmed and absolutely bloody fantastic. What you should know though, is every decent Youth Worker out there would get nominations like this. I come from a profession of people who believe desperately that people are wonderful, some just need support to achieve their potential.'

The awards take place in September in Liverpool's cathedral, and I'm pleased to have been part of getting Gateshead represented but also to finally to be able to show on a national level how lucky Gateshead is to have a woman like Valerie who has shaped the lives of many.