

RACHAEL'S STORY

Rachael left residential college a few years ago, leaving behind many good friends. Although Rachael was determined to keep in touch with her college and local friends through social media, actually finding a suitable place to meet when so many of her friends were wheelchair users was challenging. With the support of her Personal Assistant (PA) who Rachael employs through direct payments, and with the help of social media, phone, text and word of mouth, Rachael has been successfully organising regular meet ups for her friends.

“Friendship is an everyday thing at college, but when you leave, they disappear if you don't try to keep in touch. If some people don't use social media they become isolated. As well as face book I use Skype; the same social media that everyone else in the world uses.”

Rachael did some research and found that her local Tesco Store offered



a free and accessible community room. Rachael now has a regular Friday night room booking arrangement. She contacts her friends through face book and enjoys planning quizzes, games and refreshments. Rachael's friends pay a small amount to help cover the costs of drinks and prizes.

Not surprisingly, Rachael's Friday Tesco nights are very popular with her friends. For Rachael herself, they offer

her a sense of pride and purpose. "Friends are always asking me 'when's the next one'. It makes me feel like I've done something for my

community. It's really helpful for me to keep in touch with my friends because I do miss people, I do feel isolated sometimes ... I see it as a bit of a reunion. The next one's for Macmillan, all the money is going to Macmillan".

Rachael also invites her friends to join her when she rents a large, accessible holiday home by the sea. They bring along a picnic, share lifts, and enjoy friendship.

"Even when I'm on holiday it's a time to meet up with friends, see how everyone is and have the time to catch up"

Rachel gave her advice for other young people wanting to do the same

- Arrange the get to-gethers well in advance so your friends can organise transport and support assistance if needed
- Create lists of all the things you need to do with your PA
- Give yourself time to organise the event
- Find an accessible venue
- Keep all your friends contact details together in one place, use an i-pad if you have one
- Use text, phone calls, Skype, Facebook and word of mouth and e-mail to keep in touch with your friends and send invitations

"Communication is key, If you don't keep contact you will lose friendships, so keep in touch with friends!"

Personal assistants can help

Rachael was clear about the friendship role her Personal Assistant should play when writing the job description and interview questions.

"When I wrote my job description I didn't want it to just be my care, it's about living my life"

Although the help Rachel receives from her Personal Assistant is crucial to the success of her friendship networks, it is also rewarding for her

Personal Assistant. Together they write invitations, spend ages planning games and quizzes, and putting friends in touch with one another to share transport.

Rachael's initiative is helping and inspiring other young people to see what can be achieved:

"What I like about what Rachael does – it's marvellous – it gives me the opportunity to meet people have a laugh. Me personally it's much more than that. It's somewhere I am able to say right, this is *me* time"