



Sarah waits for a bus into town



## LIVING THE INDEPENDENT WAY

### SARAH'S STORY

FOR Sarah Long, living independently has always been an achievable dream. Despite having Autistic Spectrum Disorder, ME and a learning disability, she has battled through all the barriers thrown in her way, and is now in a position to fulfil her ambitions.

Words By ALEX JACKSON  
Photos by IAIN GARRETT



Receiving a helping hand with her accounts

Sarah first came into contact with Ridgeway more than two and half years ago when she was referred to the Trust, to look at her independent living skills. At that time, the Occupational Therapist completed an Initial Assessment which set out the main priorities that needed addressing.

This was essentially the start of a harmonious bond between Sarah and Ridgeway Occupational Therapist, Sarah Wanigasooriya.

With a steely determination Sarah began to overcome some of her biggest fears by learning to travel independently on the bus. Before, this was something that both daunted and distressed her, with the thought of unruly bus drivers driving round corners fast, a little too much to bear.

However gradually with support from Sarah, who would follow in her car, a new confidence became apparent, and she was keen to keep this routine going.

"At first it was fairly scary as there were a few reckless bus drivers that left me rather intimidated by the whole situation," said Sarah.

**"I find a lot of everyday things in life, which other people may take for granted, can prove quite difficult and there are certain things that get in the way of communication."**

"It's more a case of having a number of concerns and anxieties that others would simply put to the back of their minds."

Yet despite all this, Sarah has gained a great deal of independence and has further been learning how to budget, as well as getting to grips with necessary money skills.

Most recently, she has started a job at a local shop called Clairabella in her hometown of High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, where she works a couple of hours a week helping around the store.

Away from that, she has an array of hobbies, including a passion for playing the piano and listening to some of her favourite singers such as Kylie Minogue and Celine Dion. Sarah also has a creative mind achieving a diploma in Fashion and Design in 2008 and she continues to attend jewellery making class on Thursday evenings.

Now she is looking at her biggest step yet into the unknown, moving away from her family home in Buckinghamshire up to North Yorkshire.

Having joined a local Buddhist group, she is contemplating whether to move to either her own home with support or join a faith community.

Sarah said: "It's exciting and something I have wanted to do for a number of years. I've been building up to this and with Sarah's help I feel I have more confidence to live independently.

"It would be brilliant to live in my own home and have my new friends come round. And equally it would be good to live in a Buddhist community, the only problem being I like my television, which is not allowed in the community."

With her younger sister leaving home to study at University, it was a matter of time before Sarah had the urge to follow in her footsteps and move out of the family home.

Sarah's mother, Sue Long, said the exemplary support Sarah had received from Ridgeway was a huge confidence boost for all the family.

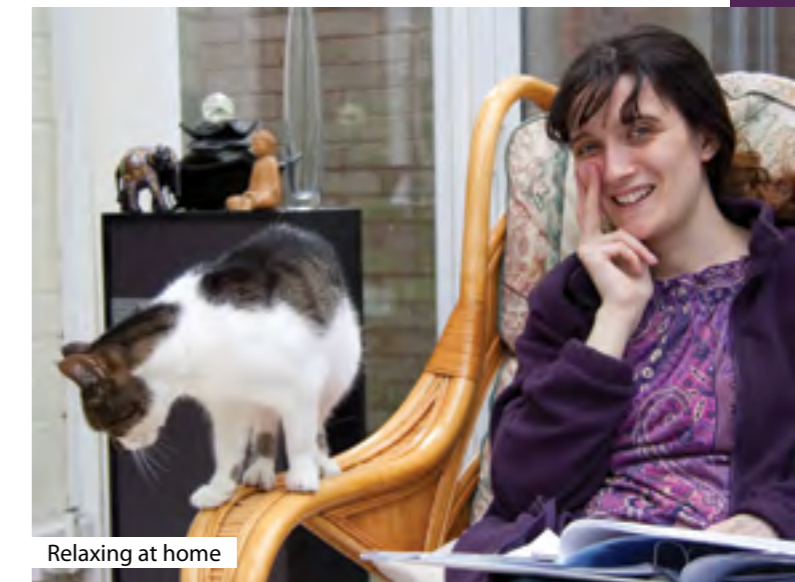
She said: "Sarah has been exceptional with my daughter and is constantly thinking outside the box in terms of ways to improve confidence and gain independence.

"It has been noticed by a lot of visitors, family and friends, just how much Sarah has benefited as a person from this support and we have been fortunate to have the support of Sarah W."

So with what was once a distant dream now becoming a reality, Sarah packs her bag, and gets ready for her big venture north.

#### Contact for further details

Sarah Wanigasooriya, Senior Occupational Therapist  
Tel: 01494 475174  
Email: sarah.wanigasooriya@ridgeway.nhs.uk



Relaxing at home