

# I DIDN'T PLAN TO BE AN ADDICT

## NATALIE'S RECOVERY STORY

*Treatment staff and her peers help Natalie find a path to recovery from heroin addiction.*

*A confronting situation years later, when she is a successful treatment practitioner, helps Natalie realise that she is still traumatised from her childhood experiences.*

*A second recovery journey begins.*

### 1. Early years

I was very happy in my early childhood. My family was well-off financially. I didn't go without. I remember being popular at school. However, I did not realise that there was a darker side to my family life.

When I was about eight years old, I discovered that my Dad had a drug habit. The reason why my family home was always busy, with people around all hours of the day and night, was because of drugs. While Mum sometimes took drugs, I think she did it more to keep Dad company and fit in with his friends.

Over the next year or so, I began to resent this lifestyle with people in and out of the house, sometimes staying for a few days. Us kids could not understand why the adults were always doing 'lions' (lines). I eventually told Mum that I didn't like seeing her and Dad doing drugs. Mum stopped using, but Dad carried on.

My family moved area when I was 11 years old. One week later, disaster struck! My Dad was arrested for a drug offence, remanded in custody and eventually given a long prison sentence. I had just started a new school and suddenly our names and house were in the paper and on the news. It was a horrible, horrible time in my life, having to go to school knowing that everyone knew. I felt a lot of shame.

I started using cannabis and alcohol when I was 14. It felt like something I knew. I really liked the way that cannabis stopped me feeling. I could do something and not feel guilty about it. I started dating a guy called Richard around this time. He used to steal a lot of money from his parents and we would go out and have great fun. I began 'mitching off' school (playing truant), going to score with Richard and then just spend the day doing whatever we wanted.

I then started experimenting with acid (LSD) and downers (Valium and temazepam).<sup>1</sup> Life was so much fun. It didn't hurt that Richard came from a wealthy family, as this helped support the lifestyle that I enjoyed.

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<sup>1</sup> Valium and temazepam are benzodiazepines prescribed for the management of anxiety. Both drugs are widely used on the street, often to help people come down from the effects of other drugs like amphetamine, or deal with drug withdrawal.

When I was 15, I became pregnant. Richard and I split up four months into my pregnancy. I hadn't been going to school, I didn't really have any friends, and I found life really boring. On top of that, I gave up all drugs while I was pregnant. I even gave up cigarettes.

I didn't start smoking cannabis again until four months after my son Joshua was born. When I was 17 or 18, I discovered the rave scene and took my first ecstasy tablet. I began using ecstasy every time I went clubbing. When Joshua was two years old, I took speed (amphetamine) whilst I was caring for him for the first time. At this point, I didn't think that I was addicted to anything, even though I was regularly using drugs and getting wrecked with alcohol at the weekends.

I began dating a guy called John, who was dealing speed (amphetamine) and hash (cannabis). I didn't really like John because he was an alcoholic and used to get in some right states. However, I could phone him up any time and he would come and take me out and he had loads of speed on him all the time. During this time, I really got into the clubbing scene. I lost loads of weight and got myself into a great deal of debt buying clothes and partying.

To begin with, I thought my speed use was controlled. Speed made me feel confident and happy. I also had to take lots of Valium and temazepam to come down off the speed and to look after my little boy.

## **2. Life with heroin**

Dad was released from prison when I was 19. Whilst he had been inside, he had developed a heroin habit. I think that this is when things started to spiral out of control for me. Dad was dealing heroin to John, who had also gotten a habit whilst in prison.

I ended up trying heroin for the first time when I was 21. I didn't think much of it. In fact, I was wondering what everyone had been going on about. However, at the same time it made me feel really chilled out and calm. I tried heroin again a week later, but after that I didn't use it for a while.

My drinking, and speed and ecstasy use, escalated. Joshua was spending a lot of time with my Mum and Dad. I ended up in hospital because of my drug use and I lost my job because I was caught drinking while working.

When I was about 22, I decided not to use ecstasy anymore because I couldn't be bothered with all the paranoia it produced. I was also badly affected by the death of Leah Betts after she had taken ecstasy.<sup>2</sup> I decided that I would just use speed from now on.

My relationship with John was really volatile. We would argue all the time, but for some reason I just kept going back to him. One of our most common arguments was over his heroin use. One day, I just thought, 'I

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<sup>2</sup> The death of Leah Betts created a great deal of media interest and adverse publicity about ecstasy. You can read the story on Wikipedia.

might as well join him, rather than arguing with him the whole time.’ I started using heroin with John in the evenings while Joshua was in bed. Maybe my Mum had a similar reflection about using drugs with my Dad all those years earlier, albeit with different substances?

For me, heroin use became normal very quickly. My Dad was doing it, John was doing it and I just accepted it—there seemed to be no problem. I remember thinking, ‘What’s everyone on about, you can get addicted straight away? That’s bollocks.’

I honestly thought I could take it or leave it, but for some reason I still kept taking it. I still can’t believe how fast my heroin use escalated. I never ever thought this was going to happen to me. I began using heroin at an earlier time in the day, and was soon using it all day, every day. My Dad would sometimes give me gear as his way of showing that he cared. He didn’t want to see me in pain and withdrawing.

I reached a stage where I was using heroin in front of my son. All of my ‘friends’ would be there, as well as my brother, and because Joshua lived in the room with me, he saw what we were doing. However, the gear blocked all this out and numbed my feelings. I was totally oblivious, on a different planet.

Things now got really out of hand. I somehow managed to hold down a job, but I would come home from work, ‘gouch out’<sup>3</sup> in my work clothes, and then go straight to work the next morning. There were times when I didn’t even take a bath for two weeks. My hair would get really greasy, but I would just put talcum powder on it. I sometimes tried to do ‘normal’ things with Joshua. For example, John and I would take him camping or to an amusement park. But wherever we went, the bong would come with us and we would smoke heroin.

My heroin use escalated until I was spending an awful lot of money each day on the drug. There came a point where I could no longer even take Joshua to school, as I couldn’t get out of bed. I would just set my alarm for ten past three so I would be up and dressed by the time he came home from school. My Mum started taking a lot more responsibility for Joshua.

The only reason that I stayed with John was to support my habit, as he had a good supply being a dealer. I couldn’t stand him, but I was so addicted to the drugs that I just couldn’t leave. John knew this and as a result could get away with treating me awfully. He spoke to me like shit and would walk out all the time. When he wasn’t there, I would be on the floor looking for the tiniest bits of heroin. I’d be smoking all kinds of crap, dog hair or anything. If it looked like heroin and it was all stuck in dust, I’d be smoking it.

At this time, I was completely lost. I remember thinking, ‘I’m scared’, but I couldn’t see a way out. I felt completely trapped. I absolutely hated using gear because of what it was doing. I felt totally controlled by John and heroin. My heroin use was taking its toll on my body. I collapsed twice from using too much, once in front of Joshua. I would be sick most days and it got to the point where I just used to vomit into a plastic bag in front of whoever was there, including my son.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Gouch out’ means to become drowsy or lethargic under the influence of opiates.

I was too afraid to go to the doctor for help because I thought they would take Joshua off me. Even though I was addicted to drugs and they were my priority, I still loved my son and no way did I want to lose him.

This was a really difficult period for my Mum. She was nearly having a nervous breakdown. I was on heroin, my brother was on it, and my Dad was on it. One day, Mum told me that I needed to leave the family home unless I got help. This was the kick up the backside that I needed, as I couldn't imagine having to live with John.

### **3. Accessing treatment**

I phoned up a local treatment agency and for the first time admitted that I was a heroin addict. I was crying on the phone and when the lady told me the date of my appointment it felt like ages away. It was three or four weeks, I think.

When I went for my appointment, I was offered a place on the pre-treatment programme. The treatment agency worker kept saying to me, 'You'll do this, kid' and I was like, 'Oh my God, do you really think so!?' I really honestly couldn't believe him. I just didn't think I would be able to get out of my situation.

The treatment agency that I went to uses an approach that is based on the Minnesota Model of addiction, where addiction is viewed as a medical disease that can be treated with one-to-one counselling, family therapy, group therapy and involvement in 12-step groups such as Narcotics Anonymous (NA). As I was so nervous on the first pre-treatment day, I asked my Mum to walk up to the agency with me. It was first thing in the morning, about 09.30. I thought that was punishment in itself!

I was still using heroin when I first attended the agency. There were about fifteen other treatment agency clients in my first group session, one of whom was an ex-heroin user who had been clean for about 16 years. She came over to talk to me and I was in awe. She had done exactly what I was doing and she had gotten through it. It was a Light Bulb Moment. From that moment on, I didn't feel so alone. For the first time, I was with a group of people who understood me and my addiction, and I understood and related to them and with what they were saying.

You have to realise my state of thinking prior to that first group meeting in the treatment agency. Once I had become addicted to heroin, I did not see that there was any alternative to the life I was living. I didn't know anyone who had overcome heroin addiction. I had never heard of anyone who had done so. I could find no information on the internet on how to give up using the drug. That was it! I just had to carry on doing what I was doing.

The agency suggested that I attend NA meetings. I went and sat there listening to other people's stories and I couldn't believe that people were saying they were now clean. I thought, 'Oh yeah, they're just saying that. They're bound to have a smoke [heroin] or a line [cocaine].'

As time passed, being at the agency and attending NA meetings felt fantastic. They were the right places for me. I actually felt like I belonged. It was really nice having something in common with other people. I also started to understand my addiction, and came to realise that my behaviour was part of my illness.

The agency suggested that I go for a detox at a local psychiatric hospital. I was absolutely horrified at the thought and was thinking, 'There's no way I'm going for a detox. That's for down-and-outs, not for me. No way!' Even my family didn't think that I needed a detox. However, the more that I thought about it, the more I realised I needed to attend the detox programme.

I began to wean myself off heroin whilst waiting to attend the Primary Treatment programme. My Dad measured out a certain amount for me each day and that progressively reduced in size. I had tried to do this before, but it hadn't worked. However, this time was different, as I really wanted to do it. Over about two months, I reduced my daily use by more than 90%. However, I was self-medicating with the opiate substitute physeptone, which I was buying off the 'street'.<sup>4</sup> Given my knowledge today, I would not recommend anyone self-medicating in this way, but it worked for me at the time.

When I was cutting down, I had real problems sleeping. That lasted for about two months. Sometimes, I was awake for most of the night. I was also feeling very shaky inside. I didn't know whether I was coming or going. It was like being back in the world after being locked up for a couple of years.

Once I had stopped using heroin, I became aware of the simplest things, like the taste of food, birds singing and spring time. It was really strange. The mental withdrawal from heroin was much worse than the physical withdrawals. Mentally, I was so wired up. I felt as if I wanted to rip up something.

I started to keep a journal, which I've still got. Every time that I felt that I was going out of my mind, I would write in my journal or make sure that I did something to keep myself occupied. My family was really supportive, and when I felt like I couldn't cope they would take me somewhere—to the beach, anywhere. I didn't necessarily want to go, but it did help me.

One of the hardest things to deal with was the mental frustration. I had so many things going around my head and I was really scared. I had tried to change so many times before and I was battling with thoughts that I was going to mess up again. I had all these feelings rushing around my head, but I didn't realise what they were because I had suppressed them for so long with heroin.

I can remember not being able to distinguish between feelings of hurt and anger. My counsellor really helped me to re-learn what different feelings stood for, which really helped. The hardest thing was having to face up to my past problems and seeing the damage I had caused to myself and others by taking drugs. I didn't want

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<sup>4</sup> Physeptone contains methadone hydrochloride, an opioid used as a maintenance therapy for people addicted to heroin and also sometimes used for chronic pain management.

to face up to the bad things that had happened and that I'd done. It was so difficult trying to sort all of that out raw, without using drugs to cope.

At the beginning, my drug-using friends kept phoning me. This was really hard because I still wanted to be with them, but at the same time I didn't. I was jealous that they were still using and partying, and I was just stuck in my house. John was particularly persistent and in the end I thought I would need to take an injunction out against him. My counsellor really helped with this matter, and gave me good advice, like not to get involved, burn any letters he sends, etc. I had to keep myself safe.

One of my main memories of this time was when I was trying to re-establish a 'normal' life. I was so used to 'gouching out' every night in my clothes that I had forgotten the process of going to bed.

One night, I thought: 'Well, what do you do? You must put your nightie on.' It had been so long since I'd done it. And so I put my nightie on and got into bed and asked myself, 'Well, what do you do now?'

'Right, people set their alarms, don't they?' I thought. So I did that and the feeling was so strange, as I had not done it for years. I continued, 'This is what normal people do.' Mind you, it was about two o'clock in the morning, not exactly a normal time to go to bed. However, I certainly thought that it was quite normal!

Although it was strange getting used to a new day-to-day routine, it became quite easy after a while. I started taking my son to school and getting pleasure out of doing little things. I found it really important to stick to a routine and this really helped me.

#### **4. Primary treatment**

Although I wasn't using heroin any more, I was still drinking a lot of alcohol and smoking cannabis. My life was still chaotic. To access the Primary stage of the treatment programme, which I wanted to do, I had to be completely clean. I had to stop drinking and smoking hash, which I didn't really see as a problem. What helped me to get totally clean was just thinking about today, rather than getting overwhelmed by the future.

Eating properly was another thing that I had to get used to doing. I had been binge eating, instead of having regular meals, for a long time. My counsellor helped me to record what I ate and develop a balanced diet plan.

Another obstacle that I had to overcome was being around heroin. I was still living at home and my Dad was still using. People didn't think that I would be able to resist the temptation. However, although I wouldn't advise people to put themselves in the same circumstances as me, seeing my Dad still using actually helped me to realise that I didn't want to be like that anymore.

Treatment involved attending the agency on Tuesday each week, when we had one group session in the morning and one in the afternoon. I also had a counselling session on another day. I would not have been

able to tackle my addiction without the treatment agency. They gave me a structure to my life. They taught me how to live again.

After engaging with the treatment agency, I felt like I belonged somewhere for the first time. There was just something about the place. I loved the people, and most importantly they weren't judging me and they were treating me like a human being. I was being supported in what I wanted to do and I was being treated like a decent person. They believed in me, when I didn't.

I still doubted my ability to overcome my addiction when I entered the Primary Treatment programme. Although I had lots of people around me who believed in me, I still struggled. Then I started to see small changes in myself. For example, on my birthday, John sent me a card with £50 in it and my first reaction was, 'Brilliant!' as I was skint. However, off my own back, I sent the card back to him because I thought it would be hypocritical to take his money when I wouldn't speak to him. I started to develop some self-respect.

There were times in treatment when I didn't think that I would be able to get through certain situations without using drugs. For example, I had to read out my life story in group and all I was thinking was that there was no way I was going to be able to read aloud for 40 minutes without some Valium. But I did it. When you do it, and you do it sober, it feels so good.

During treatment, I started to accept the role that I had played in my addiction, rather than blame others. I started to forgive people for what had happened to me, rather than blaming them. My counsellor was fantastic. I had a lot of issues to deal with and I was an angry person. My counsellor helped me to work through these issues.

The treatment agency also helped me to re-build the relationship with my son, which had been damaged over the years. When I first approached the agency, I didn't know how to be a mother. Joshua and I would argue like brother and sister, as I was still learning to be a responsible adult. I didn't know how to look after myself, so how could I look after my son? He wouldn't trust me. In fact, he often wouldn't come anywhere near me, and that was very painful.

It took a long time before Joshua would kiss or cuddle me. Now our relationship is really good, although it is something at which we both had to work. Joshua had counselling to help him to learn to trust me and overcome his fear of being abandoned. Previously, he used to wake up regularly and I wouldn't be there for him, so he now had to get used to me being there all the time.

Whilst in treatment, I began to do non-vocational courses (e.g. pottery and dress making) and help out at the local school. This allowed me to mix with people who were not addicts. This was a big step, because I had become quite isolated from 'normal' people. It was also the first time that I had ever completed a course.

During the time that I was in treatment, the agency played a massive role in guiding me and teaching me how to live a normal life. However, I still wasn't really my own person because they had been supporting me so much and helping me make decisions. When I left treatment, I was left to fend for myself. I was out there and there was no counselling and I had to get on with life on my own.

However, although I was somewhat fearful, I was ready. I had learnt the skills that I needed to go out into the world and look after myself. My ability to exist independently was all the more important in that my counsellor had helped me find a flat, so I could move out of the family home where it had become increasingly difficult being around heroin users. A week after I finished Primary, Joshua and I moved into our own rented flat. It was the first time that I was doing something on my own.

I continued with monthly aftercare sessions once I completed Primary. They comprised big group meetings where people could discuss any problems they were having. However, I was finding that I didn't have any problems. That was weird in itself, because I had always had problems. But nothing major was happening in my life. It was smooth.

I began volunteering at the treatment agency. Later, when I was about to begin studying for a Social Welfare Diploma course, the agency offered me a full-time job. I thought they meant voluntary work, but they were actually going to pay me! It was like a dream come true and I never ever expected it to happen. Like most addicts, I thought very poorly of myself and I didn't think that I was good enough to be offered a job. I thought that as I had no GCSEs or any other qualification, and I wasn't very good on the computer, there was no way I would get a job. I was so wrong!

## **5. A drug-free life**

Looking back now, I can see all of the changes that I have made. I have learnt to respect myself now and I have built myself a life in which I am really happy. I have found balance in my life. Working at the treatment agency really helped me to get back on my feet. I was able to pay off my debts, take my driving test, get a car, go on holiday and buy things for my son. I had the money to do what I wanted to do, and to buy Joshua things that he needed or wanted. Working has also really helped me to build my confidence, and to meet supportive and friendly people.

When I look back at my using days, it feels very far away. I shock myself when I think of the state I was in. I was 24, with no future other than my addiction, and I truly believed that I would never achieve anything. As a child, my dream of what it was like to be an adult was nothing like how I had been living, and that was very sad.

Now, I am so happy and that dream of adulthood is far better than I ever imagined. I feel free and very fortunate. Most people who come here to the treatment agency where I work are taken aback when they find out that I am a recovering heroin addict.



In the past, I would look around at Fellowship meetings or in a group session and think that everyone was different to me, because they could recover and I never would. I believed that I was a different type of addict. I wasn't a 'together addict', whereas they were. I thought that there was no hope for me, and I used to think that I probably wouldn't succeed in anything I did. Now, I know I'm no different from anybody else, definitely not. I think that anybody can achieve recovery. The important thing is that you have to be ready to do it because it is tough.

Since leaving treatment, I have had to learn to deal with the s\*\*t that life throws at you. Rebuilding my relationship with Joshua was really hard work, but I stuck at it. To start with, it felt like I was given this child and I just didn't know what to do as I had been off my head for so long. It was a major power struggle between us, and we both had to adapt to new roles within the relationship. I think that I would have really benefited from parenting classes that could have helped me to deal with those issues.

There have been other tough times. For example, I had to cope with the death of my Dad, which was really difficult. However, not once did I consider using. I've also been in a relationship for three years, which is a huge emotional turmoil, but I have been learning how to cope and adapt as I go along. I learnt a lot of tools while in treatment, so I just have to make sure that I keep on applying them to my life. I still stick to the mantra, 'One day at a time.'

I'm still in regular contact with my sponsor from NA, although our relationship has changed a lot. It is now more equal, with both of us providing support for one another, rather than just me off-loading my problems. Having supportive relationships has really helped me adapt to my drug-free life. Before I came into recovery, the only relationships I had experienced had been dysfunctional. I had to learn how to have positive relationships, and that was quite hard and challenging at times.

For me, the most important things in my recovery were my son, the treatment agency and my family (and the support they gave me), and NA meetings.

Recovery hasn't come easy and I have had to work at it. I have read recovery books and I still go to meetings and speak to my sponsor regularly. These activities, along with short courses and voluntary work, all helped me fill my time up. It can be difficult to fight the boredom when you have a lot of time on your hands—and boredom can increase the likelihood of relapse—so a recovering person must keep busy. It is also important to avoid becoming isolated from the world.

Over the years, I have had to learn to deal with the feelings that I have towards the time in my life when I was using. A lot of that has been done through talking to other people in recovery, people who are in a similar situation. I have learnt that even though I am accountable, I am not responsible for all that happened.

Before, I didn't know about, or understand, addiction. I certainly didn't plan to be an addict. But it happened, and I managed to turn my life around. I changed what, at the time, felt like a hopeless situation. I can

honestly say now that I wouldn't change my past. I have become the person I am as a product of my past. I am also in the position to help other people.

My life is definitely different now to how it was. The first two years in recovery I was putting the foundations down, getting to know myself, and learning how to lead a normal life. Now, I'm living the way I want to live. I am no longer ashamed of myself, and I feel confident with meeting new people and making new friends. My life is now stable, and I am free to make choices. I still live for today and I think that has really helped me over the years.

For me, it has been really important that I keep a routine in my life. You also have to be honest with yourself. Part of addiction is denial, and without even realising it people can get caught up in thinking that they are OK, and before they know it they're not. It's important that people in recovery keep on evaluating themselves, making sure that they are using the tools and skills they have developed. It is so important to avoid becoming complacent.

I want other people to realise that there is hope of overcoming addiction. Anyone can do it, as long as they want to do it. Nothing is too immense to sort out, but the hard part is reaching out and getting the help. People need to realise that they don't have to do it on their own—there are people out there who can help.

From my experiences, I think that drug users need support and somebody to believe in them. They need to be treated kindly because they are so often judged and criticised. It's hard, because when you are using and it becomes too much, you want help, but you have often pushed away the people who are closest to you. That's why it's so important that people who want to change their drug use have support and encouragement. And a good source for this support is often other recovering people. They can help you realise that you aren't alone, and that other people have or had the same fears as you. Seeing other people do so well really spurred me on and I would think, 'I want to do that!'

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## **Fifteen Years Later (November 2020)**

### **1. Life today**

I am now 20 years in recovery and very happy. I have been together with James for 18 years and we were married nine years ago. James has two sons from a previous marriage and they are both doing well in their lives. My son Joshua, who is now in his late-20s, is also doing well. He has his own successful business and lives locally. He does not take drugs and only drinks occasionally. I guess the cycle of addiction has been broken.

I have been the Team Leader at a drug and alcohol treatment agency for nine years now. It's the same treatment agency I had approached for help all those years ago. I've now worked there for 19 years.

My current position is strange in the sense that there has been a big role reversal. When I first started as a receptionist, Sally, who took my initial phone call when I was looking for help, was my line-manager. I was later promoted and became Sally's line-manager. She has retired now. I am also the line manager of some of the people who facilitated the groups I attended during the early stages of my recovery journey all those years ago.

My job is absolutely fantastic! I love it!! As Team Leader in our local agency branch, I manage a team of ten individuals who are involved in delivering the various elements of our treatment service, which include the abstinence programme, harm reduction elements, family counselling, outreach work, and drug and alcohol awareness programme.

I not only manage (and support) staff, but also the services themselves, making sure that they continue to be in line with our service specifications. I also conduct staff appraisals, write three-monthly reports, and help raise the profile of our agency in the community. I report to an agency Treatment Manager, who in turn reports to the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive.

I work very closely with all members of staff I manage, as this is the only way I can do my job properly. Funny enough, I still sit at the same desk in the front office that I sat at when I first started working at the agency as a receptionist. I like interacting with people when they first come to the agency, not having forgotten the huge impact the initial friendliness I experienced had on me all those years ago.

I'll talk more about how I became a Team Leader later, as it is an important part of my Story. However, I first want to describe the deeper journey I have been on revisiting my past in the last three years.

## **2. My trauma**

This journey began when I attended a talk given during a session of the Sycamore Tree Project run in a local prison.<sup>5</sup> The programme involves a Restorative Justice approach and it resonated with me.<sup>6</sup> Attending two sessions of the programme took me on a painful, but exhilarating and freeing, journey where I revisited my childhood and the damage that was caused to me emotionally after my Dad was sentenced to 22 years in prison (drug trafficking charges) when I was 11 years old.

The talk was given by Ray and Vi Donovan, whose son had been murdered by a gang, three of whom were convicted of murder. Vi, in particular, had been so fed up with their life being destroyed by the hate and anger they felt for the three men, they decided the only way forward was to consider the possibility of forgiving the men.

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<sup>5</sup> The Sycamore Tree Project is an intensive 5-8 week in-prison programme that brings groups of crime victims into prison to meet with groups of unrelated offenders. They talk about the effects of crime, the harms it causes, and how to make things right.

<sup>6</sup> Restorative justice brings those harmed by crime or conflict and those responsible for the harm into communication, enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward.

They tried to see the men, but all three initially refused. Eventually, one agreed to meet them. When they met, they hugged him and said, 'We forgive you.' He said, 'Sorry.' This meeting had an enormous positive impact on the Donovans and the young man who killed their son. Eventually, Ray and Vi met the other two men, with the same positive outcome.

As I entered the gates of the prison for Ray and Vi's talk, my past started to resurface and affect me emotionally. I remembered visiting my Dad at the same prison when I was child. I kept thinking about Dad; my thoughts were almost overwhelming me.

During Ray and Vi's talk, I started to cry uncontrollably. Their story was deeply moving (and very interesting), but my reaction was way over-the-top. I told myself, 'What's going on here, I need to pull myself together?' I then found myself continually talking about my Dad to the programme facilitators, Julie and Chris, but saying to myself, 'Why am I doing this? I'm not here to talk about Dad.'

Ray and Vi were well aware of what was happening to me and how I was feeling. They said to me that it would be amazing if I could share my story one day. Julie and Chris agreed. I thought there was no way I could do that.

When I got home, I was really upset. I kept thinking about Dad, my experiences from years before, and what had happened in the prison when I attended Ray and Vi's talk. This ruminating continued over the following days, then weeks, and then months. I would go out for long walks and be lost in my thoughts, and feel all sorts of emotions.

I realised that I was experiencing trauma from my past, triggered by my recent visit to the prison. However, I didn't just experience negative and upsetting thoughts. I also spent lots of time thinking about the good times I had with my Dad and these thoughts made me feel happy.

I also attended the last session of the programme, which is where the prisoners carry out their acts of Restitution for the victims of their crime. I was an emotional wreck during this session. I listened to the prisoners as they read the letters, poems or rap songs they had written to the victims of their crimes. I admired every single one of them for what they were doing. I realised that if these prisoners could get up and do this, surely I could share my Story.

I eventually agreed to give a talk and participate in a Victim session at a future Sycamore Project programme. I would talk about my experiences following my Dad's arrest. The course organisers, Chris and Julie, told me that they hadn't had a victim (me) who was a daughter of a prisoner sentenced for drug trafficking, and who described what it was like personally for a child whilst their parent was in prison.

I now had to delve into my past life in preparation for my talk. I soon realised that I had buried a lot of stuff, particularly from my younger days before I started using drugs. This process of delving into my past was

amazing, but also sad and very painful at times. I was also very frightened of the process of actually giving a talk and had to visit a counsellor to get some help about my concerns.

My good friend Sally also continually provided encouragement and came along to my talk to support me. All told, I prepared about six months for the talk. Here is roughly what I said to the 25 prisoners who attended my talk.

### **3. Restorative Justice talk**

'I lived in a rural area with my Mum and Dad and brother and sister. I remember that my Dad would disappear to London for a week or two from time to time. When I was 11 years old, we moved to a city, although my Dad wasn't there for the actual move. Within five days of the move, he was arrested for drug smuggling.

On the day of his arrest, a friend of mum's came in a taxi to pick me up from my secondary school, at which I had just started. We then picked up my brother and sister from their primary school, and we all went to the friend's place until my Mum collected us later. Mum explained that Dad had been arrested. Over the next few days, the story was carried by newspapers and TV. There was film of Dad arriving at court on the television news. Dad's arrest had apparently been the result of a two-year undercover police operation.

Mum was clearly distressed by Dad's arrest and by the financial plight we were now in due to our bank accounts being frozen. Moreover, the house was still in a poor state following the move—only half our furniture was there, and the floors were still not carpeted. Mum told us that we were not to talk on the phone to anybody, and when we came home from anywhere we had to ring the doorbell three times as a code.

I later found out that when Mum answered the doorbell on the day of the arrest, she found about 15 police officers in riot gear, many of them pointing guns at her. That experience traumatised her for a long period of time afterwards. We, along with Mum's friends, continued to ring the doorbell three times every time we came back home for about the next eight years.

Mum went into an autopilot mode in order to ensure that the family 'survived'. I guess that each of us went into our own world, trying to cope emotionally.

I couldn't understand what was going on. I was having to go to a new school not knowing anyone, but feeling that everyone knew about what had happened to my family. Every single day, I was extremely anxious about someone finding out that I was the daughter of the 'evil drug smuggler' who was written about on the front page of newspapers. It was one of the biggest drug busts in the country at that time, and the papers kept saying that my Dad was the evil mastermind behind the whole operation. To me, my Dad wasn't evil!

I got so anxious that I used to wake up and pray every morning that no one would mention my Dad or anything about prisons. The hardest thing I've ever done in my whole life was to enter my classroom, walk to

the back, and sit down at my desk, not knowing who knew what and whether anyone would say anything. As it turned out, nothing was ever said, but I wasn't to know that then.

My anxiety didn't lessen over the next two years. I experienced panic attacks when, for example, the teacher said, 'We're going to be discussing a case that happened some time ago...' I started having palpitations, my face turned red, and I felt like I was going to pass out, thinking that someone would suggest my Dad's case. Of course, I didn't know then that I was experiencing a panic attack, but I know now. My day-to-day experience of going to school was all about fear.

I became paranoid when I made new friends and was asked over to their house. What might they ask me about my family? And I was very concerned that if any of my new friends found out about my 'drug-smuggling' Dad, they would stop coming over to my house. I had no one to talk to about what was happening to me. My brother and sister were at another school, and my Mum had too much on her plate. Everything was magnified in my brain at that age.

And that was just the school side of things. The other side of things involved me having to regularly visit my Dad in prison whilst he was on remand over a two-year period. And having to live through the trial; in fact, two trials. The first trial was abandoned just before completion, because it was said that someone tried to bribe a jury member. We had to wait over ten months for the second trial to commence. Of course, the trials were big news in the newspapers. And then there was the emotional toll of missing my Dad, and not knowing what was going on. To me, he was not the man being portrayed by the media.

Dad was in various prisons when he was on remand. I hated going to the prisons. I found it really boring with all the waiting around. It felt as if some of the prison officers were deliberately trying to make things difficult for us. On one occasion, we waited hours to see my Dad and were then told that he had been moved to another prison an hour earlier.

Looking back now, I realise that Mum was really worried that Dad would harm himself. He was traumatised; in fact, we were all traumatised by the process. My Mum tried to give Dad as much support as possible, which couldn't have been easy given the scale of the burden she was carrying on her shoulders.

You can imagine the shock that I felt, as a 13-year girl, to hear that my Dad was sentenced to 22 years in prison. 22 years! I couldn't believe it. It was like a lifetime to me. I would be 35 years old when he came out of prison. When I heard this news, something changed in me. I told myself you may as well just forget about him. I put the walls up and became very guarded.

Visiting was now reduced to once a month. Dad spent time in different prisons—Long Lartin was the best, Durham the worst. When he was in the latter, the four of us would get up early to catch a train to visit him. The trip took most of the day, as we had to keep changing trains. We would arrive in the evening and stay in a bed and breakfast. It always seemed to be cold in Durham.

On the following day, we would catch a bus or taxi to see Dad. There was then a break, during which time we went back into town, and then visited Dad again later. He was classed as a Category A (High Security), Exceptional Risk (E) prisoner, which meant he had to wear distinctive, brightly-coloured yellow and navy clothing—which really upset me—when being moved inside the prison. E-Prisoners were also handcuffed when moved around. Knowing that Dad was categorised in this way made me worry more about how he was being treated in general.

As Dad was an E-prisoner, we saw him in a private room, with one officer present. We were the last of the visitors to see a prisoner because of Dad's status. I remember all the waiting we experienced, whilst the other visitors were seeing their loved one in the main meeting room. While we were waiting, we could hear the continual banging and locking of cell doors. Dad tried to arrange with the prison officers that his handcuffs were taken off before he entered the room and put on after he left. This didn't always happen, so we were sometimes distressed to see him in this hand-cuffed state.

Mind you, we were grateful that we could see Dad away from the main visiting area. As we later found out, the main visiting areas in both Durham and Long Lartin were distressing and dysfunctional places to be, particularly for children. Some women were practically having sex with the person they were visiting, and overactive children were running around causing mayhem. We would ask Dad why a particular person was in prison, and although he was evasive, we discovered that the room contained men who had killed or raped someone.

I really didn't like the prisons and the whole process of visiting my Dad. I worried about travelling on buses with families of murderers and rapists. With screaming babies. And dense smoke from cigarettes. The waiting at the prison gate and then in the prison. The searches by the prison officers. And I was bored. This was not the thing that a 13-year old girl wanted to be doing during her weekends. However, I'd feel guilty if I didn't visit my Dad.

When I was about 14, I started to hang out with people who were a little wilder than my previous friends. They smoked cigarettes and dope, and 'mitched off' school. All of a sudden my past was considered really cool. I felt that people wanted to hang out with me because of the situation with my Dad. I was interesting to know, the daughter of a drug smuggler. I can't remember how my friends found out about Dad; presumably, at this time, I felt that I could confide in them.

For the first time since my Dad had been busted, I fitted in somewhere. I felt comfortable. And I could smoke dope. I felt that I could do what I wanted and not feel emotional pain. I stopped going to school altogether and told my Mum she 'couldn't make me, so deal with it.' I stayed out at night, and did whatever I wanted to do. It felt fantastic!

However, before I knew it, I was pregnant. I was just 15 years old. I had my son when I was 16. I then started to drink more, and use amphetamines. I met a drug dealer (John) and started going out with him. He ended up going to prison.

During the time that Dad was in prison, he obtained a degree in sociology. He also became an advocate for other prisoners and tried to help improve conditions in the prison. My overall impression over the years was that Dad was very intelligent.

Dad was released from prison on parole when I was 19 years old. When he came home, he was very different to the man I remembered. He had aged noticeably and had become very possessive about some of his belongings, such as his lighter and nail clippers. We were not allowed to touch these items. He started to smoke dope.

After about a year, we discovered the Dad had actually picked up a heroin habit in prison.<sup>7</sup> As I revealed in my main Story, he started dealing heroin to John, who had also gotten a habit whilst in prison. Not long after, I started using heroin.

Our family dynamic was now all over the place. My Mum was struggling with the situation—no wonder, with her husband and oldest daughter addicted to heroin, another daughter playing up, and a grandchild to look after. We were isolated in our own lives. All those promises we had been given previously about being a happy family after Dad's release had not come to fruition. My poor Mum, after all she had dealt with earlier, now had all of this—and more—to put up with. She would sometimes escape for a weekend, but Dad would then have all his drug-using friends over to the house. When Mum came back, he would lie to her. I'd have to listen to these lies. It was heart-breaking.

Despite all of this, I still I loved my Dad. And I still do, even though he has gone. He was just so messed up. He loved us all, I know that. But he had a drug problem. After I went into recovery when I was 25, Dad became ill and had a couple of detoxes. He died when I was 29—he was 67 years old.

After Dad passed away, we went through the usual grieving process. At the same time, I had the realisation that it was all over... or so I thought. There was a tremendous relief to escape from all the negative things that had happened since Dad had been busted. There was no more of IT!

I was in recovery and my brother and sister were okay. My Mum, who is a remarkably strong person, was now able to find some relief. She is now a counsellor. I had entered a loving relationship, the same that I am in today. My son was doing well and he continues to do so today.'

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<sup>7</sup> Heroin is often preferred to cannabis in prisons, indirectly as a result of the drug-testing process. Cannabis stays in the body for a much longer period of time than heroin.



#### **4. The 'ripple effect' and breaking the cycle**

However, whilst a lot of stuff died with my Dad, what happened in the past still plagued me. I still felt a lot of shame about having a father who had spent time in prison. Whilst the damage that had been caused by my past might not have been viewable on the outside, it was still buried deep. And it hit me when I first entered that prison again all those years later. I had never previously talked about my past until I did so with those prisoners on The Sycamore Tree Project. That was an amazing experience. And I was able to let go of the shame I felt.

One thing I had learnt during my first prison visit, was that many of the prisoners had a parent who had been to prison. So here I was, someone who had broken that cycle. I could so easily have gone to prison if I had continued using heroin, particularly if I had taken the path into acquisitive crime. I said the following to the prisoners:

'From what I know about what happened to my Mum and Dad, I started to do the same as them. I started going out with a dealer. And then I started taking drugs. I have no doubt that if I hadn't have got into recovery, Joshua would have ended up taking drugs and developing an addiction. I broke the cycle of addiction.'

My talk was not just healing for me, but also for many of the prisoners, as I came to learn. The drug dealers, for example, had never really considered that there were victims of what they did. They rationalised that the people who bought drugs off them knew what they were doing and the risks they were taking. So, they believed these people were not victims.

However, these dealers had not initially considered their own family members as victims. They had not realised that their crime could have long-lasting negative consequences for their wife and children, and/or for their parents and siblings. And the behaviours of these family members could in turn impact negatively on other people, causing problems in their lives, problems which in turn could affect other people in a negative manner. The latter illustrates the so-called 'ripple effect' of a crime.

Whilst on the Sycamore Project, all prisoners did an exercise focused on their particular crime, having been told that every crime impacts on other people. They drew a diagram with an immediate victim's name in the middle, surrounded by the names of other people (e.g. victim's family and friends, prisoner's family and friends, community members) who were negatively impacted upon by what happened to the immediate victim... and so on. This exercise helped them understand that their crime is like a stone dropped into water, creating a ripple affecting more and more people.

The prisoners at my talk, including drug dealers, could see the ripple effect arising from my Dad's drug crime, and how far it might have spread (i.e. across another generation) if I had not broken the cycle of addiction with my recovery. I used heroin to help me deal with my emotions and in particular the anxiety and shame I felt, as a result of Dad's arrest and subsequent imprisonment. I became addicted to the drug. I used the drug

in front of my child and did not look after him as well as I should have done. My mother, siblings and other people were also affected by my drug use.

The Restitution session with the same group of prisoners, which took place three weeks after my talk, was simply amazing. The session began with a stone being dropped into water to symbolise a ripple effect of positivity and healing which would come from the prisoners' Acts of Restitution. A candle was lit. The Acts of Restitution, which the prisoners were not forced to do, included reading letters, poems or raps written for the victims of their crime. Making yourself vulnerable in this way in front of your peers in a hostile environment like a prison is a very powerful thing to do.

It was wonderful to connect with the prisoners that day and be part of their journey too. Restorative Justice is now a new passion of mine.

## **5. My healing**

I want to divert back to my job at the treatment agency, as there are some important elements that have contributed to my healing/recovery journey. About nine years ago, the year before I got married, I was helping a friend in their role as Team Leader of our local branch. She felt the job wasn't for her and decided to leave. I agreed to take on the Team Leader role, but hated the first six months in the job.

Suddenly, I began to come to grips with what I was doing. There were still lots of challenges and much hard work, but I found that I was enjoying myself and feeling good about the way I was overcoming the problems. I loved seeing how members of my team were developing and how our services were helping clients help themselves. I was also learning a lot about me. I was told that I treated people fairly, no matter the circumstances, which was a lift to my morale.

I started to attend a one-year management course, along with the agency's senior management staff. Over the Christmas holiday, I received an email from the course tutor saying that the next module would involve presentations, i.e. giving a talk. The email totally flummoxed me and I spent the rest of the holiday panicking.

When I went back to the course after the holiday, I had a complete melt-down when the tutor mentioned that some of us would be doing presentations that day. All the panic I had experienced as a child in the school classroom hit me full-on! That intense fear that I had felt as a child 25 years earlier resurfaced powerfully.

Fortunately, I didn't have to do a presentation that morning and managed to hold things together until lunchtime. I then broke down in the car with a good friend and my agency manager, saying as I cried uncontrollably:

'I've got to leave my role. I can't cope. I can't do this. I'm having a panic attack.'

My agency manager told me not to worry. When I called the course tutor, she said that she understood my situation and that she would make the presentations optional during the class. I decided that I needed to visit a CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) counsellor to help me get over this fear of presentations. She said to me:

‘We need to update your thinking from a child, because you are linking back to past childhood experiences and you have not updated that thinking about the shame and being exposed and all of that. All it needs is to update your thinking as an adult today.’

And that’s what we did. My counsellor worked through my fears with me and pointed out that they weren’t necessary as an adult—they were redundant.

‘So, you’re worried about people knowing you are anxious about doing a presentation. So what? What is the worst that can happen if they know?’

I learnt that lots of people get anxious when giving a presentation, including my counsellor. Gradually, as we progressed through the sessions, my thinking changed and my anxiety reduced.

After eight sessions, I went ahead and did a presentation (my first ever), and then completed the management course. Those counselling sessions helped me so much. I was so determined to do that presentation and when I finally did, I realised I had overcome a fear that had been with me all the years since my childhood. I now understood how those classroom experiences had haunted me and restrained my full psychological development as an adult. And that’s when I really excelled in my job.

Six months later, I was nervous when asked to do the prison talk, particularly given the intense emotions that had been triggered by my entering the prison where my Dad had been remanded for Ray and Vi’s talk. However, I eventually worked my way through my fears. A session with my previous counsellor helped me along the way. She assured me that I was fully capable of giving such a presentation.

Now, I don’t experience such triggers and intense emotions. Sure, I feel nervous at times, but it is a very different feeling to what I experienced in the past. Then, my nervousness was all consuming and I had ‘to run’. I was totally irrational in my thinking. I just wanted to stay at home and feel totally safe. It would just ‘knock me for six’. I couldn’t understand how people overcame their nervousness, not knowing that theirs was different to mine. Today, by talking to myself, I work my way through any nervousness I feel.

Those sessions in the prison, and all the delving, reflecting and preparing that I did for them, were incredibly healing for me. I now feel happier and more content when I go back and explore the past. I don’t feel the shame to the same level that I used to feel. I can look back at it and take it as it was. I can feel what it must have been like for my Dad, how awful it was for him, without being overwhelmed by negative emotions

relating to this or to what I experienced. I can think clearly about the positive things my Dad did, like the advocacy work he did for fellow prisoners.

It was such a shame he picked up a heroin habit in prison. It could have been so different. The experiences and the accompanying healing process have deepened my recovery. They have made a difference to the way I do things at work and in my life.

They have also helped me come closer to my Dad, even though he has passed away. And they have helped me get closer to my Mum. She's always been concerned that she made the wrong decision in supporting my Dad. Maybe that support led to additional problems. However, she knows that she couldn't have just abandoned him; it would have been cruel, both to him and us children. She still carries a lot of shame of what has happened, and is still worried about other people learning about our past. She was very concerned about me giving a talk in the prison and dredging it all up again.

Interestingly, when I did the talk a second time, I struggled a bit, because I had already let go of a lot of stuff. I didn't have that deep healing experience when delving once again into my past. It felt as if I wasn't taking that whole healing process into the room with me, so the talk felt different a second time. I also felt a little concerned that the process might be a little damaging to me, to be going through stuff I had already let go of. At the same time, I felt a little selfish not sharing, so I did the talk again. I'm due to give the talk again in a few months, Covid-19 permitting.

I feel very fortunate with what has happened. What has happened came out of nowhere. I didn't go to Ray and Vi's talk to explore my past life or anything like that. I went to hear a couple talking about something I in which I had become interested. Then I got hit by those feelings when I entered the prison. That took me a new journey.

As a result, I feel stronger in my recovery. I don't attend Fellowship meetings, which some people may disagree with. In fact, I haven't been to such meetings for some time now. However, I completely believe in the programme and in recovery. I've never picked up a drink, and have never felt like drinking. I'm too happy to do something like that. I wouldn't want to risk all that I have got in my life.

Recovery has been everything I hoped for and more. I am so very happy.

**Natalie's Recovery Story was written by David Clark in collaboration with Natalie.**

**The person whose inspiring story is told wishes to remain anonymous.**

**She was 23 years in recovery when her story was posted on Recovery Voices.**