

Send Me An Angel

True stories of hope and encouragement
by recovering drug and alcohol users
and their families

Published by GASPED
(Greater Awareness and Support
for Parents Encountering Drugs)

Disclaimer: This publication is not intended to provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsoring and funding agencies. The stories in this book are based on true events; however the names of many of the characters and locations have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of the authors and their families.

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This book was written in the hope that it can help someone in a similar situation and bring the greater understanding that comes from living and caring for a substance misuser. Service User Representatives from the local drug treatment service, Turning Point, have also contributed their stories in the hope that people can read a first-hand account of why someone started to use drugs and when they decided to get help. We hope that these stories will help people realise that they are not alone and there is help out there.

GASPED was established sixteen years ago by a lady called Kristine Smith, whose son was on heroin. When she wanted to get help and support for herself she realised that there was none out there. She set up support in her own living room and through various funding avenues managed set up a service for parents, partners and carers whose loved ones are affected by drugs or alcohol. In 1995 GASPED was born. We offer help and support through community based support groups, counselling, 24 hour helpline, respite and therapies.

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If you would like any more information on any of the services mentioned above and others please see the contact information overleaf. We hope you enjoy reading this book.

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In caring hands

Kristine Smith

It was in 1993, on April Fools Day to be precise, that I discovered my son was using drugs and had become addicted to heroin.

The reality of this was enormous: I was a complementary therapist and I had treated clients who were addicted to prescribed drugs but I knew very little about illegal drugs.

Many years later I learned that Paul had started taking drugs when he was sixteen: he had experimented with LSD. At seventeen, he started to go clubbing where he says, 'The atmosphere was great, people you had never met just came up to you and they were so happy and friendly.'

These years were the early 90's and ecstasy was the drug everyone was talking about. It was actually labelled 'the love drug' because of how it made you feel. At the time Paul did not use alcohol like most young people, he did not smoke and he has never used cannabis. So he started his journey with drugs by taking ecstasy, and then progressed to amphetamines, which he became addicted to.

I remember once waking up to hear Paul moving about. He was huddled up in the corner of his bedroom with only his socks and boxers on. He was mumbling and picking at himself all over. He got up and said he was going out (without any clothes on)! He actually thought he was going out to drive, to goodness knows where, and meet someone who needed his help. He was not in control and was incapable of stringing his words together.

When I looked around the bedroom it was an utter mess, he had taken all the electrical equipment to bits saying 'things' were hiding there.

I can smile when I think about it now, but I was actually terrified for him at the time. I thought I had lost my son and there would be no way back from the mental state he was in.

Paul told me afterwards that it was a one off and he did not take drugs, I had no other reason to doubt he was telling me the truth and I suppose I wanted to believe him.

Paul was just another teenager experimenting with life. He had a full-time job, liked nice clothes, bought a little car and had a girlfriend. I had no reason to think that his life and ours would change so drastically over the coming years.

Paul had continued to take amphetamine unknown to me, although I often thought something was not right. He was living away from home at this time so I did not see him as often. He told me that it got to where he was unable to sleep and he was suffering from paranoia, so his dealer introduced him to 'brown' saying it would help him sleep and ease the symptoms.

Paul says he did not know what brown was way back then, but was eager to take it if it stopped the problems he was experiencing with amphetamine.

And so it went on, until the day he realised that he was addicted to heroin – he not only wanted it, he needed it!

By this time I really knew things were not right. He didn't look well, he could not be bothered to shave and he lost all pride in his appearance, clothes and his car. He became secretive and did not want to engage in conversations. He never had any money, his clothes and personal items went missing – telling me they were in the back of someone's car or he had left them at a friend's, but they were never seen again!

I became increasingly suspicious that money was missing from my purse and from his dad's wallet. When we challenged him, he told us it was not him. Something was seriously wrong and I was very worried. I felt sure he was taking drugs but he continued to deny it. He was no longer the son I knew and loved.

Then came the day I found out the truth. I read a letter that had been left on his car seat. It was from his girlfriend, and all our worse fears were there in black and white.

What were we going to do? How were we going to approach him? How could we help him? Did he even want help? All I knew was that I would do whatever I could to get my son back.

Paul was now back at home and life was becoming a nightmare. It was tearing me apart to see Paul drowning in a life of drugs. Like so many parents and carers out there we decided that we would not tell anyone and we would try to cope on our own – we were so ignorant about drugs, addiction and the effects it has on the addict.

I wanted and needed to know everything I could about heroin, where he could go for help and how I could help him. Paul told me that he did not want to be addicted to heroin and that he had been on a methadone programme but he had failed by taking heroin as well. That was a start at least, if he could get back on a Methadone programme I could support him and hopefully start some recovery.

To get on a Methadone programme way back then Paul would have to wait anything from twelve, sixteen and even twenty weeks or more. Meanwhile all he could do was to keep taking heroin until then. It did not seem right that people were saying keep on buying an illegal drug when there was a legitimate way of treating the addict! However I tried to help Paul with the cost of his addiction until his treatment programme, believing that once on the programme Paul would start to recover.

As parents we had no right to know anything about Paul's appointments, his medication or how he was progressing with treatment. This was very frustrating as it gave Paul the advantage when things went wrong. We were living and supporting him twenty-four hours a day and suffering because of it; but we were expected to allow him to bring a dangerous substance into the house, without anyone asking our permission and informing us of the dangers. This only added to the misery, pain and frustration of living every day supporting the addiction.

Paul failed, and failed and kept on failing for over a decade. During these years came the most painful journeys I have had to face. Paul's addiction grew worse, I was unable to support him financially. All I could give him was my unconditional love and that was certainly pushed to its limits at times.

Paul was now getting into trouble with the police for shoplifting and was having to attend court. The stress this was causing in the family was unimaginable; we were becoming dysfunctional as everyone dealt with the strain in a different way.

Life was unbearable most of the time. I was lost and did not know what to do next. I could not give up on him and I still believed that he would be okay. What I didn't know was how long this addiction would last and how dark the days could get before hope appeared round the corner.

I was at rock bottom when one day, whilst I was attending the magistrate's court once again, a reporter from the local newspaper approached me. She had been in court and heard the proceedings. She told me who she was and that the newspaper was running a series of articles over a period of weeks about drugs and related issues: would I be interested in telling a story as a parent of a drug user.

I was very cautious and afraid that everyone would know who we were, but I was reassured that we could stay anonymous and no-one would know. What had I to lose? I felt stigmatised, alone and that people would judge me without knowing anything about me. Now I had the opportunity to put the records straight – say it as it is – that anyone's child could become addicted to drugs. I read each article every week from the treatment agencies, police, probation, a drug user, an article about drugs and their effects and then, the parents' story.

Following the article I received a phone call from the reporter who told me about parents who had phoned up to say how they had identified with my story. The following week another short

story appeared saying that whilst they were reading my article, their son was making off out of the bedroom window with a television and a camcorder. I could not believe it: other people were out there suffering the same nightmare, feeling frightened and alone. Each and every one of us was feeling the stigma, guilt, fear, anger and pain of caring for our loved ones. We needed to be able to talk but were afraid of how people might judge us. Perhaps if we could talk to each other and feel supported it would get easier.

The reporter told me that she could follow up the article and give me a box number for people to write in to share experiences. Within ten days I was receiving letters. I replied to some without phone numbers and rang others. I made appointments and visited if people wanted me to. We were so pleased to have someone to talk to, someone who understood. Other people's stories were so sad too and I knew that we all needed support. I made enquiries as to what support was available for parents and carers of drug users but hit a blank wall – there was no local support to be found.

I was like a dog with a bone and was not about to give up now. I could not keep travelling around visiting and telephoning everyone: it was too time consuming and expensive. So I asked everyone what they thought of a support group where we could all share our problems and experiences and get support from one another.

But where do I start, I wondered? The local newspaper was the answer – they had helped before, I hoped they would again. Another article went out explaining what had happened and that I planned to start a support group, but that we needed a confidential venue and some funds.

I was lucky. A couple of businessmen offered premises free of charge and the local Lions Club said they may be able to help with funds. I arranged a drugs evening and a policeman came to talk about the different types of drugs and their effects, and a support group was born – GASPED – which stands for 'Greater Awareness and Support for Parents Encountering Drugs'.

The Lions club funded a separate phone line into my home so people could ring confidentially to share their problems and concerns. Most people felt they could not attend a support group in case they were recognised or bumped into someone they knew. We all felt the same but many found the courage to attend. They were the ones who eventually progressed most.

Within fifteen months I had developed another four support groups in Wakefield and Kirklees, giving a total of five, which I attended every fortnight. This was the biggest support and fact-finding experience I encountered, hearing different stories and learning from different experiences.

We needed funds and I found myself talking about my personal experiences to local Rotary Clubs, the Inner Wheel and other charitable organisations. It was difficult, as people could be judgemental and although they would sympathise they would rather give to what they termed as a more worthy cause. This only made me more determined to educate people about drugs and their effects, not only on the drug users but on the parents and carers who love and care for them.

During this time life was very much the same living and experiencing the ups and downs of living and caring for my son. It was a living nightmare. I remember it was December. It was cold and Paul was missing, I was so worried.

We received a phone call from the police. He was at the station and would we go and pick him up? Before we saw him the police explained that he had been arrested and was being bailed to our address. They took us into a room and there was, what appeared to be, a dirty and bedraggled tramp sat there. It took me a while to realise that it was my son. His hair was greasy and messy, he had a beard and he smelt and looked very dirty. I had not recognised my own son: he was in such a state. Despite his appearance it was a great relief to know he was okay.

We took him home where he showered and we clothed and fed him. He looked a different person. The next day he went missing again! I was frantic with worry. Where was he? Was he out in the cold with no warm clothes and no food? Was he alive?

We did not hear anything else until Christmas Eve when the police rang again to say he was in the cells and would have to stay over Christmas – because he had previously broken his bail conditions and could not attend court until the Christmas period was over. At least he was safe and locked up! It was so sad on Christmas day opening presents, eating Christmas dinner, trying to enjoy myself for the sake of the family, but I got through it and could not wait to see him.

We could not visit him until Boxing Day and because it was Christmas there were no staff other than the officers on duty. Paul had not had any proper meals. The officers had taken in sandwiches for him but that was all. The police allowed us to go into town and get him a McDonald's meal and take it back to custody, which we were grateful for. I never wanted to experience another Christmas so full of anxiety again.

Paul continued to steal from his family, went out shoplifting and owed money all over the place. Eventually Paul was in trouble with the police more and more. He had been caught shoplifting several times and had to appear in the magistrates' court. As always I supported him hoping that this might be the rock bottom everyone kept talking about. It was the most heartbreaking and humiliating experience I had encountered up to now.

But more was to come. After being subjected to probation orders, more court appearances Paul was finally remanded to prison. Sometimes it was for a week or a couple of weeks then he would be back out and straight back to heroin. Paul would have to undergo a quick Methadone reduction programme whilst in prison, but would return to heroin as soon as he was released. It wasn't until many years later that I fully understood why this happened.

Prison visits were torture. The very first visit to Armley Prison was the worst: I had never felt so alone. I did not know where to go or who to report to. I just kept watching what everyone else did and followed the procedure through security and into the prison. It was good to see Paul without the drugs: he was the Paul I remembered so well before his addiction. Leaving was the hard part; knowing he was going back to be locked up again and we would have no contact apart from the odd letter before being able to visit again. After most visits I cried all the way home and could not settle for a couple of days.

When Paul was in prison it was such a relief for the family. We knew where he was: he was fed and cared for. But I felt so guilty for actually feeling this way. Thank goodness I could share my feelings with other parents who understood me.

Up till now Paul had got away with stealing things from home as we did not want to see him in the criminal justice system. But now he had put himself there things started to get tougher at home. Paul stole his Grandmother's pension, his sister's belongings, money, jewellery and anything else that would buy him heroin. It was an utter nightmare, the constant lying, cheating, manipulation and stealing was destroying our family and even worse we were watching our son destroy himself. Enough was enough!

I had not brought my son up to do any of these things and he had to start to take responsibility for his own actions, I had tried so hard to help and support him and nothing had changed, so it was now time to practice tough love, something we talked about often in support groups. I was learning that I could not change my son, his addiction or his behaviour, but I could change myself and my behaviour towards it.

I began blaming myself for letting him get away with things he never got away with as a child and prior to his addiction. Had I let him get away with too much? Had I given him the wrong messages? Had I made it easier for him to continue his drug use? The list was

endless. I had to give the right message and he would have to pay the consequences. Despite feeling guilty I started to report Paul to the police. It had to be for his own good.

As the GASPED support groups got stronger, we learnt more about drugs and their effects, about treatment programmes and rehabilitation. We learnt by sharing our own problems and experiences and even started to socialise and laugh again after months if not years of shutting ourselves off from others. I recognised that even though all our stories were different, the pattern of behaviours of both the drug users and the parents were the same. Surely, if we could recognise that, then we could look at how we could change our behaviours.

It was 1997. The GASPED helpline was busy, support groups were growing and I knew things had to change for us to continue. I was spending so much time doing voluntary work that my own business was failing, my marriage was in difficulty and I had huge decisions to make. Over the last couple of years I had heard of the Drug Action Team (DAT) and attended a couple of their meetings. Now I felt that I needed their help and, if they wanted the service to continue, I hoped they would give it.

I met with the DAT development manager who eventually helped me change the direction of GASPED. I had realised long ago that people would ring the helpline and get the information and support they needed, but found it difficult to attend group sessions for fear of being recognised. What we needed were premises that were safe and confidential, where people could attend for one-to-one sessions. I discussed my plans with the DAT Development Manager and to my amazement he agreed to support the project.

First, I was told to pull together a group of people to develop a management committee, so I asked parents and carers attending groups if they would be willing to help. Together with the Development Manager, a local doctor and a local vicar whose premises we used for meetings we developed our first management committee.

Secondly, we decided we must hold regular meetings to discuss what we needed to move the service forward. It was decided that we should become a registered charity, a company limited by guarantee and should apply to the National Lotteries Charity Board for a grant. This was really scary, I had never done any of these things before and I didn't know where to start. Within twelve months of setting up the management committee we had successfully achieved all three priorities.

The day I received the phone call from the National Lotteries Charities Board, saying they had awarded us £130,876 to set up a resource centre with a wide range of services for the parents, families and carers of drug users, I cried with joy. Someone believed in what we were doing, the service had been recognised and we could now help more parents and families who were suffering because of their loved ones' drug use.

The first Resource Centre in Wakefield opened in February, 1999 and has been successfully helping and supporting parents, families and carers of drug users since. I became the Project Co-ordinator and later the Project Manager. Further Resource Centres were also opened in Leeds and Kirklees at a later date, all offering a range of confidential services in a safe, caring environment.

During the years that GASPED was growing my son continued to struggle with his heroin use, which also led to the use of crack and the misuse of benzodiazepines. I was now in recovery from my own addiction of trying to continually rescue him and allowing him to continue the abuse of using me – this is called co-dependency. It is recognised among most carers who care for loved ones.

Over the years of battling, Paul spent most of his life being homeless or in prison; he suffered a drug-related knife attack and still has a facial scar from his ear to mouth to remind him of it. Paul has also spent time drug-free and working, mainly after leaving prison after serving a longer sentence.

During these times we worked together educating communities about drugs and talked openly about our personal experiences and the devastating effect drugs has on family life. There is so much more to tell, but how do you fit years of events, traumas and heartfelt feelings into a few pages?

Over the last five years Paul has been on a life-long methadone programme and has not taken heroin during this time. Sadly, a couple of years ago Paul turned to alcohol and became an alcoholic. He has since undergone a couple of detoxes and is doing much better. Paul is now thirty-seven years old and has housing association accommodation and a worker who helps and supports him. He is paying his own bills and taking better care of himself but he still has a long way to go.

The years of addiction and his life style have left him with other problems to face and overcome. He suffers from lack of confidence, low self-esteem, anxiety, guilt and depression to name a few. But slowly he will overcome these with continued help and support.

When I started out on this journey I did not know where it would take me and how long it would take Paul to start his recovery. I knew it would not be easy, and I realised long ago that I could not rescue him, he had to do that for himself. But I am very proud that he is now progressing and I will continue to support him while ever he needs me and while ever I can.

Until you are faced with watching your loved one change and lose control of their life, no-one can imagine the nightmare scenario families and carers have to cope with.

Thankfully with the support of GASPED you can change your life, share experiences and learn new ways of coping. Over the years I have seen people work on changing their behaviour towards their drug user, and in most cases the drug user changed their behaviour too. It does not happen overnight, but eventually it can happen.

Every service was developed with you in mind, whether it be someone to talk to who will understand, or to give you a brief break from the stresses and strains of home, or to learn to relax and ease your health-related problems. No matter what your needs are, GASPED is there to help you.

We have to recognise that we have a life too and we have to make healthy choices for ourselves. At times we have to let go for our own sanity and sometimes go back to do battle again, because we love them no matter what. We do become damaged people – no-one can see our emotional scars – but by recognising that they exist and finding support to help you, your life can begin to heal.

I do not know what I would have done without the love, care and support of the hundreds if not thousands of beautiful, brave people I have met and worked with on my own personal journey. A journey that despite its problems has helped me grow to become a better person.

It is almost eighteen months since I retired and I am still in touch with many parents and carers who over the years became friends. I will always cherish those friendships and remember why we met and how far we have come, simply by reaching out and supporting one another in times of need and comfort because of the impact of drugs on our family lives.

I feel honoured and proud to have worked with so many wonderful, caring people over my fourteen years with GASPED.

I pray that the service will continue its work in the caring hands of those who work to improve your everyday lives.

Fields of poppies – Dad and his drugs

Mary B

I recall what it was like to grow up in the 60's and 70's as a child in a family with a father I loved to the very core of his being and who I lived for. But who wandered increasingly away from me as he was pulled ever deeper into his lifelong love affair with drugs. Initially he mixed cocktails of amphetamines, barbiturates, narcotics, tranquilisers and alcohol. Later the barbiturates took over the rest to become his main drug of choice, his meaning and his reason for living, and the only friend and family that he wanted. I felt the pain of watching a creative, brilliant and loving man who was full of energy throw his life away in sleep – and in sleep and in sleep, every day and all day becoming one big sleep.

Of all the emotions I remember from my childhood, loneliness stands out above the others. Loneliness screams out at me from my past and my present. It screams out from the bed on which I used to curl up under my quilt and deliberately not cry as the drugs saga carried on in Dad's bedroom. It screams out from my own bedroom window through which I would gaze out and dream of escape, standing there for hours whilst in Dad's room next door the horror carried on. It screams out from the hallway into which I'd come home from school, scared that my Dad might have died during the day. There I would be plunged straight into drugs demanding immediate attention with no-one asking if I'd had a good day myself. It screams out from my school where I had to keep it secret and hide who I really was. And it screams out from my life after leaving home. A life made up of years of running away from broken relationships and of misunderstandings in my communications and of hiding behind armour.

Yet today I live in hope. It seems crazy that drugs, in themselves inanimate chemicals, were able to dictate my whole family's existence and rule our every thought and action. It seems crazy

that they could have such power. But today there is more knowledge and experience than we had back then. Today there are interventions available for addicts which sometimes work. There is also advice for families on how to resist being dragged down into the same suffocating mire that the addicted family member is stuck in. I hope that by telling my own story I can add to the body of education that is helping us tackle the drugs problem today. Many children are now part of a whole generation who have grown up under the shadow of addiction within their family, and they will need to grapple with its effects as they grow up and live out the rest of their lives.

Early childhood – a culture where drug misuse was seen as normal

Dad was addicted to drugs even before I was born so I never knew any different. This has to be understood in its cultural context. In the 50's and 60's amphetamines (uppers) and barbiturates (downers) were widely available on prescription. It was a time when my Mum and Dad joined the growing army of recruits to the newly formed National Health Service. It was a time where medicine was regarded as the hope of life after the destruction of war. And it was a time when drugs were deified as magic bullets. Amphetamines were prescribed in their millions, not least as slimming aids. They also became a popular street drug in the sex and drugs and rock and roll culture of the time, especially when mixed with barbiturates in the form of Purple Hearts. Dad was already taking Purple Hearts when he met Mum in the 1950's and she's told me that he spent much of their honeymoon in Paris trying to hunt down some other drug.

Amphetamines were widely issued to boost soldiers during the Second World War and my Dad fought in that war. He joined at the age of only eighteen years and drove tanks. Towards the end of the war he had a particularly harrowing experience when he was shot by a sniper and narrowly escaped death.

Whilst he was convalescing he was asked to help identify the dead soldiers, which involved searching the bodies which had been lying rotting in the hot battlefields of Italy. He did this for six months after the war ended and the experience was deeply distressing. He was only able to bear it with the help of a book that he found in a soldier's pocket, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas A Kempis. He read it and found comfort from it before posting it back to the family of the soldier he found it on.

He returned from the war determined to help save lives, so he did his medical training and became a doctor. However, the job was stressful and meanwhile he was suffering war nightmares. I think that when barbiturates eventually took over his life completely and turned it into one continuous sleeping session, his aim was to use drugs as a blanket. A blanket that would smother the trauma of the war, as if he was lying down next to the dead soldiers in the battlefields and falling asleep amongst them instead of having to sift through the death. When I picture the battlefields of Italy I sometimes imagine them as overgrown with poppies – opium poppies!

Initially Dad used drugs in a multitude of ways, seeming to need them in order to feel normal. He would get home from work and drink half a bottle of whisky to medicate against the hard day. Then in the morning he would take amphetamines (commonly known as speed) to speed him up for the day of work ahead. Then late in the day he would take barbiturates to counter the agitational effects of speed. Sometimes he just got into a drug for its particular effect, for example he would go through phases of drinking a stomach medicine known to contain morphine, literally by the bottle. Other times he would take drugs because he enjoyed the mind-altering experience and it was part of him being daring and different and exciting. Or he would take them because he loved to experiment scientifically with their effects. He had the MIMS book of drugs and other books on Pharmacology and spent hours pouring over them, reading the effects of different drugs and what counter-acted what.

Culturally drugs were regarded as medicinal and only capable of being good for you. I remember when I was very little being given a quarter tablet of Valium because I was crying after falling down and cutting my knee. In terms of his cultural attitude to alcohol, he came from a Scottish family who prided themselves on their ability to drink heavily and to hold their liquor. This was despite him and his sisters also being troubled by the experience of being brought up in part by an abusive and alcoholic uncle. Another cultural factor was that Dad loved the Sherlock Holmes stories and the detective's drug taking habits were another part of the romance of drug taking culture. My whole family got drawn, to differing degrees, into his various fantasies about the wonders of drugs.

I have some lovely memories of Dad's happy moods. It was exciting when he would spontaneously whisk us off for ice creams or play games like lifting us right up to the ceiling and down again. But there were also the down-sides that Dad was in total denial about. We had to live with his mood swings which, although not abusive or violent, were often irrational and swung to opposite extremes of high and low.

I remember one night, when I was a little girl, waking up and finding Dad locked in the toilet with a bottle of whisky and Mum outside in tears remonstrating with him to open the door and hand the bottle over. She had previously suffered the ordeal of witnessing him overdosing, at some point in time between my older sister and brother being born, but when it happened exactly is all vague in her memory as she has blanked a lot of things out. I remember some rotten family Christmas times ruined by substance misuse and I remember how we had to creep around the house in silence when he wanted to sleep. Another memory, of a time when he over-reacted in disproportionate violence to my brother over something, terrified me so much that years later I hyper-ventilated when he was similarly angry towards me. And then there was the trouble he got into at work when it was becoming obvious that he was a

doctor prescribing drugs for personal use. In particular he was warned after amphetamines were placed on the dangerous drugs list. Barbiturates remained easier to obtain in terms of their classification until well into the 1980's though. Barbiturates are deeply unpleasant drugs which now have a bad reputation amongst addicts. They are highly addictive with a long chemical half-life that makes them hard to come off. They cause unpredictable mood swings and confusion. They are dangerous because they depress the respiratory system. As the user's tolerance builds up, the difference between the size of dose needed for an effect and the size of dose that leads to death is very small.

Mum was out of her depth with a husband whose drug addiction she didn't understand and had no control over. She vacillated between challenging his drug use and then capitulating to it. She believed his excuses about why he needed to take the drugs because she saw the distress that he was in when he wasn't taking them. Thus a many years long drama was played out. This was a screen play of Dad wanting more drugs, Mum fighting him over it, Dad manipulating her to his viewpoint, Mum caving in. Then the whole scene would be played out over and over again with boring repetition and predictability. I think she only managed to limit his drug use a little with these delaying tactics though. To us children she made excuses for him that the drugs were medicine that he needed to help with the nightmares, with work worries, with pain, with whatever the latest crisis was. Even now, despite all the overdoses and the traumatic end to this story, she struggles to describe him as a drug addict although she will admit that he was one if pushed.

Long term effects of growing up with denial

I think that for any child it is hard enough to know what is normal and for children in addicted families it is particularly hard. I grew up holding in my head both Dad's glorification of drugs and Mum's

caution about the damage that they visibly caused. Even now that I have learnt about denial and rationalisation I still have to fight hard against the falsehood in my head that there is something romantic and interesting about drug misuse. I lived in adulthood like a child playing at being like Daddy by skirting at the edges of substance misuse and of danger generally. I played this game as a teenager with what I saw as safe imitations like cigarettes and alcohol. I especially enjoyed all the paraphernalia of the different coloured boxes and bottles. However, I made sure as I grew older to play safe like Mummy. So I limited my habit to thirty not sixty cigarettes a day; and to eighty not two hundred units of alcohol a week!

After I left home I thought it was dead cool and liberating to use soft drugs, mainly cannabis, but I avoided hard drugs because I knew how they can destroy a person. I wanted to be rebellious and interesting like my Dad was but I didn't want to have my life robbed from me as it had been from him. It's like I'd play with and flirt with things that were more dangerous than I really understood in my head. I had a child-like understanding of danger that could not comprehend how serious the bad stuff was. In adult life I loved to push at boundaries, going on shoplifting sprees to flout legal boundaries. I would see how far I could go with boundaries of discipline at work. Yet at the same time I was scared of how out of control I was.

Within six weeks of leaving home and despite being overjoyed at getting away from drugs I somehow managed to accidentally get in with a crowd who used illegal drugs and offered me heroin. I refused it but I liked the crowd and was deeply distressed when a teenage girl I met amongst them, who had run away from home, died from a heroin overdose. Later on I became friends with a woman who was addicted to cocaine, which is a drug I hate with a passion and would never dream of taking, but I wanted to be around her none the less.

Another effect was that I found relationships and the whole area of how people interact with each other bewildering. I did not understand all the various signals. This is common apparently when you live with denial as a child because it is hard to trust your own judgement when a parent tells you that something obviously true is actually false. You can be perfectly rational about everything else in life and do a good job at work and yet be clueless when it comes to getting along with people.

When I first started being counselled by GASPED about the effects on me of my Dad's addiction my counsellor quickly noticed that everything I said or did was at one extreme or the other. There was nothing in the middle. I have to be careful with excess generally, in eating, in all manner of silly things such as a tendency to buy bucket loads of herbal teas which I'll never drink.

There are a number of other things which I thought were normal and I was bewildered years later to discover they were not. I was also baffled by how other people managed to do the things that I knew were normal. For example I never ever understood how you could walk into someone else's house and it would be pristine. I couldn't begin to keep my own place tidy and only really understood living in chaos. As Mum and Dad's energy was increasingly concentrated on his desire for drugs, Mum struggled to do her best for a family that she absolutely loved and put considerable effort into feeding us well, but other things like being house proud were bound to give. For years I lived in a state of untidiness that was so extreme it would lead any visitors to wonder if I was on drugs myself. As I was very unsettled and frequently moved house I repeatedly had chances to start over again with a clean slate. However my living space always became very quickly chaotic. In a way I needed it to be chaotic in order to feel at home and yet I was unhappy and embarrassed about living that way too.

The teenage years – traumatic life and death events

Drug addiction without intervention gets progressively worse over time. The same weary and tedious drama of Dad planning drugs, obtaining drugs, taking drugs, then planning more drugs carried on monotonously over a long period of time as though an old long playing record needle had got stuck in a groove. I would describe the process as follows:-

It feels like you know that something has to give eventually yet it just seems to go on and on. Then some shocking event caused by drug misuse occurs and everything descends to a lower plane. It is like a record needle jumping to a new groove but with the turntable slowing down in speed at the same time. Over time these shocks occur with greater frequency and at shorter intervals apart. Problems escalate until it seems that nothing could get any worse, yet somehow things do then get worse.

At least, that's how it was for my family. I think that my story is a good illustration of how children growing up with addiction are likely to be witness to traumatic situations which are a matter of life and death. These can cause behavioural reactions which are now recognised as post traumatic stress.

A major shock for my family was our car crash when I was nine years old. Dad must have blacked out because one minute we were driving round a roundabout, the next we were wrapped round a lamppost. Seatbelts weren't compulsory in those days and I was thrown forward, knocked unconscious by my forehead banging against the back of the passenger seat. Mum was thrown into the laminated glass windscreen which broke her nose and blacked her eyes. Dad was hurt the worst with his hip being smashed against the steering wheel. In casualty I remember lying on a trolley and becoming aware that my brother and sister were there but Mum and Dad had been taken away to theatre. Mum told me recently that Dad was terribly worried about going to theatre in case the

anaesthetic interacted with some drugs that he had taken. Thus there is a strong chance that these same drugs were responsible for the accident.

Dad just seemed to give up after the car crash and life at home became extremely confusing for a while. His first hip replacement was unsuccessful and he was in a lot of pain and was confused and depressed from self-medicating. He took a drug overdose although I was too young to know that. I remember a doctor visiting and Dad being unreasonably furious at Mum and criticising her, and Mum standing in the hallway crying.

Then Dad decided that because he was disabled he would have to give up work, although he could surely have waited to see how the second hip replacement operation went. I think however that his addiction had got to the point where he was struggling to hold onto his job anyway. The car crash gave him the excuse he needed to enter wholly into a drug habit that was already dominating his life. We moved out of our house into a small flat, went onto disability benefit, and life turned into a nightmare.

Here is a description of that nightmare:-

Dad is always lying down, maybe on his bed, maybe on the settee. He is an incredibly intelligent man but all his brain power is turned in on himself. It is focused on his pain, on his bodily functions, and on his next dose of Sodium-Amytal barbiturates. He is visibly diminishing. He starts to tell a story but his speech is slurred and slow and he is dribbling. The story is one that he's told a thousand times and it is all about achievements from years ago as though today does not exist. He wants me with him. He wants someone there all the time. But he can get boring and his lack of inhibition can be embarrassing and I want to get away.

Now he's asking for another dose. Not one tablet but ten – two thousand milligrams. This is enough to kill a man who has not built up a tolerance. I go to the kitchen where we keep

the tin on a top shelf. It is a round purple decorated tin that once contained chocolates. I ask Mum if he can have ten tablets.

'No,' she calls out to him; 'it's only an hour since you last took some.' I go back and I'm hovering at the door longing to get away but unable to leave. Then the argument starts, a negotiation in which his tactic is to wear Mum down. He comes down to eight tablets and she goes up to two tablets. After a short silence we hear a moan of pain. I see him glance at me surreptitiously through his grimace to check if his moan is getting the attention it deserves. Mum goes up to four tablets.

'But no more,' she's shouting at him. 'You'll kill yourself if you go on like this.'

Eventually they settle at six tablets and he starts falling asleep. I am now free to go to the bedroom I share with my brother and sister and start my homework. But I find that I cannot concentrate on my work. Instead I am going into an uncomfortable daydream where everything is going wrong for me at school. This is despite, in reality, being good at school because I cannot afford to draw attention to my family's secret.

It's a kind of agitated yet comatose state in which I'm half asleep. Yet I am also listening out in the background for Dad waking up and calling out again. Which he does an hour later, and then it's a repeat of the earlier saga, and then the same again a third time before the evening is out. Then it is the same again the day after, and the day after that. The same every day for the next nine years until I leave home.

Getting the tablets gets trickier because he is making out prescriptions to Mum's name. However there are now so many scripts that a single pharmacist would almost certainly report suspected misuse. So Mum extends the source of supply to all the chemists across not just our town but six adjacent towns. It is getting harder for her to leave home though. If Dad is left

alone he somehow manages to fall down whilst we are out and as his weight has risen to above twenty stone it is back-breaking to lift him. But he needs the tablets so when it gets desperate Mum asks if I would mind going. When I turn sixteen years old I get a Saturday job in the next door town and I can cash prescriptions at a couple of different chemists in my lunch hour. On a school day I can jump on my bicycle after school and cycle to another neighbouring town.

We also learn how to fool him into taking less than he thinks. Mum sets out a newspaper on the table along with a box of corn flour and pours the tablets onto it. She then breaks the capsules apart and empties their contents onto the sheet of print. She carefully refills them with the corn flour and puts the capsule back together. When I am home from school in the evenings it gives her the chance to go out to an occasional evening church service. Her faith is all that is holding her together, and I take over the job of making the placebos. When Dad starts pestering me for tablets I give him a mixture of real ones and fakes. But I still need to go and check on his breathing every half hour and I am really scared of overdosing him. When he gets too demanding I have to go and fetch Mum back from church.

Now here is a description of another nightmare. This is a genuine recurring dream that I used to have:-

I am in the grey stone stairwell of the block of flats that we live in and am trying to get to the ground floor to get out through the fire exit. I want to use the lift which you can access from the landing of each floor. But when I open a door to take me from the staircase onto a landing it is covered with dead bodies that have been shot in a massacre by terrorists. I am trapped in the staircase running up and down and opening doors into landings only to have to retreat and find another landing. But I am never able to escape and I wake up in distress.

The possibility of Dad dying was a constant terror for me. There is a strong link between barbiturates and both accidental and deliberate overdosing. When I was just turned fourteen years old another shock happened. Dad had lost all sense of perspective of what was appropriate behaviour and had no concept of myself and my brother and sister as children. The human beings in his family had become objects for getting him his drugs rather than people with lives of their own. My real Dad loved us very much and we would get glimmers of that sometimes. But the drugged-up Dad could not see past the chemical he wanted so badly.

On this occasion he decided that he couldn't bear it any more and was going to end his life. He seemed to think that it was entirely appropriate to call us all into the bedroom and explain this to us in a farewell speech. Then he asked us to fetch him the tin of tablets. I was hovering by the door as usual, wanting to get away. Therefore after a momentary shocked silence Mum told me to fetch the tin. Then my brother and sister said,

'No Mary, don't get it, it's wrong.'

Then Mum said, 'You'd better get it Mary because it's what he wants and he'll never forgive us otherwise.' Then it was all very unreal and panicky and I didn't know what to do but eventually I fetched the tin and we watched him swallow the contents of all the bottles, then we watched him slip into unconsciousness.

I don't think I've ever managed to be decisive since that day because why would I ever want to make such a wrong choice again? Then we asked Mum if we should call an ambulance but she was scared that he'd be angry. He had made her life hell for calling an ambulance last time he had overdosed. My brother said we should call one. I said I didn't know. My sister decided to go and call it, and they saved his life at the hospital in the intensive care unit.

Over subsequent years we had to rush him to hospital a number of times. On one occasion I went into his room and found him

gasping for air with his eyes rolling and his skin turning blue. After I left home my brother says he overdosed so often that it felt unreal.

I was living away from home when it all finally came to a head. I got called back because he was in hospital after a particularly serious overdose. They let him out of hospital and I thought it was okay to leave Mum and my brother to it. However he was clearly confused and talking gibberish. That night he went totally mad. When my Mum went into their bedroom he swung his crutch at her head and hit it so hard that it bled. She staggered into our bedroom to escape and slept there after my brother calmed her down.

They were woken up in the early hours of the morning to a flood. Dad had turned on the taps and put the plug in the sink because he thought they were trying to burn the flat down. It took the intervention of my brother, the local vicar, an ambulance crew, a fire brigade crew, and the police, before they could get him to hospital. My Mum was taken away by my sister, and my brother got busy sorting the flat out, but I didn't know about it. This was because since leaving home I had moved house so many times that only my Mum kept up with my address, but she was in shock just then.

Dad died in hospital shortly afterwards. Due to the circumstances he died totally alone without having had any visitors. Mum was like a skeleton and down to about six stone in weight by then. She was also exhausted by years of running around for Dad. She washed everything by hand because money was used for drugs rather than for things like washing machines and she travelled to all those different chemist shops. She did this whilst paralysed down one side by a stroke, suffered young when the stress on her increased after I left home.

Long term effects of witnessing life and death situations

I think that it must be common for children growing up with drug addiction in the family to be exposed to extreme situations.

Therefore they might suffer from various post-traumatic stress symptoms. I did. Even now my reactions include flashbacks in the form of reliving old emotions and events. I also transfer old feelings onto unrelated situations in everyday life today. Other reactions include daydreaming, dissociation and the need to curl up and lie down for hours in a comatose type state. I struggle too to remember some of my childhood and I am sometimes unnecessarily obsessive or neurotic.

However the reactions were far worse when I was living through it as a child. Then I was blind to any knowledge of how drug addiction in my family was affecting me. Then I suffered frequent spells of depression, anxiety and demoralisation. I became generally withdrawn at school as well as home. At one point in my adolescence I went through a phase of cutting myself. For longer periods of time though I used to survive by turning my back on it all and pretending that I did not care. Then I had lots of aggressive energy which helped me to get on with life. This anger also troubled me though by producing a tendency to be manic, to overwork, to get over-excited, and to lack judgement.

My life was a mess when I first came to work in Castleford five years ago. Since leaving home twenty three years earlier I had lived at over thirty addresses across ten different towns and cities. I had been in relationships with over thirty different boyfriends. I was starting my twelfth job. I knew nobody in Yorkshire and I felt totally broken, alone and without roots.

The instability is understandable when I put it in the context of growing up with drug addiction. Personal relationships were hard work because I was wary about committing myself to someone who might abandon me. I struggled with an insecure feeling that Dad hadn't considered me worth staying alive for and nor would anyone else. I was also scared that I would end up like Mum, trapped in service to a man and not having a life of my own. I was restless and ran away from problems that I didn't know how to solve.

I received such a buzz when I first left home and got away from the stress that I made it a habit to always move on when things went wrong. That way I could use the energy from the buzz to kick start my life all over again. My restlessness was also a feature of how quickly I became demoralised with situations, always assuming that everything would get worse in a downward spiral like Dad's addiction.

Moving was always an overreaction though, as none of the problems were so enormous that I could not have stayed and sorted them out. Over time it led me to this lonely place of being in a new town with no family of my own and no friends. I felt broken and worthless and was struggling to believe that I could hold my life and even my sanity together any more.

Meanwhile in my new job work relationships were strained because I preferred to run my own life rather than risk trusting anybody with formal authority over me. Dad's misuse of drugs was a secret that we strictly protected from the authorities. Mum warned us that if we told anyone what was going on we would get taken into care, and Dad would be struck off the medical register. The shame of this would destroy him. Therefore I regarded all authority as my enemy and as a threat to my family. Yet deep down I also wanted the authorities to help, so I got even angrier at them for letting me down by not spotting the problem. So began a pattern of railing against and picking fights, on a personal basis, with any authority generally.

Into adulthood – recovering from the damage

My recovery started when I admitted that I needed help. I had been in Yorkshire less than three weeks and my new job was going badly. I went shopping in Leeds and a pair of teenage boys got on the bus back. They were high on drugs and terrorising the passengers. I got home and it hit me that yet again I was living in the middle of a drugs problem and I felt desperate.

For the first time since childhood I knelt down and I prayed to a God that I didn't believe in to ask for help. Then I started sobbing. As a child I had found church a comfort but over time I lost my faith. After the overdose that I described my whole family being witness to, my Dad had woken up in hospital glad to be alive. He then tried to kick his drugs habit. He got himself a copy of that book from the war, *The Imitation of Christ*, and he scribbled furiously all over it as an antidote every time he wanted a fix, 'God is Love. Cut down the barbs. God is Love'. When he caved in and went back onto the tablets I wrote a poem in which I expressed a view that the devil had won and that God could do nothing about it. A few years later in sixth form I was easily convinced by a teacher that the reason God did not stop the hardships in the world was because he did not exist.

But now alone and desperate in Yorkshire I did not know where else to turn. There began, following that initial admission that I needed help, a very special year in my life which can best be described as a journey towards recovery. First I came across the Gasped family support organisation and rang the Wakefield helpline number. This was another crack in my shell of isolation as I started receiving counselling and attending a support group and things began to fall into place.

Meanwhile I had started meeting up with my brother and sister for occasional outings after twenty years of us scarcely seeing each other. In our childhood it was not the case that we siblings always looked after each other. It was hard enough looking out for ourselves and we often took out our pain on each other, physically fighting like cats and dogs and yelling and screaming at each other. My shell splintered some more as I acknowledged that it wasn't all about me. My sister had been exposed to a particular burden of responsibility from the expectations placed in society on the eldest child. My brother had borne the burden a few years longer through staying at home and had witnessed the especially severe trauma at

the end. Rebuilding a relationship with them has been a healing and a beautiful experience.

Then thirdly there was my new job, where team work was demanded. I found that I could not get away with being my own boss in the way that I had been able to in previous jobs. The conflict that ensued from me trying to do so was so highly charged that it felt like a sledgehammer was being crashed against this huge wall of safety that I'd spent years building up and hiding behind. But as things came to a head I finally broke the years of secrecy, shame and silence and told my manager about my background and the help that I was getting from GASPED. With that the wall came crumbling down at last and I was able to be myself and start facing my difficulties.

I think that telling your story to others is an important step in breaking the shame barrier, as long as you receive a supportive response. I was lucky in that I was able to get that from my own workplace, and would recommend to others who are hiding issues of addiction at home to consider taking the same risk. There is always a danger, of course, of inviting ridicule by doing so. However, many people in our society have themselves experienced addiction through a friend or a family member and have some kind of understanding of it. People are often kinder and more sympathetic than our fears expect them to be, so there is a good chance that the risk will pay off. My previous practice of keeping quiet about my problems never worked for me anyway. Speaking out was initially painful as I am used to being proud and independent and so felt vulnerable and humbled. However, it has proven in time to be invaluable in helping me to settle down and stay in the same job and town.

As I began to pick up the pieces and trust other people to help me, I began to notice the positive things that were happening in the world of drug addiction. I met some addicts who had been through the Teen Challenge rehabilitation programme and were now free

of drugs and for the first time I believed that a cure for addiction was possible. At the same time I accessed a wealth of experience and insight into the problem by reading from the considerable library of therapeutic, self-help and true life story books held at the GASPED office.

Then a local church in Castleford hosted an event at which a recovered heroin addict, Barry Woodward, was telling his story. As he spoke it dawned on me that my angry rejection of God for not healing my Dad in the past was unreasonable. I decided to trust that God was really on my side, and on my Dad's side, and could be a source of hope and strength. Thus the year ended with me getting my faith back, sharing my prayer of conversion to Christianity with a man who confessed that he had also used barbiturates to feed his addiction. I am still struck by the irony of this, considering that my faith had been broken in the first place by my despair at my Dad's addiction to barbiturates.

It is still hard work for me to face my problems, to settle down in one place, and to build relationships and roots, but it is also rewarding and enjoyable work. Breaking my isolation is crucial to success in this challenge. I have benefited enormously from practical and loving support from my GASPED support group, from my place of work, from my family, and from my local church.

I am optimistic now that the tide can be turned against the problem of drug addiction in our society. In the past people died in large numbers from diseases like cholera and typhoid but today these are no longer a threat because of advancements in medical knowledge. Efforts made by society to build clean water systems and to provide educational programmes in public health matters also contributed to tackling the problem. I think that we can do the same with drug addiction over time.

Combating drug addiction can seem like slow and difficult work, beset by the disappointment when addicts get clean then relapse. However there are some success stories getting through as well.

FIELDS OF POPPIES – DAD AND HIS DRUGS

These offer the prospect of our society being able to beat this problem in the long run. It is too late for my Dad. It is not too late for those drugged-up teenagers who shared my bus and got off just round the corner from where I now live. Nor is it too late for the generation of children growing up bewildered today by their parents' addicted behaviour.

We all need to tell our stories about how substance misuse has affected us. By putting our heads together we might not only be able to face our personal battles better, but to tackle the problem in society as a whole as well.

Sunshine through clouds

David

Having come from a difficult, confusing and less than ideal family background, my childhood and early life was often troubled. My involvement with substance misuse began relatively young, starting with solvent abuse which was particularly prevalent in the early to mid 1980's. As far as I can recall, I would have been around fourteen years of age at this time.

This started as a consequence of my moving to Leeds. It had been decided that due to the untenable situation at home with my parents, it would be better for all if I went to stay with my grandparents. Unfortunately, making friends in an alien city meant considerable extra effort to find my place and ensure I 'fitted in'.

Regrettably, inner city life was somewhat different to the small village I grew up in. It turned out my new peers found truancy from school whilst glue sniffing in derelict buildings or on industrial wasteland by the river to be the easiest way to relieve boredom and get their kicks. Perhaps inevitably, this meant it wasn't to be long before I became involved and found myself doing the same.

Over the following years, the practice of solvent inhalation eventually evaporated (pardon the pun) to be replaced gradually, as smoking cannabis and drinking came to the fore. When coupled with general delinquency, plenty of mischief and numerous minor infringements of law, my teenage experience was educational to say the least. Sadly, somewhere along the line I lost both myself and my individuality. Being easily led, this soon meant I became just 'one of the pack'.

Naturally, trends changed and towards the end of the 1980's the rave scene began to be established alongside and in partnership with a whole new spectrum of drugs. Strangely enough, both myself and my friends wholeheartedly embraced this fledgling culture and (as if we needed one) another opportunity to get wrecked!

This was pretty much the status quo until well into my early twenties. Drinking regularly, taking recreational drugs and letting time slip by. Eventually, I drifted away from the ‘scene’ and for probably the first time in my life, managed a period of stability which then allowed me to move forward in life. Sadly, this wasn’t to last.

By the age of twenty-five, I had begun to get involved with a drug that was to devastate my life and affect my future in many different ways. During the summer of ‘95 my grandfather became ill and his eventual death was to be the catalyst that set me upon this path.

Heroin had been ‘doing the rounds’ in my social circle for several years prior to my involvement, though up until this point I had managed to keep my distance. After all, who could forget the government television campaign of the late 1980’s featuring shock tactics and the catchphrase ‘Heroin Screws You Up!’

Perhaps it was the result of a bad day immediately following the aftermath of Granddad’s death, but my resolve wavered and I decided to try opiates for the very first time. Initially I was extremely unwell, feeling nauseous and unsteady on my feet. However, once these feelings subsided I found the overall experience and effects offset a lot of the negativity I was feeling at that time.

Several weeks later, I again used heroin and over the following months the time period between each episode of use became shorter and shorter. This was to be my lot for the next decade, with my addiction getting worse, my friends turning away and my family disowning me. Homelessness soon followed, along with criminality, debt, ill health, self-destructive behaviours and long-term unemployment.

It seems, at least in my experience, that the journey through drug addiction has a tendency to follow a predictable course, with distinct ‘phases’ as it robs an individual of self-respect, material possessions and, ultimately, all they hold dear.

In my case, when I first became involved with heroin, I was in full-time employment, earning a respectable wage and more than able to afford my ‘habit’ at that stage. However, it only took an inability to find a ‘score’ on a few occasions (which then brought the nightmare of daily withdrawal) before my timekeeping began to suffer and I eventually lost my job.

At first, this wasn’t too much of an issue. Luckily, I was able to borrow money from family and friends, though as my addiction progressed the emphasis on paying my debts was replaced by the need to source and finance drugs combined with the worry of constantly needing my next ‘hit’. Naturally, it wasn’t very long before people quite understandably became reluctant to afford me any credit, which meant another avenue was exhausted.

The next stage in my descent into misery saw me selling my possessions for a fraction of their true value until, again, this source of income dried up.

By this point, I was becoming increasingly desperate and having few other realistic options, I began to consider criminality, which then brought further complications and, eventually, trouble with the law. Shoplifting and petty theft soon overtook the little self-respect that I had left and by this time I wasn’t far from rock bottom.

It was during this period that I changed my method of drug administration and began injecting for the first time. My main motivation for the switch was to maximise the longevity and effects of any drugs I might acquire. Obviously, this then introduced a whole new level of risk. Potentially, these might have included accidental (or deliberate) overdose, blood-borne viruses, infections and deep vein thrombosis. Not to mention the possible complications of the undesirable and often downright nefarious additives and adulterants that some unscrupulous dealers have been known to include in order to maximise profits and/or ‘bulk out’ their wares.

Obviously, my decline had a severe impact upon both my family and my relationships with them and any friends had long since

abandoned me, leaving me isolated and frequently alone. At that time, I felt that nobody really cared and that if others didn't, then why should I? My association with other 'users' made it even harder to break the cycle and in some ways I was now in an impossible situation.

Eventually, I knew it had come to the point where it really was sink or swim, I realised something had to give and I approached my doctor. This was followed by numerous abortive attempts at detoxification and years of being passed from 'pillar to post.' I tried many different types of treatment including DF118 (Dihydrocodeine) reduction programs and several Lofexidine rapid detoxification regimens. Regardless of the particular outcome of any episode of treatment, I inevitably found myself mixing in the same circles and therefore, once again, returning to drugs.

However, it has to be said that despite all of the above, in some ways I have been very lucky. Many of my friends and peers have wound up dead through drug overdose or mutilated and irreparably damaged as a result of DVT and/or limb amputation.

I survived!

My turning point came after I had returned to my native Wakefield. As a result of yet more criminal indiscretions I was given a Drug Treatment & Testing Order (by Wakefield Magistrates Court) in the spring of 2001. This sanction required me to attend daily for over twenty hours a week. Perhaps this was the intervention I had always needed, someone to listen, time to untangle a few knots, a period of abstinence.

In tandem with a Methadone prescription (for the first time) and other intensive psycho-social interventions, I managed to achieve significant success as, back then, the majority failed and ended up back in court for re-sentencing.

Immediately following this, I was transferred to voluntary treatment (taking my Methadone prescription with me) where over the next couple of years I built on the gains I had made by *engaging*

with the service (Turning Point) and *accepting* the help I was offered. This required significant co-operation on my part and trust was a huge issue at the outset. Eventually, I began to understand that if I was to salvage anything, the strength had to come from within.

Once I had recognised this, I started to believe that maybe there was a future and perhaps I could regain control of my life? After the many negative experiences I had endured and years of being told by 'professionals' what was best for me, I had found someone, somewhere, who was sympathetic to my needs and demonstrated faith in my ability to change.

By working through the many issues that had contributed to my 'fall from grace' I was able to move forward and once again, to my surprise, begin to feel hope.

Obviously, this process took time and eventually culminated in my involvement as a Service User Representative.

This further enhanced my understanding of drug misuse and the issues that matter to those in a similar predicament. It also taught me that I was not alone and that far too many people had found themselves in a similar situation to me as the result of a few poor decisions. As a reward for my time, I was given the opportunity to undertake various training courses which began to make up for my poor schooling and worked wonders for my self esteem and academic aspirations. In turn, I was then able to pass on my knowledge and experience to other Service Users and help them to overcome some of the very problems that had made my own 'journey' seem so impossible.

Secondary to this, my family began to see a change in my lifestyle and we slowly began to re-build bridges and in time, trust began to be re-established. Hindsight suggests that at the time when I felt the most alone, many people had kept their distance due to a lack of understanding and ignorance of exactly what kind of help I really needed. The associated stigma and negative portrayal of addicts

SUNSHINE THROUGH CLOUDS

by the popular press probably didn't help either.

Though my life is far from perfect and I still have some way to go, I am now engaged as a volunteer within my local drug treatment service and feel sure I have now turned a corner. These things seemed insurmountable not so very long ago, especially back in the middle years of my addiction which truly were dark days of despair. With this in mind and on balance, I genuinely feel that if I can find my way back, then with patience and the right help, *anyone can*.

I would like to think that my story might help others to realise this.

Waiting for the next crisis

Brenda

It had been a busy day. I could distinctly smell mints, he had been drinking. 'How about fish for tea, Alan?'

'Fish,' came an almost incoherent reply.

'OK,' I replied and said I would cook the tea now. However, just as I closed the oven door, instead of an incoherent reply an almighty shout came from the direction of the hall. I ran from the kitchen and found my husband (Alan) on the floor smelling of whisky. He had attempted to go upstairs only to land in a drunken heap at the bottom of the stair steps and trapped behind the front door. There was an injury: the left leg was z-shaped, he had also bumped his head. Here we go again! I quickly turned off the oven and rang 999.

As I waited for the ambulance to arrive I looked down at my husband, lying on the floor. He was in pain, looked unkempt and was still in his gardening clothes. There was a mixture of emotion. Sorrow because of an obvious injury, but also deep-rooted anger at his (in my eyes) stupidity! You see there had been injuries before, resulting in hospital admissions. Was he taking up a bed that could have been earmarked for somebody on the waiting list? The ambulance pulled up outside; I could see the blue lights flashing. There was a loud knock on the front door at which I asked if they could go round to the back door.

Two lady medics came in, one saying they would have problems moving Alan. They told him to try to breathe in the gas and air. He struggled and both medics told him to keep the mask on his face.

'We have to splint this leg of yours, so that we can move you to open the door.' After a struggle he was put onto a stretcher/ chair then taken into the ambulance. After checking his vital signs we all set off to the Accident and Emergency department. Alan was taken straight to a cubicle. A nurse took off his splint, trousers

and socks, at which I was horrified at the dirty feet and toes. I was embarrassed. ‘So sorry,’ I apologised about the state of his feet, at which the doctor understanding my situation cheerily replied,

‘It’s ok, love, it won’t show up on x-ray.’

The pain was quite intense, he groaned and his face became more lined as he winced in pain, even though he was very much inebriated. The doctor prescribed an injection of morphia. This was given by the staff nurse prior to him having his x-ray. As the pain subsided he became restless when taken into the x-ray department. I stayed behind in the cubicle.

It took a while for the x-ray to be done and in my wait I began to feel hungry as it was now half-past seven and a very long time since having a sandwich at mid-day. The doctor appeared only to disappear back with the radiographer. They both then returned with my husband’s x-ray films. They put them up onto the monitor and it showed very clearly that he had a fracture of his femur, the longest and strongest bone in his body.

Nothing much happened for what seemed like ages and by now it was ten p.m. The night staff came on duty and a big discussion was going on. At last, some news: the doctor explained that my husband could not be treated at our local hospital. He would need surgery. So he had to be transferred elsewhere. They ordered an ambulance. When the ambulance arrived by this time it was half past ten. I was advised not to go with them as it could be three a.m. before I would get home, with no transport provided. I have a helpful family who, if asked, would pick me up at that time. How could I inflict that onto them when they had to be up at the crack of dawn to go to work? After all, they always came each time their dad was drunk to pick him up many times over. They never liked this situation but tolerated it well.

By this time I was really hungry. Lucky for me my daughter phoned the hospital just as I was about to leave; she had cooked a meal for me. Chicken curry never tasted so good! You see, even

though Alan was in hospital and it had been a traumatic day, I could relax in the knowledge that I would not be picking him up off the floor that night at least! At half past eleven my daughter offered to give me a lift home, which I gladly accepted. The lights had been left on in our house, more welcoming than an empty house in total darkness. My daughter saw that I was safely inside then left. I had a quick bath, made a cup of tea and then sat pondering through the day’s events. Where did it all go wrong, I asked myself? We both had worked hard, brought up three children who, in fact, are great. A moment of sadness crept in but then I pulled myself together by remembering to phone the hospital for an update on Alan and his condition. The reply from the hospital was he was very unsettled and was due for an operation in the morning. I returned to bed, feeling mentally and physically worn out. A quiet and peaceful night was had. Wonderful!

As I awoke next morning the clock was striking eight o’clock. The house had an empty feeling and I could please myself. The responsibility for my husband had been taken from me for a while. You see, he also has many medical problems apart from the alcohol problem. Unfortunately the drink problem was not the result of the medical problems. The drink problem manifested itself first, so the bottle blots out reality; and also common sense – total drink denial.

Many times I tried to advise him to take some action to have the treatment he badly needs i.e. to stop drinking. Always the answer was the same: ‘I am not that bad!’

Back to the day in hand. I phoned the hospital and was told my husband would be going to the operating theatre for a pin into his broken leg. We could visit that afternoon. I had some breakfast, tea and toast, listened to the news; dressed, then did a general tidying up before getting ready to visit the hospital.

When I arrived at the ward my husband was heavily sedated and his bed was next to the nurses’ station for observation purposes. I asked the staff for an update on his condition and was told that

the operation had been a success. I stayed for a short while then, as he was not aware that I was even present, decided to go home. I opened the door as the phone was ringing. It was our friends, Jack and Eve. They wanted to know if it was convenient to visit the next day. It was and they arranged to pick me up at half past two. They duly came at half past two the next day and we arrived at the hospital at three o'clock.

As we walked towards Alan's bed we could see all was not well. His bed was shaking; he was having withdrawal symptoms from the drink. His whole body was twitching. Jack and Eve were totally shocked. They had not seen anything like this before. The staff took us to one side and explained the situation. I had seen this before but this time it was my husband. We left the ward after about half an hour – our friends were upset and wanted to leave. Travelling home in the car I told our friends that drink had been a problem for some time. In turn they told me that they had suspected it for some time. It was now in the open. I felt that a weight had been lifted from my shoulders and now I was hoping that with the appropriate skilled treatment my husband would stop drinking. On arrival home my mood was low. I made a cup of tea and put my feet up, trying to enjoy the now tranquil surroundings.

On the next visiting session I had a meeting with the hospital alcohol team in my husband's presence. He agreed to attend an outpatient clinic for treatment. There was no conviction there so, unconvinced I would watch that space. For a month after the surgery Alan was housebound with no access to any drink. The short course of treatment had settled the side effects down. We had a blast from the past of how we were. He showed some interest in reading, doing jigsaws and a little more interest in television wildlife programmes, even watching news bulletins. I felt in my comfort zone. Was this a new beginning? Deep down inside, though, elements of doubt would surface. However, I tried to be very optimistic even though the family had their reservations too.

We were right to have reservations: he attended the alcohol clinic only three times. On the last occasion they were double-booked so my husband was not seen, but they should have booked a further appointment. We are still waiting.

Due to my husband's immobility problems he was housebound and he became increasingly bored of staying in the house as he was no longer able to drive because of being banned for drunk driving. He then decided to buy himself a buggy to get around on. That was not good news for me! Three off licences in close vicinity; it was a matter of time. I was unfortunately proved right.

First came subtle signs: being very outspoken, homing in on little problems like, 'You said you would only be an hour shopping!' Then doubting any explanation given. He began visiting the garage frequently, sucking mints on his return, obviously to mask the smell of the drink. All a top-secret mission so that nothing was witnessed by me. I must admit that in his absence I looked all around to find the drink and, if I did, would tip it onto the garden. No wonder the plants died!

On one occasion my husband had to attend a clinic for a post-operative check up. Because I could not go with him I booked a taxi thinking all would be well. Not so. The appointment was for 10.30am and by 1pm he had not returned home. As I was about to phone the hospital they phoned me. Could I go straight there as they had something untoward, that's all. I could not believe my eyes when I arrived. For there was he totally drunk with the hospital security guards around him. It seems he had stopped the taxi at the off licence, bought half a bottle of whisky on the way to the outpatient clinic and drunk it before arriving. I was so embarrassed, upset and humiliated, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me. The staff were supportive and the police that came were excellent but vowed he only escaped going into a cell because of his medical condition!

WAITING FOR THE NEXT CRISIS

The police took us home. They were so annoyed they carried my husband into the house then went outside to cool off. On leaving they left me a phone number to ring should there be any further problems. He slept for the rest of the day. At this time I was contemplating moving out. Where would I go? Should I give up all that I had worked for? No was the answer. Don't do anything like this in haste only to regret it later on. Rational thought surfaced. Remembering the latest diagnosis of my husband's condition, who would care for him? The family couldn't cope as they work and have responsible jobs. Ah well, I'll ask the services for help. This was to no avail, the drink being the stumbling block and his rights. Where are *my* rights, I thought? Nonexistent, it seems.

There are many people in circumstances like mine I am told and I truly believe that. They have to be strong, shouldering responsibilities of another human being who cannot and will not accept any responsibilities for their actions.

So here we are: to this present moment the drink problem remains. Even whilst I am writing this there is a drunken rant going on. Shouting my name constantly, swearing and unsteady on his feet. He cannot tolerate the drink as well as before, with his worsening condition. Everything now is a load of crap to him. This situation will last for anything up to four hours. By then it will be dinner time so I have to look forward to being followed around the kitchen by him. He stands behind me very unsteady on his feet. I then don't know what to watch the most, the meal on the hot cooker or him. Also not forgetting to make sure has hasn't turned the cooker off when I am not looking for when that happens the meal can take up to four hours to be ready. Frustrating isn't the word; that's when I could lose it!

The rant goes on, no time here for complacency. I wait for the next crisis to come. The caring, principled man I married is slowly destroying himself and all he ever had!

The running man

Thomas Fitzsimons

On the 25th April 1988, I was awoken by a family friend. Dad was dead. Though his words were clear, I couldn't get it in my head how this was happening; I had only been with him the night before – My father and I, doing the things a father and son do. Talking, arguing – finding it hard to show our deep emotional bond.

He had died suddenly in the night and by the time I had woken up his body had been moved by the coroner. Perhaps it was because I hadn't seen the body that I held out hope that it wasn't happening, that it wasn't real.

I had been waiting for the coffin to arrive for days. There had been a mix up at the airport and that had meant a delay in my father's body being flown back to Belfast, the city I had grown up in, a city already brimming over with emotional significance for me. As we lived in England we had a period of about two weeks arranging to fly the body back to Belfast. All the time I convinced myself that it was a dream and that my dad would appear and shout,

'What about ya!'

Hope is a wonderful thing to hold onto. If you have hope you never feel as though you can't cope. That hope was finally extinguished when the coffin arrived. The house was packed with people who all went quiet when the hearse pulled up outside. Though I had been through this macabre circus before at my grandfather's funeral, you could get the sense this was something different. This was the body of a young man. My father was thirty nine when he died - the father of five young children, a dear husband, a brother and a son. This was not a man who died having lived a full life; this was a man who had been taken too young. The knowledge of the wasted possibilities hung in the air, the atmosphere heavy with tragedy.

It is the custom to keep the casket open amongst the Irish Catholic community and I had managed to convince myself that I could handle seeing the corpse. I had seen my grandfather's body only four months earlier and took it in my stride – as the eldest male child my job was to stand up and be a man. A man? I was thirteen years old! I had only just started listening to music and noticing that I was attracted to girls. My first love was still football and I still enjoyed an ice-cream with my mates and playing out till the sun went down. Too soon, the undertaker lifted the lid off the coffin and I began to shake.

'No, this can't be! This can't be! This can't be!' I screamed – a boy stunned by the reality of loss and death and unable to cope with the emotional punch of the sight in front of him.

My father's bloated face and lifeless hands were all wrong: he was an expressive man – so full of physicality and passion. He would always be writing or playing imaginary guitar and reacting to some minor outrage or fit of enthusiasm by throwing his hands in the air. I always remember them being warm and gentle when he gave me a hug, but also firm when I'd overstepped the mark. This contrast was slowly absorbed and as the mourners began to cry, I began shouting,

'I've got to get out of here! I've got to get out of here!'

I don't remember where I ran to or how long I ran for. I just ran and ran until I couldn't run any more, got my breath and ran again. My vision was impaired by the tears and I often stumbled but running seemed to be the natural thing to do. Running put distance between the truth of the matter and the hope I wanted to cling on to. Yet, the running had to end and soon I found myself again surrounded by the puzzled looks of my family, unable to understand their own grief, never mind the boy's. Nobody could have understood my need to run, but it had helped, briefly, to dull the memories of my father's dead face. When I stopped, the pain came back.

Of course, the tragedy of these things is that when so many people are touched, they become self-centred mourners. Each getting through it the only way they can, nobody noticing the other's private trauma. Nobody noticing that my world was shattered. The pain I felt after my father's death created a perfect environment for me to develop a liking for alcohol.

The first time I got drunk was on a football trip to Germany. I had gone there about a month after my dad had died. I remember waking up the next day thinking 'Wow I didn't talk about Dad once last night!' It, alcohol, was to be my saviour, my new love and my confidante.

Quite quickly my drinking developed in to a regular pattern. I began working on a building site and had plenty of disposable income. We are not talking a paper round. At the age of fifteen I was earning one hundred pounds a week. I was and always have been a hard worker. Working on a building site for most kids would have been a daunting place to be but I felt at home. I was surrounded by my countrymen and they looked after me. Their idea of looking after me was different to my parent's idea of how I should be brought up. I was influenced by the stereotype of the Irish. I actually believed it! We worked hard and we drank a lot.

Looking back, I find that quite sad. The Irish as a nation have a lot more to offer than that image. Unfortunately the other guys lived up to stereotype. So from the age of fifteen I would be working a ten-hour shift and then hitting the pub for eight pints of lager.

Obviously this began to impact on my schooling. I had lost interest in being a child and going to school. That opportunity of childhood had been snatched away from me when my dad died. I didn't want to learn how to speak French or how to dissect a frog or read Shakespeare. It had no relevance to my life. I wanted to be a man. I wanted to be something I was too young to be. I wanted to feel alive. I wanted to escape the pain. Alcohol did all of this for me. It made me feel part of the workforce, it made me feel alive with confidence and it made me forget, for a little while anyway.

My drinking got me into trouble very quickly. My first night out in a Wakefield nightclub ended up in a bar brawl which I was heavily involved in. Here I was, after only drinking for two years, fighting with grown men in a nightclub. The fight spilled onto the street after being thrown out of the club. I found myself attacking another man and punching him to the floor before raining kicks and punches into him. I had become an animal. I had become a criminal. We ran off laughing.

These types of incidents were to become a regular occurrence over the next few years. I often refer to environment and culture. I found Wakefield back then to be a perfect breeding ground for alcohol abuse and creating the right environment for it. We had 'ten pence a pint night' for a start! There was also a culture of 'that is what we do in Wakefield, we drink'. One of the things Wakefield is famous for is the 'Westgate Run' – it was seen as a challenge or even a birthright to try to have a drink in every pub on the long stretch of road to prove your worth as a drinker. This challenge became the norm for me from Thursday until Sunday. I could afford it even at fifteen.

My relationships with people close to me were becoming strained. My anger was a real issue and I would often take it out on those closest to me. My girlfriend at the time was subjected to quite bad treatment both verbally and physically. I think this is important to admit to as so many people deny it happens. I had gone from being a normal thirteen-year-old to being a drunken, violent and abusive person in three years.

We were in the same nightclub one Saturday evening when I spotted her dancing with another man, something she was more than entitled to do. I saw red, ran onto the dance floor and took a swing at this man. I then turned on my ex and kicked her across the dance floor. I felt genuine betrayal and the type of hate that would make a person kill. My head had gone completely. I needed to get out quickly.

I had left my car at my mate's house, so I got in a cab to go back there to sleep. When I got back I started to go over what had happened in my head. The anger was coming to the surface, I was going to sort this out. I couldn't sleep until I had confronted my ex. I got in my car, I'd only had it for a couple of months. It was a metallic blue Nova SR, which for a nineteen-year-old was a great car. It was also super-fast. I drove into Wakefield at high speed. It was a wet January evening and as I got to the town centre I picked up the speed to about 80mph in a 30mph zone. I had been drinking all day and at that speed I could hardly see out of the window with the rain lashing down. Suddenly I felt the car slide. It hit a kerb and bounced me into the traffic island, which then put me straight in line for a shop front. At eighty miles an hour I was happy: I would put my foot down on the accelerator and go as fast as I could and end it all – that would teach her a lesson. It would also get me away from my crap life.

I ended up inside the shop front having crashed through the front security shutters and then through the main doors. Nothing not even a scratch. Having caused twenty thousand pounds worth of damage and giving a positive breath sample I was banned from driving for sixteen months and given a twelve month probation order, which involved an alcohol awareness course.

This was going to be a changing point in my drinking. Banning me actually did no good at all. I now had no reason not to drink. Someone else would do all the driving. I just started to get better at drinking.

The next ten years were full of total denial that there was anything wrong with me. Despite several arrests for drunken behaviour, only the people closest to me knew the severity of my drinking. My work was suffering as all I wanted to do was get to the pub. I would often have rows with work colleagues to enable me to storm out of the office and go and get drunk.

Unlike the stereotype of an Irishman, I didn't live up to that of

an alcoholic. I wasn't living on the street or constantly in and out of jail. I had a management position in a large construction firm. I was in charge of about forty men, had a company car and a good salary. Yet I was never happy. It was not making me happy.

All my money was being spent in the pub. Even after the birth of my children I couldn't control the urge to drink. If anything when the kids came along it got worse. I became very selfish with my time and my money. Holidays were non-existent as they would use too much of my drinking money. Living with me must have been a nightmare. The constant fear of whether I was coming home drunk and in a bad mood must have been very frightening but something I felt impotent to change.

My decision to quit alcohol was one of the hardest I had ever had to make. Some people will find that hard to understand. How can it be a difficult decision to give up something that has destroyed my life? You see, at the time I had made that decision I had no belief that alcohol had destroyed my life. I had never experienced life without alcohol in it so therefore I had nothing to compare it to. I had in my head that the only difference would be that my life would still be as shit, only now I would be sober.

Alcohol gave me a sense of purpose every day. My whole day was geared around getting my first drink. Plotting, planning, lying and even stealing to get to the pub. My work was always secondary to getting drink. So here I am, about to give up the one thing I love, the one thing I get out of bed for, the one thing I work for.

It's not easy, is it? We have all tried to give things up for a new year's resolution and failed after three weeks. Most of the things we give up are pointless: sweets, chocolates, coffee, etc. Why do we fail so miserably? It takes will power, it is a personal sacrifice and none of us like personal sacrifice, and most importantly it is boring when you give up. You feel completely worthless. At least when I was drinking I had a social life, I had rows with people, I had laughs with people. Now I would have none of that.

People still see alcoholism as a sign of weakness rather than an illness. They see it as a failure of self-control. People say quite often, 'It's your choice when you drink and how much'. That may have been the case when I took my first drink of alcohol but that was when that deal fell apart.

I believe that alcoholism is an illness, and not just a mental illness but a genetic illness. In other words it's already there before we take our first drink. I think that it is not just an addictive nature but that there is an alcohol gene. I certainly don't have any other addictions. With people continually telling you that alcoholism is not an illness and that is simply a lifestyle choice it becomes harder to talk about and makes it difficult to get the right help. How can you get help from your doctor for an illness when the doctor himself could be doubtful of the severity or cause of your illness?

The months leading up to March 2006 were my worst drinking days. Oliver had been born in January and my partner Zoe had her hands full with both kids. I hated being around the house with kids crying and Zoe stressed; I couldn't cope. I think my mental state was at its lowest. I was struggling to keep my alcohol problem from my new employer and my relationship with people around me was at an all-time low. There was always someone complaining to the landlord or the club committee about my abusive behaviour or my drink driving. I just laughed it off and said when they spend as much as me in here then they can complain. Justifying my behaviour by how much money I was spending should have been an eye-opener to how bad things had become.

The Monday after St Patrick's Day Zoe had had enough. I had been drunk for the entire weekend, had been extremely abusive and looked as though I was on my last legs. She never actually said she was going to leave but things were tense. I had upset and annoyed her in the past but I could see in her eyes that she was beaten and tired of fighting.

They say behind every great man is an even greater woman. Well behind only the luckiest alcoholics there is a strong and loyal partner - always seeing the best in the person they love and defending their every action. Zoe knew my problems but only on occasion would she get angry about it. What good is getting angry about an illness? She honestly believed that I would beat this and that my true personality would come through. She hoped.

But, this time it was different; Zoe knew that every time I got close to being at rock bottom she pulled me through. She had realised that in order for me to know how much this was hurting her, I had to feel the hurt for myself. The threat of losing Orla and Oliver was quite real on this occasion. Zoe had the opportunity, if she wanted, to move back to her folks in Bristol. This really would hurt me. Bristol was not a place I could travel to every weekend to see the kids. I had been through this before with Mason and Niall, my eldest kids, and was terrified it would happen all over again.

Something fell into place that day. I knew I was about to lose the one person who, through everything, had remained loyal and who loved me unconditionally. That same day, by chance, I received an email from a magazine called 'Men's Fitness'. It was about a duathlon being held in September in Windsor. My first reaction was to delete the message as exercise was something I avoided like the plague. But somehow I read a little more and noticed that there was an event for beginners. Inexplicably, I was drawn to it. My mind started working overtime - was this a sign of what I was supposed to do?

I was so desperate to show Zoe I could change that I called her into the room, where I struck a deal with her: I would train for the race if she would put up with me for a couple more months. She looked at me with amazement. I suppose she could see in my eyes what I had seen in her eyes, that something was different. She could see that I was serious about this.

There was of course the little matter of me stopping drinking. Obviously I could not start training whilst I was still drinking. Cold turkey for me? Could I do it? Having drunk enough to 'float the navy' over the weekend, I was probably still pissed when I agreed to all this. So the first day without booze was a little easier than normal as there was still alcohol in my system. This got me through the day at work. All I had to do was to get past the pub on the way home and I was starting a new life.

Easier said than done. The pub had become my second home – my sanctuary after a hard day. Finding strength from somewhere, but all the time doubting my resolve, I switched my phone off and drove a different way home. It was a turning point. The next test that day was the anticipation of the usual call from the lads asking if I was going to be in the pub. Never one to miss a drinking session, if I had received such a call I would have found it impossible to say no. I ignored my phone. 'You could just go in for one' was my default thought. This was never the reality. Even when I only had enough money for one drink it was never enough. I would often attach myself to a group of people in the hope that they would buy me a drink.

I managed to get home and felt an unusual calm about me. This was it! Simple! I had cracked it. I had successfully climbed the first hurdle. I had broken the cycle of work, pub, work, pub... Zoe looked at me to gauge whether I had been drinking. I don't think she could believe that I was actually sober after a day at work. I went upstairs and got my shorts and t-shirt on. 'Here goes,' I thought, 'how hard can it be?'

I remember feeling quite proud of myself for about the first one hundred yards. I was running, but then reality set in and my pace slowed. This wasn't fun, this was torture. I had made a mistake. Running was not the answer! Running until you make yourself sick was something you would see boxers or top sportsmen do, pushing their bodies to the limit, until breaking point. For them, this was

simply the rough with the smooth, but for me, I thought I was about to die. Seriously, I thought I was dying. Every foot-fall on the hard pavement made me feel closer to death. I was literally violently sick and shaking. My heart felt as though it was about to pop out of my chest and my head was throbbing. This was it for sure - I was taking my last breath.

Feelings of embarrassment started to come to the surface. I was a fat horrible mess who couldn't run. I was a bloody horrible drunk who was fit for nothing. 'As soon as I finish I am going straight to the pub!' I thought.

Though I had only run half a mile of the familiar neighbourhood streets, I was in a terrible state. Still, when I finished I didn't go to the pub. Not just because I thought I was dying or because I couldn't get off the bathroom floor, but because I got the feeling I was going to get more and more of. It was a feeling of something I came to understand was happiness.

I hadn't been happy for almost twenty years. I'd had moments of laughter and of relief but not true happiness. Even at the birth of my children there was too much anxiety and excitement to just feel happy. The ideal of pure happiness, for me, is when you forget everything for a moment and your mind is still and it is just about you and a feeling of inner peace within your own mind. You are happy with 'you'. Now that might seem a little selfish, but I truly believe that this is the key to my recovery. I needed to be happy with me. I needed to forget what others thought and concentrate on me. The man I believed I was. I needed to even forget about my family troubles...work...money...the past and concentrate on making myself better. The problem with the drink was *my* problem. This was, and still is, about me.

From that initial run, a new me was born and my life changed beyond recognition. I began to lose the weight I had gained during my heavy drinking. I had topped the scales at eighteen and a half stone with a forty-four inch waist, but after about a year of training

I had managed to get down to thirteen stone. It wasn't easy. But the feeling of happiness that came from the run, the euphoria of happiness and satisfaction and pride, made me do it and stick to it. No feeling of fleeting drunken relief could match this new high.

There was a lot of pain but soon I was running almost every day and I began running in more competitive races. I was getting to the stage where I was comfortably doing ten kilometres and was starting to tackle half marathons. Had anyone told me this was possible at an earlier stage, I would have laughed. I never believed this was something I could have ever achieved. Yet I managed to complete the Newark Half Marathon in the August of 2006 just five months after starting running.

Achievements like this seem trivial – everyone knows a runner. But these milestones of achievement were crucial markers on my road to recovery. Without these seemingly trivial achievements you can never move forward. When you are drunk you never move forward; you are either always moving in reverse or you are not moving at all. Your life goes nowhere for long periods and you can never see that changing. By running ten kilometres you can then set a plan to go further or faster and you can chart the progress. It gives you direction and stops the endless drifting.

Running also allows you time to think without any other interruptions. Spending my time in the pub never allowed me any time to think or make decisions by myself. There was always someone offering their opinion or their often misguided advice. When I was running I would often go over things in my head and forget that I was running at all – Where had things gone wrong? How could I have hurt people I loved so much? How was I going to change even more? How was I going to redeem myself and make things right with my family? I had a lot of running to do.

Thinking about change is one thing and I found this quite helpful in the early days, but I would often be going over so much in my head that nothing ever seemed to be resolved. I took to writing

things down as soon as I got back from a run. Actually writing it down acted like a contract for me. A contract between me and sobriety. If I wrote it down I would inevitably act on it. Also, if I spoke about it or told someone what I was thinking then I would always do my best to do it. This was to prove I was serious about doing this and that I was serious about making amends.

One of these ideas was to try to help others. It occurred to me that as I wasn't a natural athlete, if I could do it, anyone could. I therefore set about finding out how I could become a personal trainer. Incredible! Me, the once eighteen stone alcoholic, a personal trainer! But I wanted to pass on my experience to others. In my mind I was the ideal candidate for the job – a real life example of change. I wanted to inspire change in others, too!

So, at the end of 2007, I started to train as a personal trainer, finally getting my qualifications in May 2008. This has enabled me to pass on my knowledge to so many people, some of whom have had alcohol issues.

Another of the things I had written down was to one day run a marathon. I have now completed over twenty marathons and ultra-marathons. The highlight was completing the Marathon des Sables in April 2010. The Marathon des Sables is a one hundred and fifty five mile race through the Sahara Desert. Daytime temperatures reached 50 degrees and we had to carry our own food and equipment to last the week (11kg backpack). The longest stage was day four, which was fifty-five miles. It took me almost twenty-one hours to complete the stage. When I crossed the finish line I was asked how I felt and I replied instantly that 'I was proud to be a human being and I hadn't felt like that for a long time'. The emotion of recovering from alcoholism came flooding through and I cried for two hours solid whilst watching the sun come up over the desert.

My recovery is continuing and I will always face a daily battle with temptation. Things are easier now and I am committed to changing people's perception of my illness and of addiction in

general. Whilst listening to a race brief someone asked: 'Why are we doing this?' - this being a forty-five mile cross-country run. The race director's reply was fantastic and it is now a very special mantra I live my life by. He said: 'You are a focused individual who wants to achieve.'

I just want someone to help my son!

Anne

My youngest son was twelve years old when he started having psychological problems. One day his elder brother told me that he was going to go to school by himself from then on rather than going with his younger brother. This was because his brother was being difficult – first he wouldn't run for the bus if it was already at the bus stop before they got to it. Then he started refusing to stop at the bus stop because he thought that people in the queue were watching him.

At this point we just thought that my youngest son was being troublesome, because otherwise he was a generally normal child. It's just that there were isolated incidents, little things happening. Then he started missing school altogether and not going out of the house. First it was the odd day and then it progressed until we couldn't get him to school at all. My brother would help by taking him to school in his car but by the time he got back home, my son would be back too.

I phoned the school to tell them that I was having problems getting him to school. They sent out the Education Welfare Officer to see us and they offered him home tuition. But then he wasn't happy with the people who came to support him and eventually refused to let them in. After that we were promised great things in terms of helping him and that all these people would come out to see him, but it never happened. A psychologist did visit in order to diagnose him. He said that my son had all sorts of problems as by this time he wasn't going out anywhere. But nothing else happened after that. When he was thirteen years old he started going out again. But this was now after dark and he was coming back at all hours. He usually left alone and walked, but once I heard a car pick him up. One night he went off but soon came back, saying that the aliens were after him in a spaceship.

I did wonder if he was taking cannabis but it was hard to tell as he smoked anyway. Then one night he asked me to take him to a friend's house but to pull up two houses away and wait for him. He came back clutching a little square wrapped thing in his hand. That's when I knew for sure. I had dropped him off at a dealer's house.

A bit later on he stopped his night-time wanderings and would just disappear for half an hour now and again. Apart from that he was always in the house, by himself. My son was always helpful, though, despite the fact that he was acting strangely. He helped with the housework, and one day I came home from work and he surprised me with a meal that he had cooked for me himself. He never asked me for a lift again, after that first occasion, because I had made it clear to him at the time that I knew it was drugs and I knew what he was up to.

His behaviour continued to be strange for the next couple of years. Sometimes he would clutch a black bin-liner, holding it as though he was holding a solid metal object, and he would spit into it. Or he would look out through the curtains holding a bat, which he said was to protect us.

My son had a difficult early childhood because, until we eventually escaped, his Dad had beaten both me and the children for a number of years. One day he announced to me that he was going away to visit his older sister. But when I asked him when he had spoken to her to make the arrangements he replied that he had spoken to her in his head. This kind of thing went on until, out of the blue one day, he said to me and my brother, 'They don't want me to die yet.'

'Who doesn't?' we asked.

'The aliens,' he said. 'I'm too valuable to them.'

I phoned his community psychiatric nurse and said that I thought we needed help. They came out to see him and injected him with some medication. He then continued to receive a monthly injection. When he turned sixteen he was officially released from full time education. At that point I decided to move house in order to take

him away from the environment that he was living in. As far as I was aware he was still taking cannabis, maybe getting it when he went out briefly to get his cigarettes late in the evenings.

After the move he seemed a lot calmer at first. On the day that we moved house he was totally spaced out, sitting on the doorstep and staring up at the stars. But now he started getting out and about a bit more, walking the dogs. He even started contemplating getting a job. But two weeks later things suddenly went drastically wrong. First of all he told his brother to stop talking to his friends about him because he could hear it through his head. Then I came home from work one day at teatime and I saw that his brother was standing by the front door holding a big metal pole. He himself was sitting on the ground holding a smaller bar. I was looking away whilst I parked up so I did not notice that he had disappeared from the door. But as I walked away from my car I suddenly heard my car windows being smashed behind me. My oldest son yelled at me to call the police and I walked into the house and did as he said.

We both sat in the house waiting for the police to arrive. While we were sitting there we noticed that there were lots of scraps of paper scattered all over. These had some very bizarre things written on them. When the police came they took him away for questioning and then I got a phone call to tell me that he had been sectioned.

He was sent to a psychiatric hospital in Manchester. As I lived in Featherstone at the time it was a long way to travel, but I did manage to visit him twice a week. He was released to a psychiatric hospital in Wakefield a month later and after three weeks they let him out. But three months later he bought himself a Rambo knife, saying again that it was for protection. His psychologist told him to hand it over to me for safe keeping but he refused. The police then came and raided the house and took him back to hospital. This time he stayed for two years and spent his eighteenth birthday there.

This was followed by him going to a mental health rehabilitation unit, and then he tried living alone. He couldn't handle living alone,

though, so came back to live with me. My son was now in his twenties. He stayed with me for two years. He wasn't bothered about taking cannabis any more although he did drink a bit too much. He was difficult to live with and we also wanted him to learn to live independently. Therefore after the two years we found him a flat. He seemed to like it and he settled in okay. Things were alright for the next year.

But then a year ago he went to his sister's for a holiday and life since then has been a nightmare. He started taking cannabis again while he was on the holiday and has been on street drugs ever since then. When he came back I found out that this had happened and told his psychiatric support team. He was then tested and the results came back positive for other drugs as well as cannabis. He is also on his official psychiatric medication and they warned him that the street drugs will mess him up.

We all know that he never wants to go back to hospital. Yet no-one seems able to talk any sense into him and his drug use has escalated. First he was taking khat, which he said wasn't a drug as his friends had told him it was plant food. Then he moved onto another form of amphetamine, whizz. This is now his main drug of choice.

My son is a six foot tall lad, recently turned twenty-six years old, but his weight is down to nine stone. He looks bony, his legs are like sticks, and his face is sunken-looking. He's got a good-sized set of reasonable clothes but he wears the same outfit for weeks on end. This is full of cigarette burns and it smells. He jumps around a lot and shouts.

He will have an argument with an object, such as a security light, a lunch box. He'll even look at a wall and shout at it. He punches holes in his doors and his walls and he walks aimlessly. He'll walk three miles from his home to my home sometimes twice a day, even though we both live on the same bus route. He isn't washing and his sink is covered with dirty pots and pans and his worktops are not wiped down.

He is also vulnerable and people are taking advantage of him. Dealers turn up at his flat and give him his stuff. Then when he isn't quite with it they take his money. One day I turned up at his flat. He was acting strange and he had two friends with him so I left. But then I felt uneasy and went back five minutes later. I bumped into him and the two so-called friends coming out of his door. They were carrying his television and his digital set-top box. I said, 'Where are you going with that?'

'He's sold it to us,' they answered. They denied that it was for drugs but they were lying.

Another time I went to his flat and his door was wide open although he was in the bathroom. You could see straight into the sitting room from his front door and his money was just lying on the settee. Anyone passing by could have easily taken advantage.

Once he phoned me and asked if I had taken his post office card which he uses to draw his benefit from the post office cash point machine. I went round and he told me he had left it on a stool by the wall. I asked him who else had been in that day and he told me that a friend had called. Then he told me that when he had gone into the kitchen this friend had been searching his flat for money and rummaging in the settee. But he hadn't known how to tell him to stop. I asked him if this friend knew his pin number and he didn't answer. Sure enough all his money got drawn out of his account. He was left with no money that week because he couldn't prove that it wasn't him who had done the withdrawal.

A neighbour of his has even stopped me in the street and told me that he has heard my son shouting at people, and asked me if he is vulnerable. At first I thought he meant that my son was shouting at nobody, but no. The neighbour says he has been shouting at people who are actually in the flat. He now keeps his eye on the situation and lets the support team know about it.

I go down to my son's flat at least once a week with my Hoover to clean it up for him. I work full time so, other than that, I just pop in when I have time between shifts. He walks over to mine, usually

when he runs out of money or when he has fallen out with his brother, who lives near him. When he calls it can be at all hours of the day and night. He might turn up at eight in the morning when I am just leaving for work, or at five in the morning, or at any time after midnight. When he comes in he first raids the cupboard for food and helps himself to a huge bowl of cereal, followed by half a loaf of bread, toasted. Then he comes and sits down and talks to himself, swearing and cursing and arguing with whoever or whatever it is that he is visualising at the time.

I just don't know what avenues are open for doing anything about the situation. No-one seems to want to help. Every time I think that there is a glimmer of hope from the professional services, like a proper review meeting happening, the door gets shut again. I hear no more about it and nothing happens. I am at the end of my tether. Sometimes I will drop him off back at home after he has called round to mine at some unearthly hour of the morning. Then I drive home crying my eyes out and I want to just drive my car straight into a brick wall. I feel so frustrated sometimes. Why won't he turn his life around? Why isn't someone there to help him?

His life is in a complete and utter rut. He has got no real friends and his life is aimless and unstructured. He expresses an interest in going to college every time a new prospectus comes out but then is unable to follow it through. The first thing he does is to get out of bed, usually after ten in the morning, unless there is something wrong and he has been up all night. He tends to sleep curled up on the sofa in the sitting room because it is the warmest room in the flat. It has a storage heater that works. Once he is up he goes round to his brother's, who takes him to get his cigarettes and buys him a bacon sandwich. Then he goes back home and goes back to sleep or listens to music on his portable CD player. He breaks any televisions or DVD players that he has before long. There is a television shaped hole in the wall from the last one he broke. He hasn't really got a life in fact. It is just an existence.

I JUST WANT SOMEONE TO HELP MY SON

Until a year ago, before he started back on the street drugs, my son was reasonably clean and tidy and he fed and washed himself. He is a capable person and he is fairly bright considering what little schooling he has had. He is very knowledgeable about things he is interested in, like planets and stars, and he has Maths, English and IT certificates. He can also be very charming. I want to see him get back on track and to have a good life.

I think his Dad's violence affected him the worst of any of us because he was the youngest. The violence started shortly before he was born so he grew up seeing me and his brother and sister being beaten, and being subjected to it himself. He grew up knowing nothing else. He visibly relaxed when we finally got away from his Dad. Unfortunately I was then physically ill for a couple of years because one of the beatings had damaged my back. I needed strong painkillers and had to rely on his sister a lot to help bring him up. So it hasn't been an easy start in life for him. I would love to see him have the chance to get a better quality of life. If the street drugs problem could be resolved he would still need help, but while he is taking them he is beyond even helping himself.

I feel that the system has let my son down. I do not think that he would be using street drugs if he had been helped by the system more. He appears to be using street drugs as medication. He is terrified of being sent back to psychiatric hospital and uses them to keep himself together, but his behaviour is becoming so erratic that he risks the drugs having the opposite effect to what he intends.

I really love him and because I love him I can see the potential that he has got. I know what he is capable of, and what he can do, and what he can put his mind to. But I can't do any more. When I ask for help I am treated like an over-anxious mother and it is not taken seriously. Or I am told that it is nothing to do with me as it is up to him. But I just want what is best for my son. I think that he deserves to get back on track and he needs the help because he is not able to do it by himself. I just want someone to help my son!

DARREN & AUNT

But this is something else

Darren & his aunt

No one should underestimate the difficulties of life on drugs. Life's difficulties can be bad enough for everyone but living with a mind controlled by drugs – this is something else!

Darren is my sister's boy and being just an auntie you are one step removed. I have not had to cope with the kind of problems and pain over the years that he and his mother suffered due to his addiction to heroin. But I want to share my experiences and Darren's story because there is a message of hope in what has happened to us. It might just help someone to understand more about what is going on in their own or a loved one's life.

Although I've never suffered the agony of addiction, I have had a taste of the powerlessness and pain that addicts can suffer. My one experience with drugs happened some years ago. Taking drugs that affected my mind was my doctor's idea when I was suffering from deep grief, stress and depression. I was depressed after the sudden death of my mother and one of my brothers. On top of this I was stressed at work, I was living in a community that was suffering from the loss of the mining industry and I also had other health problems. I've never been in that state before or since, thank God, but at the time I didn't know what to expect.

My doctor referred me to a consultant psychiatrist, but being over busy and thinking I was just an attention-seeking middle aged woman, probably going through the menopause, she left me in the care of a new registrar from India. I was prescribed a drug by mistake and I obediently followed his instructions for over a year. This drug caused anxiety and tortured me with sleep deprivation. These effects led me to the point of suicide, not knowing that the medication was inducing the symptoms I was suffering. Years later in court the registrar proved for me and the judge that he had been unable to read English, did not know what the referral letter said and had no idea what the drugs he prescribed were for.

When I went to him again because the drugs had triggered suicidal thoughts, he doubled the dose. Later my husband persuaded him to admit me into hospital for assessment and safety but he still didn't realise how ill I was. My disturbed mind was possessed by the compulsion to commit suicide and drove me to believe that suicide was the best thing for everyone. I walked out of the hospital ward and jumped from a footbridge into moving traffic.

My experience of the extreme effects of drugs in driving me to hell mentally, physically and emotionally was relatively short-lived, but I was given a glimpse of how the mind can be destroyed and addicts can suffer. I was fortunate; I came back from the brink of tragedy, back from the dead. I woke up in hospital several weeks after the suicide attempt and the twelve-hour operation when they tried to put me back together. Unconscious during that time in intensive care, I had not needed medication for the mind. Once awake I was no longer under the influence of the medication that I'd been prescribed and my mind was my own again, albeit shattered and inside a broken body.

Thus I experienced the extreme effects of mind blowing drugs that take away your ability to think outside the compulsive, self-destructive drives that are at work in the brain. I experienced the excruciating pain but only for a few short months. I was lucky compared to many addicts because I was not addicted and I gained control of my mind once I stopped taking the drug. But I did experience the trauma and misunderstanding that can destroy relationships. I have known the resulting family break-up, the loss, the guilt and the grief that leaves victims isolated and lonely, with their whole lives in a mess. I'd seen the hell that is the inevitable destiny of many druggies, but without the long-term prison of addiction.

I think it was the understanding and strength I had shown in fighting for recovery that brought my nephew Darren to ask for my help when he had reached rock bottom and wanted to break free

from drugs. It was totally unexpected when Darren rang and asked if he could come and talk to me. He is a very special nephew and I've always thought the world of him but he wasn't the kind of chap to come asking for help. Although he can be outgoing and has plenty of friends, he is rather a private person. Some might say he tends to play things close to his chest, that he is thoughtful or rather deep. Anyway he is definitely independent and his own man, choosing to go his own way from an early age. In some respects he is secretive and this may be related to his drug addition and that part of his life that was never talked about.

I'd known for years that Darren took drugs as in the early days he admitted that he smoked drugs at weekends. He told me openly, 'I smoke it to relax and have a good time, it's just like others might have a few pints at the weekend with their mates. I like to hang out with friends at dance music festivals and join in with the drugs scene.'

When he came to me for help he said,

'I smoked cannabis casually for years and thought they would never get me onto the hard stuff, heroin, but they did. They are very clever, very cruel and they don't leave you alone until they've got you feeding their greed. They want you in their power so you're left at their mercy, making them rich by constantly having to feed your habit.'

I was worried about Darren for a long time before he came for help. Apart from being there for his mum, my sister, there wasn't much I could do until he wanted help. I once gave him money to pay off some debts so that he could go to Australia when a long-term relationship with a girlfriend broke up. His escape to the other side of the world wasn't immediately successful in getting him away from drugs because, as he says,

'They are everywhere, oh so easy to get and so hard to resist.'

In Australia it was just as easy to get access to what he craved and the habit demanded; it was just a different group of addicted (so-called) friends. However, it was the beginning of a new life and

finding the girl who supported him through the slow climb out of the hell that drugs had dragged him into.

Darren met his new girlfriend when he was working as a builder. He is one of the 'world's most skilful bricklayers', at least he says so and I wouldn't argue, I've never seen one better. His partner is an architect who is not just stunningly gorgeous, but a capable and determined young woman. She fell for Darren and has never let his addiction get between them. When his visa expired and he had to leave Australia she followed him back to England and they set up home together.

Throughout all the years of struggling with drugs, Darren has always managed to hold down a job. I can't honestly say he turned up for work every day but he was never short of jobs, if he actually managed to get himself on site. He is so hardworking and skilful that his misdemeanours are quickly overlooked. He is such a lovable lad that most people who know him quickly forgive the trouble he can cause. But his mother and family did put up with quite a lot from Darren at times and things were getting to be more than his loved-ones could endure, when he came knocking on my door.

Darren was accompanied by his devoted girlfriend the day he desperately asked me to help him sort out his life and get clean of drugs. Together they were prepared to seek help but we all knew Darren's mind had to do the work of fighting the addiction and he needed specialist help. He said he was praying to be normal and he realised he was wasting all their hard-earned money for the substance that was robbing him of what he wanted most, a normal life.

At least now he was able to reach out but he knew it was so easy to slip back because drugs, such as heroin, have a terrible grip and wield power over any victim. The pushers and the cravings pursue their victims relentlessly. Darren said that it was all he thought about and constantly his mind was fixed on getting the next fix. It was the most powerful thing in his life, driving his every action, his

sole motivation, his desire above all else.

But slowly he had become sick of the feeling of powerlessness, tired of the useless, destructive, mindless waste of his life. He said he had caused so much pain to those he loved and had got to the very bottom of the pit. He said he was lucky to have been shown a better life and had managed to work out that he could only get to that better life if he was prepared to do the enormous work of change. He said he realised that he had got to the very end of his tether and somehow he saw that he had to change, he'd worked out it was up to him. He was scared that he couldn't do it alone and was reaching out for help. I took him to Turning Point because I didn't know what else to do, I didn't have any answers, I just knew he needed professional help.

I think that Darren turned to me because he knew I wouldn't turn my back on him, he knew that I loved him and would not turn him away. I also suspect he thought that if all else failed he could probably get the money for the next fix from me. Maybe he also knew I was strong because I too had suffered and I knew something of the immense power drugs can have over one's mind.

Darren knew I had experienced that overwhelming destructive grip of pain and terror that is inescapable when powerful drugs invade the mind and take over. I too had been possessed by chemicals in the brain that had driven me to sheer hopelessness. It had been for me a pain far worse than the hell of physical agony that I suffered when my broken body was crushed so badly in the fall. The mental hell and driving compulsion to suicide was far more unbearable than the later physical torture from my injuries that initially required I take morphine to survive. Therefore by the time Darren came to me for help I had some small understanding of the suffering and terrible tyranny his mind was under.

My own years of struggling to recover, relearning how to walk and fourteen major operations to rectify the damage, only served to make me strong. My wonderful surgeon became a friend and he

once told me that the bone that regenerates where the breaks have been is much stronger than the bone around it. That is how I see myself, as one who has suffered and will always be damaged but who is also able to be a strong member of her community. Suffering helps you to find your true strength. My ability to endure seems to be quite considerable and for that gift I am immensely grateful. I try now to help others where I can.

Darren knew I could be strong for him and that I knew how to contact people to help him in his fight for recovery. By the time he came to me he really did want to break free. He was sick of his situation and at last understood that he had to be the one to make the decision that he wanted to crawl out of the pit into a better life. He says he was lucky because he saw that a better life was possible and he had a partner, a mother, a family and good friends beside him.

So far it has worked for Darren and he escaped back to Australia after getting free of the grip of heroin. Last year he married his girlfriend and they started a wonderful new life together in the sunshine. He still says he knows he'll always be fighting addiction but as the years go by it's not so powerful and his hope and joy become stronger.

I believe that most addicts are the victims of drugs and so are their families. When we think about people who are addicted to drugs I think that we should remember that their minds are out of control and they need us to help them recover. I think it is very difficult for us to understand what it is like being inside a mind that is disturbed by chemicals. Most of us can make rational decisions most of the time and don't easily see why others do not do the same. But I know that anyone's mind can be out of control if it is affected by chemicals. So no-one should think, 'It can't happen to me!'

Darren once told me that he would like to tell all young people thinking about taking drugs to, 'Be afraid, be very afraid' – because

it's not something to play with; it is so very powerful in its ability to destroy your life.

Here is Darren's story in his own words.

I'm an addict and always will be. I fight it everyday but it gets easier. Cigarettes and alcohol came at an early age. I started smoking because I thought it looked cool — I was young and oh so wrong. I started drinking at an early age too, but it wasn't until I was about 16 that a few of us started smoking cannabis. A good friend got a job in London working for a music paper and he had been introduced to cannabis by his flat-mate. Then when he came back home to visit he brought some for us to try. The first time I ever had cannabis I went white and was very sick, but that didn't stop me as I liked the feeling it gave me, it made me feel relaxed. We then started buying cannabis on a regular basis locally.

With my friend working for a music paper in London he got passes to a lot of soul music weekends. They were called soul weekenders, but dance music was starting to come through, and with the dance music the drug ecstasy became available. I'll never forget that feeling from my first E: I was scared. 'Could it kill me? What was I going to be like on it?' There were loads of things running through my mind but I didn't take mine when everyone took theirs. I held it in my hand for an hour because I was scared to take it. The only reason I swallowed it was because I was paranoid from smoking cannabis and I thought a bouncer had seen me with it, so the best way to not get caught was to eat it, so I did. Honestly, I thought it was the best thing I'd done with my life. I now think that was one of the worst things I've done with my life because this is where everything started to change.

I started taking E's on a regular basis, then having speed, LSD and cocaine now and again, only because we couldn't

afford cocaine much as at that point it was expensive. I started living for the weekends, travelling up and down the country partying. Everything was great until one Sunday I woke to the news that a good friend had died taking ecstasy. You would think that would calm a lot of people down but it had the opposite effect: the people close to him went off the rails, not a bit, but a lot. More drugs became available as more of us travelled around meeting people from other cities. This carried on for a few years.

One Saturday night at the age of twenty-two I was introduced to heroin. I was someone who thought heroin would not be my thing. I was a happy upper sort of person. I smoked weed to come down from pills and powder but this stuff just blew me away. I used it on a weekend to come off the other drugs but, as we all know, anyone who has had heroin, 'Brown', 'Horse', 'Smack', will tell you, there is no such thing as a weekend junkie; the weekend turns into seven days. I was one of many people that thought it couldn't happen to me but it did. The first time I knew I was addicted to heroin I went to Amsterdam on a trip and I woke up feeling ill, stomach cramps, being sick, sneezing, chicken skin, kicking, then a friend pointed out I was rattling and the only way to stop it was to get more.

This carried on for a few years until my girlfriend worked it out and wanted me to get help. I went to the doctor's after working up the courage to tell him. I'd never admitted it to anyone, not even to myself. Me, a junkie? Not me! I thought. The day I walked into the doctor's and told him I was a heroin addict is the day I needed and wanted help. The reaction I got was a joke. He turned round and told me he would put me on the list to go to Springfield Mount Centre in Leeds, not, 'Yes take these once a day to help you withdraw.' I was really annoyed with him as I was there for help, there and then, not in a month when they were ready to help me.

Once I got on a programme I got some negative reactions from lots of professional people. One thing that stuck in my throat was that when I went to pick up my daily prescription I was told I couldn't have it till half-past ten, Why? I still don't understand that! Why couldn't I be treated like a normal person and get it when the shop opens? Surely they make them up in advance but they keep you waiting around and that sometimes made me laugh. I thought on many occasions, 'It's faster getting drugs off the street than out of a pharmacy.' I was working at the time and I'd taken time out to get help and get to the chemist's but they wanted to punish me by making me wait about and that wasn't helpful at all. I suppose they thought we were all messing around all day so we could be made to wait for a few hours till they decided to serve us.

I moved to another country to get away from heroin, to the other side of the world to get away from heroin, but it's everywhere. It doesn't matter where you go, if you want it, a junkie can find it.

I eventually worked it out in my own head how to tackle it. It has to be one day at a time. If you can't get through the day take it an hour at a time, and if not an hour, a minute at a time. I still wake up some mornings wanting it but it passes.

I say to myself, 'Why do I need to pay to feel normal? It's free to be normal. Some people have no choice and can't get better. Cancer, for example. You can do it.'

So I treated myself, everyday for about a year; I bought myself an ice cream. I'm now addicted to ice creams but it's not a bad thing to be addicted to.

Losing my way

Leanne Dobson

When I was younger I thought I knew it all. I was in foster care at fourteen until I was sixteen and a half. It was some of the best years of my life. I was big-headed and I always got what I wanted. My social worker told me that I could get a flat when I was sixteen, so that's what I wanted. My parents didn't want me to and my foster parents wanted me to stay and go to college and maybe even university, but I knew what was best for me, right?

I moved out and started at the local sixth form. It didn't last long. I got a job and dropped my education. I started going out all the time. My flat was the regular place for everyone to come to on a weekend. It wasn't long before I was smoking cannabis and taking amphetamine. I loved it. I was losing weight. I had gone from a size 18/20 to a size 10 in two and a half months. Everyone treated me differently, especially the lads. I started seeing one lad who was four years older than me. I had liked him for years. It wasn't long before we were taking anything we could get our hands on. We were clubbing every weekend. I didn't see my friends any more, replacing them instead with ecstasy. I was loving it. I had a boyfriend that I adored, I would do anything for. What could go wrong?

One day I arrived home from work and my boyfriend, the love of my life, was sat in my living room 'chasing the dragon'. I was very unhappy and kicked him out, calling him a smack head junkie. It was only a day or so later that he returned with his apologies and I took him back. It wasn't long before he was doing it again. What I didn't know was that he had been addicted to heroin before and had got himself clean. Now he was doing it again and more often. It got to the stage where I couldn't face kicking him out, because I loved him, so I said to him that if he was going to do it I wanted to know what the fuss was about. I wanted to try it. He said no at

first. I said get out of my flat then, so he passed it over and told me to do it myself; he wasn't going to do it for me. I had seen him do it enough times now that I kind of knew what I was doing. I liked it. I liked it a lot. I wouldn't let it get hold of me though. I was too strong for that. Even when I was doing it more and more I thought to myself that I was still too strong. I didn't have a problem. Then one day I heard my boyfriend talking to the man who was moving in upstairs from us. I went out to have a look and introduced myself when his girlfriend appeared from their doorway. I realised I knew her from school. We all were talking and it turned out that they were dealers. They'd been dealing heroin for ages and that is how my boyfriend knew him. That sealed it for us. We were doing it every day. Soon my wages and his weren't enough.

We needed another way to make money. We owed money left, right and centre. I hardly saw my family anymore. I missed them everyday but you don't realise the effect drugs have on your friends and family. They have to watch you wasting and destroying your life because there's nothing they can do. No-one can do anything. You have to be ready to do it yourself and you won't be ready until you hit rock bottom.

Then one day I had fallen asleep on the bus from Selby. I woke up in Leeds and as I was getting off the bus another user from the village I lived in was getting off the bus. Because I didn't have the bus fare to get home she took me shoplifting with her and taught me how to do it. I soon had my own de-tagger and I was going every day. I hated going with my boyfriend because he just wasn't bothered. I was taught to discreetly look where staff and cameras were, not to mention the undercover guards. He just wanted to do a kamikaze. I was only ever caught three times in six years and that was when I was with my boyfriend so I stopped taking him.

I became best mates with the girl who taught me how to shoplift, helping her with her kids and going 'grafting' (shoplifting) with her. Things can fall apart so easily when you have an addiction. After

twelve years of being on and off, me and my boyfriend split up. So much had happened. I moved out and got another job. It wasn't long before I heard my ex was in hospital with an abscess on his brain so soon I was at his bedside. I was so upset and blamed myself for his condition. If I hadn't left him he wouldn't have ended up in hospital. I went every day after work. We got back together and soon got back into heroin. It's like a love affair you can't end: the more it destroys you the more you want it.

I knew things were bad when I fell pregnant. My ex wasn't interested and just 'wanted rid' and his mum was just as bad. The only person who asked me what I wanted was my dealer. I sat and thought about what I was doing. I was pumping myself full of drugs and I was killing my baby myself. I thought I knew what was best but didn't want to face it so I took more gear to numb myself. I finally went into hospital for the termination and took plenty of gear in with me. I thought I was ready until I came round from the anaesthetic. I was in recovery for a bit and when I was taken back to my room I had more gear to numb the pain of what I'd done. It took years to realise I'd done the right thing. I couldn't look after myself and my boyfriend, never mind a baby.

We soon split up for good and I moved to Pontefract to be closer to my family. I soon went looking for the heroin again. The more I thought about what I'd lost the more gear I took, not realising I'd lost it through the gear. I saw what I was doing to my family but that wasn't enough to make me stop.

I finally got my own place in Pontefract. Then I sank to new lows. I knew I was okay looking for a smack head, so I used that. I used to lead people on to get money out of them so I could keep up my drug habit. I needed the gear. It numbed everything. I soon got one fella wrapped so tightly round my finger that I saw him on a daily basis. I never slept with him. I just lied to him and made him think he had a chance with me and was happy to keep giving me money.

It took me ages but I got sick of the drugs and got myself into treatment. I met another guy, an ex-boxer and he'd never done drugs and he hated them. He knew about me because he went out with my best friend's sister. We got together quickly, me thinking I was ready, but I wasn't. He was a binge drinker. Vodka was his choice and he wasn't very nice with it. I had been doing well until he told me one night when he was drunk that I was a no-good druggie who would never amount to anything and the only reason I was living with him was for sex. I had been a heroin addict for nearly ten years and I'd never felt so low. I told him what he had said the next day. He denied all knowledge; 'it was the drink' was his excuse. That gave me the excuse I needed to go back to my beloved – heroin. He said it, so it must have come from somewhere.

It got to a point where my wages weren't enough. I was lying to him on a daily basis, knowing that if he found out I was doing heroin again it would be the end. I stole some money off my friends. They found out and went straight to him. I lost everything – boyfriend, house, dog, friends and my job.

This was my lowest point. I literally had nothing. I had lost it all due to me and my partner (heroin). I hated myself. It wasn't long before I started to hate the drugs.

I went to Turning Point and got myself into treatment. This is where I met Lewis, Outreach Worker for Turning Point. I was soon on Methadone. I got my family back and I am now busy with Lewis and I haven't looked back. I get regular support from my key worker and have never felt better. Lewis has got me involved in everything he is doing and I am now a service user representative. I try to help other people who have lost their way as well. I could have done anything with my life. I have GCSE's A's, B's and C's but I lost my way.

I owe a lot to my family and friends for supporting me through the hard times but without my key worker and Lewis I wouldn't be where I am now. I regularly work with Lewis on the MERLIN

LOSING MY WAY

project and go to the soup kitchens. I am also volunteering for the Saviour's Trust, who helped house me. I get stronger every day but I now know it will get easier with time. I am ashamed of some of the things I have done but I am not ashamed of being on drugs. They have made me who I am today and it's a big part of my life. I am proud I have done something about it and can help people who are trying to sort their life out.

I give everyone who has helped me a big thank you. This story is dedicated to my friends and especially my family. I hope you all understand more now. Love you all. x x x x x

DEBBIE

Letting go

Debbie

I became aware that something was wrong when my youngest son was thirteen years old. Things started going missing from the house and I realised that he was stealing. The first things he stole were a tool box and some gardening equipment, and then he stole a CD player. Eventually I had to call the police on him. He had smashed his sister's bedroom up, pulling off the blinds and pulling stuff out of the wardrobes, just generally wrecking it. Then he stole a lawnmower. It was getting horrendous so that's why I reported him to the police. When the police came they took statements from me and he had to go to court. He received a warning and a fine but his behaviour continued to be bad. He ended up being sent to a juvenile detention centre for a few months.

At the time I didn't connect his behaviour with being on drugs. I knew that drugs were around but I didn't think that my son would be using them. He had always been a very sweet, loving and affectionate little boy. I don't know whether I just didn't want to admit deep down that he might be on drugs, or whether it just didn't occur to me because I wasn't part of a circle that knew about drugs. Or whether it was because we had had other problems in the family which could also explain why he was behaving badly. It is just now, looking back, that I realise it is obvious that he was on drugs. I can even see it in his photos. He has told me that he in fact started taking drugs when he was eleven years old. My son used to go round to my next door neighbour's house regularly. Somebody once told me that people all sat round in a circle smoking at her house. But the thought that it was drugs that they were smoking never occurred to me. She seemed to be a sweet lass and she wasn't bothered about going out drinking or anything like that.

Other older lads in the street were also on drugs and he tended to like being with the grown up lads. This might have been because

his Dad and I had split up and he felt more protected with a male adult around. But I now know that one of these friends was a heroin addict. I didn't know that at the time because it would never have occurred to me back then, and I wouldn't have known how to tell who was a heroin addict or not anyway.

For the next three years, until he was sixteen, he continued to get into trouble and was in and out of court several times. He was drinking with other lads and they were sampling, certainly cannabis, and possibly glue-sniffing as well. He had also been kicked out of his high school and sent to a special school for youngsters who behaved badly. I found that experience awful. He was only young and the taxi driver who took the lads from my area to the school seemed to spend all her time shouting at them.

I was really struggling anyway. I was trying to bring up three children on my own and I began drinking heavily myself. I just wasn't coping. Their father had moved into the same street with another woman, who was supposed to have been my friend, and I was really hurting. The children were also hurt by the whole set-up. Then it got nasty. My ex and his girlfriend called the social services and reported me for not looking after the children properly.

When the social worker who visited asked about how we shared the childcare, it soon dawned on her that their father never had the children. She suggested that I ask him to help but the new girlfriend went mad about it, saying that she wasn't going to child-mind just so that I could go out. I remember the children sitting there crying because they were scared that they would be taken away. I had admitted that I was drinking in the house. But the social worker reassured me that I did not have anything to worry about there.

After a couple more visits she said that there was no need to come any more. I was doing my best for my children with what I had. They were clean, fed well and loved. I just wish that I'd had more to give them. But I was finding it hard to cope with stuff and my youngest son's behaviour was continuing to get worse.

I just didn't know what to do. When he was fourteen his Dad split up with the first girlfriend who was so hostile to childcare and my son went to live with him for a while. But then his Dad got another girlfriend who smoked cannabis in the house, and they let him smoke it too. I was furious as well when they let him have some tattoos done. Therefore I was pleased when his Dad and the girlfriend fell out and he came back to live with me.

His behaviour remained dreadful, though, and he was beginning to become quite abusive towards me. By the time he was sixteen he was experimenting with amphetamines. By then I was aware of his misuse of drugs and had known for a while. This was because other people told me that that he had offered cannabis to them.

Drugs were very much part of the culture and there was more awareness about them generally by then. It was just life around my way. It used to be a thriving mining community but now there was high unemployment and little hope. Lots of people that I knew were misusing drugs but for them it was just part of the Saturday night out. But for my son it was different. It wasn't just a night out for him but instead he was using drugs all the time. It was something that he seemed to be using to medicate himself.

I think that he finds life hard. He has tried to work a few times but he finds it difficult in social circles so he turns to drugs. He finds it hard to face past issues so he turns to drugs. He started college but found it hard to study and get his head around stuff so he turned back to drugs. He tried to get into a relationship with a girl and couldn't handle it so drugs kicked in more. Anything that pressurises him makes him agitated and he turns to drugs.

I think that drugs were my son's way of coping with all of his hurts as a child and he is basically self-medicating. He couldn't handle the struggles between me and his Dad. He couldn't handle it when he felt rejected by his Dad, for example, when his Dad would say that he couldn't call round or when he broke a promise to take him somewhere.

My son is twenty-one years old now. He is still very young and he is emotionally scarred and mixed up.

Over the last five years I have managed to build myself up and to become stronger. He still lives with me and I am prepared to be there for him. But I have got to the stage where I think that he needs to make some serious choices about his life. His behaviour has got to the stage where it is destroying his whole family, upsetting his older brother, his sister, and her daughter. And I am sick of treading on egg shells and having to act in a way that will avoid conflict, instead of being free to express myself normally.

Since he started on the amphetamines he has become unbearable at times. When he takes them he starts hallucinating, running up and down the garden and thinking that people in the street are talking about him. He starts chucking things around the bedroom. He starts hammering nails into things in order to make silly meaningless objects. When he is coming down off them he then gets nasty, punching walls and pulling doors off. Spitting at me and shouting in my face. Once he is finished he is really sorry and promises that it will not happen again. But it does.

He has tried to access some help but he never follows through with it. A typical day when he is just doing cannabis is that he gets up first thing, but because he hasn't got a job he is stuck indoors. He watches television or goes on the computer. Then he goes back to bed in the afternoon. In the evening he goes out for half an hour, maybe to one of the houses where he does his drugs. Then he comes back and goes to bed. He is trying to get a job but he has had a lot of jobs and has soon walked out of them. I fear that until he faces the problems that he has with being in social situations he will continue to have problems with working. And then his drinking lets him down in jobs too. He feels that he needs a drink in order to face the social situation but ends up showing himself up. He also finds rules at work difficult to cope with.

A typical day when he is doing amphetamines is more like a day and a night! He never goes to sleep for two or three days in fact. His life is a bit of a mess really. He still steals from me sometimes and he can still be abusive towards me. I know that I am not doing him any favours by letting things go all the time. But I haven't quite got to the place where I can honestly say, 'No more. You've got to move out'.

I just want to get it right in my heart and in my mind, and let it be solely my choice, that I make that decision to cut the apron strings. Although I know that he is not a baby, he is still a baby to me and he is vulnerable. It is scary to think that I am going to cut him loose out there, and then who knows what might happen to him?

For my own sanity I have started building relationships outside of the home. I work full time but even with being so busy I have started courses at colleges and started learning. I have educated myself about drug addiction and I feel more in control because of the knowledge that I have gained. I understand denial and I understand co-dependency.

Co-dependency is when the relatives of the addict get pulled into the same routine of everything revolving around the drugs. I am beginning to realise that there must be something wrong if my son is the only person on my mind.

I really wish that everything would change for the better, and that he would get better and have a happy life. But I have had to start thinking about my own health and life and sanity. I've got a social network now. I attend a GASPED family support group where I meet other people who have a family member with addiction problems. It is nice to meet others who understand and to talk through the difficult situations. I am also active in my local church and I am open with a few trusted friends about my family situation.

I am not caught up in my son's world as much as I used to be and I am a lot healthier for it.

My journey

Peter Hurst

Hi I am Peter, and this is my story of my life (to date). I am thirty-one years of age and I live in a tiny village called South Elmsall, near Pontefract. It's on the border between South and West Yorkshire.

My parents are called Peter and Lillian. I have three sisters, all older than myself; you could say that I am the baby of the family. Lisa is the oldest, Mandy is the middle sister and Louise is eighteen months older than myself. We all lived in the same family home from 1984 until we all started growing up and leaving home. We had a close upbringing and the home was a very happy one. We always had fun and me and my sisters were as thick as thieves. My sisters loved and still love me to bits.

Because I was the youngest it was very obvious that I was spoilt. I think there were a few reasons for this. The first one was that I was really ill as a baby and had to spend time in hospital having an operation. I was rushed into theatre to remove a blockage in my stomach. My parents thought that they were going to lose me; the doctors told my parents that I would be lucky to make it through the night. After very close observation and several weeks of intensive care I came out the other side and was able to return home. I was in and out of hospital until the age of four.

Also my mum always wanted a baby boy. She tried three times and kept giving birth to girls so when I arrived I was wrapped in cotton wool. Yes, I think that, looking in people would think that I was a spoilt brat. This is not the cause in my eyes, though, for how I behaved later in life.

I attended Carlton Road Junior and Infants School. The school was fine and had its benefits. It was just round the corner from where I lived so I sometimes used to wag it when I felt that way out. Mostly, though, I did enjoy school.

I then attended Broad Lane Middle School, which again was in close proximity of my home. It was at this school that my problems first began. The bullies – like a pack of hungry wolves they were – were horrible to me and to my close friends. The bullies tried to put us down all the time. Sometimes it got so bad, the name-calling and ganging up on one of us, that when it was my turn it felt like I had been struck by a train. It was something like a stampede of elephants trampling over me. Every single time that it happened I kept thinking no more, this can't carry on, I need to stand up to these thugs or tell someone what is happening, because it was becoming unbearable, I was getting singled out more and more. I hated going to school. When would this torture end?

This went on for quite a while and sometimes I didn't bother going to school because I knew what was coming for me when I got there. Finally I got caught not going to school and I got into a lot of trouble at home. I got so upset that I finally blabbed all to my parents. It happened to be the best thing that I could have done. Because I found the courage to tell my parents I was being bullied things started to get better almost immediately.

I moved to a new school and it was a fresh start. My new school was called Moorthorpe Middle School. For the first time in a long while things were going well. I had got rid of the bullies and I thought that all the evil in my life was finally over and done with. I was starting to do well at school, enjoying my life again and feeling safe and secure. It was a nice feeling.

Soon afterwards two lads, who were cousins, moved to my new school. They were called Darren and Andrew. Once again they tried to make life hard for me, picking on me, pushing me around, calling me names and hitting me. I must have one of those faces that says pick on me. Maybe it was because I was mollycoddled at home that I was soft. This time, however, I was not budging. I suppose you can say that I was being stubborn. But to be honest with you I really didn't care. There was no way on

earth that I was going to let bullies fracture my mind, body and soul again. It was just not happening.

One day we were all stood in the playground and these two thugs started on me. I don't know what came over me. I don't know what it was but something inside me just flipped out. I blew my top and I fought them one by one. This was immense relief, to say the least. I had finally stood up to the bullies. I thought that I could stop feeling empty, soiled but most of all scared. That was when I made the decision that these bullies would deter me no more – never! This was an amazing feeling.

It was at High School, which was called Minsthorpe Community College that I finally really started to enjoy school life, especially in my first year. I had a good circle of friends. I tried hard with my studies and got my head down. I got a glowing report that first year and my parents were really proud of me.

It wasn't until the next year that things started to go wrong in my life yet again. I made a new circle of friends (Well, I can't really call them friends – I will call them acquaintances.) The people I was now mixing with were into different things rather than riding bikes and playing out on the street. They were into drugs.

It started with spliffs and bongs. Basically I was just getting smashed every night with my acquaintances and then going home, going straight to bed and sleeping the effects off. I was fifteen years of age at the time and doing spliffs and bongs was an everyday thing for about two and a half years. The time just slipped by, as did my studies at school. I lost my old circle of friends and lost myself in this activity.

I was then introduced to the drugs, whizz and ecstasy. Taking these drugs, especially ecstasy, made me feel really good, the feeling of warmth and excitement fulfilled me for hours and hours. I knew inside that it was not a good thing to be doing but I enjoyed it and I wasn't harming anyone, was I? I loved being under the influence. It took me away from real life to a special place which was harmony.

At the age of eighteen I came face to face with the ultimate evil, the devil himself. This is when I first tried heroin. Oh the feeling of immortality, the feeling of being wrapped in cotton wool! Surely this feeling couldn't be real, could it? Just by taking this little bit of powder! But it was. This was a curse, my curse because I loved it. This was the best feeling I had ever had in my entire life.

It wasn't until four or five months down the line that I started to realise that I had a serious problem, but if I am quite honest with you, at this point I wasn't really concerned. I had a job which at the time was paying for my habit and I was living at home. I think that I was in pre-contemplation. God knows how I was getting to work and functioning properly, but I was. God knows how no-one found out that I was using heroin either, well not in the short term anyway.

At the age of nineteen I met a girl called Penny. Things seemed to hit off very quickly. Penny was twenty-one and she had three children. A lot of people said that it would be too much for me as I had never had a serious girlfriend before, never mind looking after kids too. But being as naïve and stubborn as I am I just did my own thing and moved in with her. I used to work and look after her kids and use gear too. Penny had a brother, Danny, who I later found out was also on gear. We started using together and before too long we started robbing. At first Penny didn't know about my addiction but eventually she found out. It wasn't as bad as I thought that it would be. She was quite understanding but very upset. She wanted us to stay together but I couldn't handle it. I didn't need the hassle, I just wanted to use again. Penny had too much baggage. I decided to go back home. I felt quite emotional because I did have feelings for this girl but the power of my addiction was much greater.

Back home I felt a sense of relief. Like the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders. I could use in peace. I knew that this feeling and this life was false but I lived in my own little bubble, I think. Nothing mattered, just the next fix.

I eventually lost my job and at this point I was up shit creek without a paddle. I had a heroin addiction and now no legitimate funds to feed my addiction. I knew my mum's pin number for her bank account so I was stealing money from my parents now to feed my addiction. After a few weeks my parents bank account was nearly empty. I suppose I felt a little guilty deep down but nowhere near enough to stop doing what I was doing.

My parents eventually found out about my secret other life and after a lot of ranting and raving they forgave me. They tried to get me off it and they succeeded. I did my first ever rattle at home. God, it was horrendous. The experience is one that I would choose to forget. People talk about climbing the walls, well I was climbing the ceiling. All I wanted to do is to make my escape and score but this was impossible. I was locked in, all windows and doors were locked and there was no way out. It was just like being in a prison cell. Doing a rattle is agony, the stomach cramps, the shivers, the vomiting. These are just some of the symptoms.

But I must say that doing a cold turkey was, to be fair, a walk in the park. I realised eventually that this was the easy part. The hard part was as soon as it was over, to keep off the heroin. This I could never do. I also think that deep down, even after doing a cold turkey, the drug still had a hold over me. I still wanted to carry on using. The drug still had me. I only did the rattle for my family!

I stayed off gear for a while (well a short while). There was really no way that I was giving the feeling up just yet. I enjoyed it, to be honest. I had no intentions of doing the right thing. I started using again.

I had been in trouble with the police a few times by this point but it was nothing too serious. The courts were giving me fines and community orders but it didn't really affect my drug use. I was still able to do the thing I wanted to do.

The age of around twenty-one was when I first started injecting the drug. My first experience of injecting was not a good one. This

resulted in me going over (overdosing), and I hardly have any recollection of this. All I remember is being slapped around the face and being made to stand up. There were two people with me and if it wasn't for them attending to me I would have been dead! You would have thought that I would have been put off by this experience but not by a long shot. All I did was put less on the spoon until my tolerance had built up to levels I knew I could exceed. My life was chaotic.

I had several jobs, like warehouse jobs, but they never lasted any longer than a couple of months. It was the same old routine really. Either going into work high or getting bored and packing work in before I got the sack.

It did rather upset me, though, when my family found out again. However a pattern formed. I would come off gear for my family and then start using again in secret, then I would get found out eventually and do another rattle to please my family. My heart was telling me to do it. I needed the feeling that I got from it. I couldn't live without it, to be honest.

Things went on like this for a while but now it wasn't just heroin I was using. I was also using whizz on top of gear. I didn't think that whizz was a problem for me, though (not at the time anyway). After all I wasn't taking it every day. In my opinion it was just something different to try and a different kind of buzz. I needed gear to function properly because if I didn't use, the side effects from not using were too bad to handle.

All in all I did about six cold turkeys altogether over the years and each time I reached a different rock bottom but never low enough for me to stop. Would I ever actually reach the ultimate rock bottom, or would it have killed me before I realised enough was enough?

I had just turned twenty-two years old when I met Jayne, also a heroin addict. Her being an addict didn't bother me at all, in fact it was brilliant – we could use together. I fell for this girl, I thought

that she was the one. She even came to live with me at my parents' house. My parents thought that they were doing the right thing. We were both going to get clean together and live happy ever after. Jayne at the beginning seemed very sweet, trustworthy and honest and I thought that it was a match made in heaven.

After a matter of weeks the reality hit me. She wasn't any of those things, we were just existing. All we were both bothered about was the next fix. We didn't care where the money came from or who we stole from. Basically all we cared about was heroin. As time went by I finally realised that our relationship wasn't based on love or anything you hear out of a fantasy film. It was purely drug based. This was the reality but for some reason I found it really hard to leave her. I knew this was extremely dangerous for me but the gear just kept coming. Jayne always managed to find money from somewhere to pay for gear (I won't elaborate on this as it is far too personal.)

I think that apart from the drugs the other biggest mistake that I made was marrying her. This was not good and none of my family came to the wedding. My parents had kicked us both out by this time. We had wronged them so much it was unbelievable. They all knew that marrying Jayne was wrong for me and would lead me further into the dark waters. All Jayne's family attended the wedding. I felt so uneasy and isolated. This did get me thinking. I was in a hole with no-one to pull me free, not even my wife. We were living in a dirty caravan just using and using. I remember one of my worst experiences was when I was injecting in the caravan and my mum opened the door to bring us some food. The look on her face was, to be honest, just pure sadness.

In 2005 I got charged with a second burglary (of a dwelling). I should have got four years imprisonment but due to a technicality I only received an eight month sentence. This was my first prison sentence and one that I won't forget. Inside I got off the gear but on the day that I was released I went straight to score. You could

say that I had missed it and being in prison was me just having clean time. I was back on the gear straight away and I had no money, no job and nearly no family. After a few months we finally separated. I broke free from my marriage and, God only knows why, but I was allowed to go back home to my parents.

Things were going great, I had accessed services again and was stable on a Methadone script.

About six or seven weeks after being released from prison I met Debbie. Debbie was not a user. She was my oldest sister's best friend, they worked together. We hit it off straight away. She knew all about my past and the things that I had done. She had taken a chance on me. Things seemed perfect. This was the first honest, open and trusting relationship I had ever had. I felt totally at ease with this girl and I knew that I loved her. This was the real thing.

Debbie at this point had a little girl called Emily; she was four years old. Debbie rented her own house and within three weeks I had moved in. I was off the gear and I was doing really well on my Methadone script. I even got a job working for ASDA Distribution Centre, which I really enjoyed. Things went extremely well for me for about twelve months. I didn't touch a thing. This was what normal life was like. We had bought my parents' house as my parents had moved abroad so we were like one big happy family.

But even though at this point I was very happy, I knew I still had underlying problems to deal with (these problems are far too personal to discuss or share with just anyone). I knew in my own mind that they were not going to go away, unless I did something about it. I knew which way it was going, though. Back down into the hole. It was the only way at that point. This was always the way that I dealt with things. Drugs was the answer to everything.

When I met Debbie she was sterilized but had Emily from a previous marriage. I had always wanted a child of my own so Debbie got in debt for £5000 for a reversal of sterilisation. That is

how much trust she put in me. We were only given a ten percent chance of success but God must have been on our side, trying to give me a reason to stay clean, because Debbie fell pregnant almost immediately. We were both over the moon.

Everyone hoped that it would be a turning point. Even me. Well I was wrong to hope and so was everyone else. There is nothing stronger than the power of addiction. But unless you have been there you could never understand it.

Even Debbie being pregnant couldn't stop me from using drugs. She did a rattle with me when she was five months pregnant. Emily stayed at her dad's. Debbie always kept the bad things that I did from Emily. How horrible was I – using when I was going to be a daddy!

I can remember the day that Debbie went into labour. I had used in the afternoon. She didn't find out about it which of course made me feel invincible, like I can do it again. I was being devious, selfish, sly, horrible and cruel to Debbie but I just couldn't help it. The pull was too strong.

I was not back on heroin, though. I chose whizz instead. This drug of choice caused me a hell of a lot of problems. I was so paranoid, accusing Debbie of all sorts. After being kicked out on numerous occasions for my hellish drug taking, I switched drugs to try to cover up my tracks as Debbie recognised the signals. I always tried to take Debbie for a fool and for the majority of the time I did. I went from whizz to heroin, heroin to whizz. It was driving Debbie insane, she was losing her head, losing her mind. It was all my doing. I really did feel shit for putting her through all I did. It upset and got me down but I was just finding the answer through a bag or a bomb.

I knew that things couldn't carry on the way they were. I would do a week or two where I wouldn't take anything and I would earn a little trust back. Then I would use again, Debbie would find out, get really upset and then forgive me. She tried to help me stay

clean but I couldn't do it. My drug use was spiralling out of control yet again and I couldn't help it. The next fix was my priority.

Aidan was born in February 2007, weighing in at eight pounds seven ounces. I was the proudest man alive. My heart was melting and I could barely keep still. This was my happiest time ever. For the first few months things were going really well. I was a family man with my step daughter, my son and my missus. I was still working at ASDA, we were paying our bills.

I was still using. I was telling Debbie I was clean and for the majority of the time she believed me or chose to believe me or couldn't prove otherwise. I could see the hell that I was putting her through and it hurt me to see her so upset but I couldn't stop what I was doing. It was perfect for me. I was leading a double life. I had my family and also drugs. It was like a torrid love affair.

At first I started stealing money. Debbie would look for money that had gone missing for hours, even ripping the sofa underneath to see if it had fallen down there or search through all the rubbish in vain. I used to help her look for it and knew that she would never find it. What had I become?

Then Debbie got wise to that and money was never left around for me to steal. Little by little I sold my pride and joy, my collection of DVD's. I got a fiver for ten DVD's (enough for one bag), even though the DVD's had cost far more than any fiver. I was upset that I had to sell my beloved collection but I needed my fix.

Eventually Debbie realised the DVD's were missing. It only took a few weeks, to be honest. She had bought some drug testing kits and I tested positive. How I wasn't kicked out I will never know. I do remember it was close to Christmas, though, so maybe that was the reason.

Then I did the ultimate low. There was no money to steal, no DVD's to sell and I had already sold my bracelet, necklace and engagement ring to the dealer. What could I do, I was desperate?

I sold all Debbie's jewellery, every last bit. I didn't even get that much for it either, just enough for a few bags. I felt bad handing it over but I needed the fix – there is no excuse but, believe me, I had no choice in the matter. Debbie didn't notice straight away. She was going out of her mind with me but I just kept denying everything. God, I hurt this girl so badly. When she found out she was totally gutted.

I eventually lost my job after nearly four years and things were going from bad to worse. My addiction was affecting every aspect of my life, including my children's. Then the unthinkable happened: Debbie fell pregnant again. She sat me down and told me that she couldn't keep the baby because she knew that I couldn't stay off drugs. She didn't want to bring another child into the world in these circumstances. She begged me to not take anything again. I just walked out and went for another bag. I was devastated but my addiction was too strong. I went to live with my sister.

I was still using but still in contact with Debbie. She still loved me but couldn't take any more from me. She had two children to consider. It could have been three children but Debbie had made the decision to terminate. Even though I hated her at the time, I know that it was the hardest thing that she has probably ever had to do and I was to blame for this decision. If I would have stayed clean we could have had the world.

For some reason Debbie gave me a final chance. I had nothing to offer, I had no job, no money and no self-respect, but she loved me so much and we had Aidan together. I had been put on blockers and I told her that I was clean. It took just a few days for her to see straight through me.

The relationship was finally over on 18th March 2009 when I was kicked out. I went to live in a caravan yet again with some other users. I was using more gear than I had ever used before but I had no way to pay for my addiction. Now that Debbie had had enough I had no-one to steal from. I didn't see my kids at this time

at all and although I loved them I knew that they couldn't see me like this.

I owed loads of money to a well-known drug dealer and when I couldn't pay up the dealer beat me up. I was told pay up or die, but how could I pay? I was in a mess. I had no family (they had washed their hands of me), I had no children and no Debbie. I have never felt so alone. This was rock bottom! I had to make changes in my life. I had run out of chances. I was going to end up dead.

In July 2009 I went into rehab. Believe it or not, Debbie drove me there. I was at Phoenix Futures at Sheffield. I got into rehab through my key worker, who at the time was Paul Kirkham from Shared Care. I did a full six months in rehab, and it was the hardest thing that I had ever done in my life, but by far the best thing that I have ever done. Finally I was making changes from a twelve-year drug addiction. I worked really hard whilst in rehab and my family finally realised that I was serious for the first time. Although I was still an addict I didn't want to have drugs in my life anymore.

Slowly but surely my family came to see me. My kids were there on every visit I was allowed. Debbie also visited me. Eventually I think all my family were proud of me. Although taking drugs was my choice, it is so hard to break the cycle once you are addicted.

All through my life during my drug addiction I have done things because family members wanted me to. Maybe that's why I never stayed clean, because I didn't want it in my heart. Maybe I always used again because I knew I could have another chance. Maybe I finally decided to try to come clean forever because I had no chances left. All I do know for definite is that rehab was my choice, my decision and the thing that saved my life.

I learned so much in rehab. My way of thinking, my behaviour and my lifestyle all had to change and only rehab could help me. I gained qualifications in Literacy and Numeracy and I also learned

MY JOURNEY

different coping strategies, alongside relapse prevention, co-dependency, counselling, powerlessness. I could go on and on. Rehab helped me so much and I know that If I hadn't had the experience I doubt you would be hearing my story today.

I finished my programme on 18th December 2009 full of confidence and with great awareness. I felt amazing, like I was starting my life again and I had a completely different outlook on life. I was lucky enough to move back in with Debbie and my children and to be honest I felt that the world was my oyster.

Whilst in rehab I realised that I had so much life experience to offer and that I needed to work in this field. I finally felt strong enough. I wanted to work and help people with addictions. In February 2010 I started volunteering with Hemsworth District Partnership (HDP) doing various things, talking to service users and assisting with needle exchange. I also gained a volunteer post with Turning Point and my weeks were filled volunteering. I set up S.M.A.R.T. (Self Management and Recovery Training), again a valuable tool that I had learned in rehab. It is a peer support group for people encountering addictive behaviours such as drug use, alcoholism and gambling. I also passed my Counselling Awareness Level 1, which is something I am very proud of.

In July 2010 I commenced employment as a Substance Misuse Worker with HDP. It is just part-time for the minute but I am absolutely loving it. I am finally where I want to be, drug free and working in the career of my choice. I have spoken at lectures at universities to students about my journey and life experience. The most important thing to me is I have also got my family back. I am finally experiencing life and loving every minute of it. I am holding my head high.

To top everything I was nominated for and won the Keith Challon award for outstanding recovery. All my family were there, including Emily and Debbie. It made my heart ache seeing how proud they were of me. I now talk to Emily about what drugs have

PETER HURST

done to me and to my life. Aidan is too young to understand yet. It would break my heart to see my kids go my route in life. I will teach them all I can to keep them safe.

I hope you have enjoyed my story. I know that life will not be easy and I will always remain a drug addict but I am living proof that an addict can turn their life around. When you hit your rock bottom it just takes determination, the right support network and self-belief. I am now making a difference to my life and I am helping to try to make a difference to others. I am finally giving something back.

Last but by no means least, I would like to say a big thank-you to the people who have supported me throughout my experience, and a special thank you to the funding board that made rehab possible.

Thank you for taking your time to read my story and I hope that it has helped you in some positive way.

Peter Hurst
6th December 2010

What about the children?

Ann

My name is Ann. I thought I had quite a normal family. I was divorced after nine years. I had two children and I brought them up on my own. They were aged eight and three when I divorced. I had no partner, no live-in lover. I was on my own, with a little help from my family when needed. I managed alone with my two children. Yes, we had our ups and downs, especially as they grew into teenagers, just like any normal family.

When she grew up my daughter started a family with her partner. She had a boy followed two years later by a girl, which we were all very happy about. Then money problems started, week after week. When talking to a friend, she told me that my daughter's partner's family were into drugs and were known in the area for it

I found out that my daughter was using both cannabis and heroin. I was devastated when I heard this and very anxious for her two kids (my grandchildren) more than anything else. So I looked into drug addiction and read as many magazines as I could. I went to ask the doctor about it but I couldn't find any answers. On one particular occasion I saw a stand-in doctor and she advised me that the best I could do would be to look after the grand-kids as much as possible myself.

I worked part-time and started to go out with friends. After a couple of years I met someone. In this time my daughter's drug problems got worse. She and her family moved further away, although they were still in the area. My daughter would arrange to meet me with the kids and yet not turn up, whilst I would be left waiting. She always had some excuse why she hadn't turned up at the appointed time and place.

One day, after yet another no-show, I went to my daughter's house unexpectedly and it was a mess: kids not at school and other

people there who I didn't know. Later I found out that this was a regular occurrence.

Following this incident my daughter went into hospital for help and to get a detox. She was supposed to be in for a few weeks. I didn't find out until a week later that she had gone into hospital. As soon as I heard I went straight away to visit her but when I got to hospital she had gone out a few hours earlier. I spoke to the receptionist and said that I would wait for her return as it was an hour's journey to get there. I waited and waited, thinking that she had just nipped out somewhere for a magazine or a smoke perhaps. After some time, a nurse came and informed me that my daughter probably wasn't coming back. I felt such a fool. How could she do this to me?

I cried all the way home. Feelings of anger and hatred flowed through me. My thoughts centred on her, her partner and the kids. I worried and worried: and what about those children? I had never felt so low in my life. I felt that she couldn't be helped because she didn't want to be helped. Yet I worried about her children because I loved them the same way as I loved her. Yet I hated her at the same time. My daughter was doing her best, or so she thought, but all I thought of was the children.

After a few months had passed I received a phone call at work from my daughter asking if I could meet her in town the next day. I met with my daughter as arranged, only to hear that she and the children had been put in a hostel and that her partner was on remand for a drug-related incident. This wasn't his first time in prison but it was the first time that I knew he had ever gone to prison. They had lost their home through non-payment of rent.

I felt helpless, anxious, and my head was everywhere but nowhere. Following this meeting I couldn't concentrate on anything. Friends at work knew something was wrong but I couldn't talk to just anybody about it. I eventually confided in a good friend. Although she was younger than me and it was a big thing to me,

she made me aware that, in life, things like this can happen.

Then in a matter of weeks my daughter asked if I could go to court with her. I asked what the court appearance was about but she just answered that it was nothing to worry about but she wanted me to meet her. So I swapped my working day with my friend at work. She agreed to do my day and I would work hers in return. I confided in my friend and told her I was meeting my daughter as she was to appear in court. My friend tried to put me at ease and said not to worry.

I waited anxiously at court for over an hour wondering where she was, having to visit the toilet every fifteen minutes. I felt so worried. I had never been to a court like this before, full of young people just sitting around. I was watching the door with trepidation. Where was she? I heard her name being called so I approached the man and told him who I was – and that my daughter hadn't yet arrived. He kindly told me not to worry as there was time yet. He seemed very caring but had the difficult job of trying to keep the young ones in order. All this was new to me. I hated it.

Then she walked in with the two children. I hadn't realized they would be here. We waited until eventually she was called into court and I went in with her. The children waited out in the corridor with a friend of my daughter's. You wonder what they were thinking in a place like that. Her solicitor said it could go either way and she could be remanded. I asked about the children and the effect it could have on them. I was told that unless I was prepared to take the children then Social Services would have to be involved. The outcome from that dreadful day was my daughter was remanded for shoplifting and I walked away from court with two children. What a mess. A woman came up from the cells with a message from my daughter saying I had to do what I thought was best for the children. What could I do? Holding back the tears, holding the hand of each child in mine, we left the court. What could I say to the children?

I had only just moved in with my partner four months previously. I had no home of my own to take them to yet I couldn't just leave them anywhere. I had to be with them. I took them back to my partner's home. I rang family and friends to let them know what had happened and broke down on the phone to my friend. She said, 'I'm coming for you now, you're all staying with us.'

My partner's home was a one-bedroomed flat so there was no way we could all stay there and I knew he couldn't cope with the situation at the time. We stayed at my friend's for three weeks. Every day I'd take the kids to school followed by form-filling at the housing office and social services yet I couldn't get anywhere. My friend eventually came with me to Social Services and demanded to know why they weren't doing more to help me. Due to her input on my behalf they agreed to help. I again had to tell them my story and fill in yet more forms before picking the children up from school.

The children seemed to enjoy being at my friend's as she had two teenage daughters who loved and spoiled them. They also had toys to play with such as a bike and computer. But we couldn't be there forever. We were imposing on their lifestyle. I kept going to the housing office and Social Services for another two weeks. Finally I got a result. They told me we could have a room in a hostel, a flat. This was all new to me and very frightening.

I was there with the children for six months. That first week I had the children was very difficult and my head was everywhere. If I hadn't had my friend to help me I hate to think what would have happened to us. My friend also took me to the doctor's who prescribed tablets for anxiety. My friend was such a great support to me and the children for those six months both practically and emotionally.

I took them to school every day and picked them up, which involved two bus rides. I wanted to keep things as normal as possible. They were good children. We would go to the park every

day after school to play on the swings and roundabouts or go on walks. We had no television so we would play games. Although it was a stressful time, I also had good times with the children which I found very fulfilling.

It was the last week in August when I was offered a house. It wasn't in a good area but we made it our home. Friends and family helped with decorating and furniture and it turned out to be a happy home. The children moved schools just up the road from where we lived and we had some good neighbours. But I still felt alone, I didn't know anybody in the same situation as me.

Then I was told about GASPED and how they may be able to help. I was depressed and desperate yet I waited a week before phoning. I made an appointment more or less immediately – I think the next day. I talked to a younger woman and told her everything. She understood all the emotions and the stress I was under and was really helpful. She said I was not on my own, and asked if I would like to attend a meeting and meet people in similar situations to me. So I agreed. The more times I attended the more confident I became. I made some new true friends that had gone through the same difficulties, emotions and stress as I had. I also discovered that talking about it helps. Sharing experiences can help you through your problems. GASPED was the only place where I felt wanted and cared for. I felt comfortable because I fitted in. It's the only category that I fitted into. You can have the same feelings known and shared by others.

There was a grandparent's group which was made up of people like me – grandparents who look after or who are the primary carer for their grandchildren. Because their kids, like my daughter, misused substances I felt comfortable in the group. I found it easy to open up about how I was struggling financially to support two children. It was here that I found out about the residence order. When I first went to the 'Social' they told me that this fund didn't exist. But I knew it did – people in my group got it. I fought for it and in the end I was awarded the order after months of fighting.

There are more people in difficult situations due to drugs and alcohol. They need to know that there is help for them. The government needs to be aware and address some of these issues and do things to help. Lots of people need help to look after these children, who are affected through no fault of their own. It's not the child's fault. Why should they suffer? It's not the grandparents or carers' fault either. We are here to pick the pieces up and do the best we can, but we need help too.

To me, grandchildren are something to be enjoyed but I found myself playing both mum and dad as well as being grandma to my grandkids who I desperately wanted to do right by. GASPED is the only place we can go and that's why there needs to be more funds going into it. You can go to a doctor and he can understand to a point where he can give you tablets. But he can't give you that feeling you have when you come out of a meeting with people who have an understanding of what you are going through.

This is not the end of my story. I still have the two children, or should I say teenagers, and I still need the meetings. I could have gone into other things which happened but I found it difficult to write as there are some dark places – and you like to think you have moved on a bit from that.

My daughter has been to rehabilitation, which is good. But for it to work a drug user has to be in the right place in their head. Some are successful in recovering but some are not. There needs to be more and more work and understanding going into the problem.

Maybe I'll be able to follow on writing as the children turn into adults, or they may want to write their own story!

I would like to think that anybody in my situation would feel better, or benefit after reading this story.

It happened for a reason

Jamie Morrell

My story first started in 1996. At the age of thirteen I lost my older brother through an asthma attack, brought on by using heroin. I found this very hard to deal with and as a result started using drugs with my friends, mainly cannabis.

About a year after that I noticed my friends being very secretive and they would hide things from me, I later found out what the big secret was – the secret was heroin.

It wasn't long before I felt pressured into taking it myself.

Taking heroin was a massive thing to me as I was very anti-heroin due to it playing a part in my brother's death, which shows if it can reach somebody like me who had so much hatred towards the drug, it can reach anybody. The one thing that always sticks in my mind is that heroin doesn't discriminate. It doesn't matter whether you're rich, poor, black or white, it can and will take anyone who crosses its path.

So there I was taking the drug which ruined my family. I used to try and hide it as best I could but there was no stopping it boiling up to the surface. At the age of sixteen I lost my Uncle Tony through suicide, which had a profound effect on me. My heroin intake became daily and I soon became a full-blown addict.

I would spend each day the same as the last, just going round in circles from one fix to the next, walking about with my head down and looking like death warmed up. I would find myself walking the streets at all hours with no money in my pocket hoping I would bump into somebody who could relieve me of my pain, or just to see if an opportunity to make a few quid would arise. If I didn't get my fix the pain which was waiting for me wasn't a nice thing to think about: stomach cramps, cold sweats, aches and pains everywhere. Knowing I wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight, laying in bed, hot one minute then freezing the next.

At the age of seventeen I got caught stealing from my mother. She knew what was going on but chose to ignore it until it affected her, in which case she tried the tough love approach and kicked me out of the family home. You would have thought this would have made me see sense but it only made things worse, a lot worse.

I moved in with another heroin addict who injected, so of course I started injecting which made my habit worse, I sold all my valuables and as soon as all the money had gone he kicked me out too. Later on that night I went back to my mother's asking for a second chance.

Earlier on in the week she had been talking to a family member about the troubles she was having with me and the drugs. I was very lucky as my cousin and her husband were getting ready to move down to Nottingham to start a pig farm up and they said they would like for me to join them. This was on the understanding that I did my cold turkey and then helped out getting the farm up and running, which I did. The cold turkey was without a doubt the hardest thing I have ever had to do. I had nothing to help me with the stomach cramps, the cold sweats, aches and pains, except the determination to get clean. Within a week I was feeling better and I started regaining all my senses. My sense of humour started returning and my love for life was back. Up to then this was the best thing I'd ever done with my life.

I was on the farm for about a year and had learnt lots, but decided it was time to move back home as my relationship with my mother had improved tenfold, I was even getting on with my sister, which was a first for us!

The happiness wasn't to last long, though. I started dabbling with heroin again, which soon led to me being addicted – again.

I had been using again for about five months when I woke up one morning and decided enough was enough. I got in contact with Turning Point, which was a massive step forward as I could get the support I needed – not just to get off the heroin, which is just the start, but to stay off it. While on my detox I was asked if I

would like to be protected against hepatitis B with a vaccination which I thought would be a good idea. I had my screenings and it wasn't good: it came back positive, which meant I had the virus. My key worker was great and you could really tell she cared, which I believe helped me stay clean as I would look forward to seeing her to tell her of the progress I was making.

While being on a Methadone detox I managed to hold down a job and I changed my circle of friends, which I now believe is paramount in succeeding. A job for the boredom and good friends for the support network: I'd changed every aspect of my life, which was the key to my success.

Within a year of starting my detox it was coming to an end with the Methadone. I finished on 3ml and though it doesn't sound like a lot it wasn't easy. It was nowhere near as painful as the cold turkey but it still took a week to feel normal.

I was clean for over six years and in this time I'd had a beautiful little boy to my then girlfriend and had been in work for most of this time, in which I gained my independence by moving out of my mum's and getting my own place. But as before, what goes up must come down. In the space of three months I lost everything. I was growing cannabis at this time to get some much needed money and to give my boy a good start in life as I was in debt with the rent. I ended up getting caught and losing my job, which led to me losing my house. I lost my girlfriend and to top it off my dog got stolen.

I didn't handle it all very well and depression crept in, which in turn led to me using heroin again. I knew it wasn't going to help matters but I couldn't help myself from doing it as the depression came hand in hand with heroin for me. I was on heroin for about a month when I decided to get back in touch with Turning Point, and I also got back in touch with an ex-girlfriend for the support.

I stuck to my script from day one and soon started to feel a lot better and look better too. My key worker again was excellent and told me of their past with heroin, which gave me belief there was a light at the end of the tunnel and it's not true what they say, 'Once a smack head always a smack head'.

My key worker asked me about my hepatitis and referred me to the nurse. She asked if I had any symptoms common with having the virus. I had none so she asked me if I would like another test to be on the safe side. So I had the test and the news was great: I had no trace of the virus and no trace of ever having it too. This was a great relief to me, and all the things I never thought I could do due to having the disease were all now a possibility. One of those things was to become a substance misuse worker. I told my worker of this and he supported me all the way and referred me to Lewis Ward, who is a Service User Involvement Worker. Within a couple of weeks I was Service User Rep and in that time I got myself on a drugs awareness course and an Introduction to Counselling Course. I got a certificate level 1 in the drugs awareness and managed to get a level 2 in the counselling course.

While being a rep I've been involved in many things such as the Taxi Presentation, meet and greet, delivering questionnaires for WISMS and so on. The one thing I am most proud of is the setting up of the soup kitchen (soup 4em) in my home town.

Me and Lewis approached the Moorthorpe Substance Misuse Steering Group for help and support in the setting up of the much needed service which is now being currently used by between fifteen and twenty people each week and is still growing.

Since becoming a rep in 2008 I have done more than I ever imagined possible and have been on various training courses such as the ones mentioned above. Also I have done a computer course (clait), health and safety in the workplace, food and hygiene in catering (so I can cook for the soup kitchen if needed), adult numeracy, constructing futures project certificate, safer injecting

IT HAPPENED FOR A REASON

and overdose training (so I could deliver the training to service users), viral hepatitis training to help conquer the stigma towards sufferers (something I am very proud of doing as I experienced the stigma for six years), delivering questionnaires training, analysing results training (to help with the several questionnaires I have helped to deliver), interview skills training (also to help us deliver the questionnaires).

I have now been clean for three years and I am currently stable on 30 ml of Methadone with the intention of slowly reducing in the near future. I have now managed to gain part-time employment as a Substance Misuse Support Worker for Hemsworth District Partnership, and I also do volunteer work with Turning Point at their structured day programme.

I was also involved in the Mount Snowdon walk for charity and loved the experience. I only raised ten pounds but every penny counts.

With my work and my little boy I have got everything I have ever wanted and feel so lucky to be in a position where I can share my experiences and hopefully use them to help others. Thank you for this opportunity to tell you my story, as I believe everything in life happens for a reason and all the downfalls I have had in life has been to prepare me for the work I am doing.

Yours truly

Jamie Morrell

Substance Misuse Worker

My son is an alcoholic!

Sue

There I've said it. I don't know when it started or why. Looking back I can only hazard a guess and at first I blamed myself. Was it because I was in an abusive relationship with my first husband and my son was witness to that from a young age? Or was it because I left his dad due to the abuse and then later married my second husband, who is such a loving and supportive man? But then I'm putting the blame on me and thinking it's my fault for the choices my son made, which I am sure every mother has done and will do for evermore.

Years later I can reflect back on the last twenty-two years and say with a degree of certainty that my son just fell in with the wrong crowd.

He was sixteen years of age. I remember the first time he came home drunk. I brushed it off thinking all young lads do this, it's the norm. I can't pinpoint the exact time I realised that my son had a drink problem. It just got progressively worse and escalated when we moved house. Every time something went wrong for him he would turn to drink, it was his coping mechanism. For years he would come home and because he was so drunk he never made it to his bed but collapsed on the sofa. I used to wake up every morning dreading what I would find when I walked down the stairs.

He ruined the sofa with cigarette burns, because he would fall asleep with it lit. I used to pray every night that he didn't start a fire by accident. I had watched so many fire programmes over the years and seen what little time it takes for a fire to take hold and knew if this happened my son would not survive. I didn't even think of me.

Every time we moved he would refuse to come with us and ended up getting his own place, but due to his drinking and his inability to hold down a job he would lose house after house. He

led such an unstable life and I honestly did not know what to do. I would bail him out because of the huge debts he would run up even though I could ill afford it. I felt isolated and alone, I did not know which way to turn and felt sick with worry about him. I lived in constant fear that I would wake up one morning with a knock on the door and being told that he had been injured or worse.

I remember how I used to try and help him in any way I could and could not bear to see him go desolate and without a home. We used to pay for deposits on flats for him and the first couple of months' rent. After that I believed, naively, that he would then continue to pay the rent each month, but of course he would spend the money on alcohol, spirits mainly, and he would get kicked out for non-payment of rent. Then it would start over with him begging me to help him and promising me he would change his ways. And of course I believed him, he was my son and I loved him, still love him. However I couldn't let him come and live with me. I couldn't face having to live with his drink twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, so I paid for another bed-sit for him until he got kicked out of it and then another. I had no money but I was helping my son – what else could I do?

Then the day came when I just didn't have the money to do it anymore. I was broke. When I told my son he changed before my eyes: he became violent and aggressive and threatened to kill me and my husband. Every time he asked for money I couldn't give it to him, I didn't have it. We became so fearful of him that we got an injunction order against him. By this time my son was living on the streets, he was homeless.

I'm not sure how long it was after this that my son finally decided to get help, although by this point he had been drinking for sixteen years. I think the final straw for him was when he received a probation order for non-payment of fines. His solicitor had advised him that he could potentially receive a prison sentence. He had been getting on trains to various destinations and forgetting to buy

tickets, he was so drunk. When approached by the conductors he would get angry and potentially violent, so that in the end the train company had no choice but to call the police.

After this incident he did try to stop drinking and succeeded for while. He was like a new man, the man he should have been if alcohol hadn't taken a hold of him. Our relationship turned to normal, or as normal as it could be, and I began to believe that we had come through the worst of it and things were only going to get better. He began to rebuild his life, he got a job and a flat. I began to hope!

However, something happened within the family and it tipped him over the edge and he started drinking again. I think he had used alcohol for so long as an escape mechanism that he didn't know how to deal with everyday life when the bad things happened. During this period of drink my son had gone into town one day to run some errands. The next thing I knew there was that dreaded anonymous knock at the door that I had been fearing for over twenty years now. He had fallen down drunk, suffered terrible head injuries and the doctors were unsure if he would survive. He did. However, due to the severity of the injuries caused he is now permanently brain damaged and suffers from terrible mood swings. He has been told that if he falls down and hits his head again then he will not survive.

For me this was the final straw and I knew that I would have to get help – for me. I couldn't go through this again with no support. My son's alcohol worker gave me GASPED's number and when I walked through the door for my first meeting it felt like I was coming home.

The people I met at GASPED told me that by giving my son the ability to carry on with his life the way it was, I was allowing him to drink himself to his grave. GASPED taught me to accept my son for who he is and not change him – he will do that on his own if he wants it enough. He needs to take responsibility for his own life, I

MY SON IS AN ALCOHOLIC

can't do it for him. For me this was one of the hardest things to do – to let go. He was my son and I love him. I had raised him and managed to pick him up and brush him off with everything life had dealt him, but not this, not his drink problem.

Due to his brain injuries he did stop drinking for a while because he was scared that the next fall would be his last. However he has since relapsed twice. My son's drink problem is still there. He's fighting it now though so that is a positive step.

Me? I am coping. Without the help of GASPED I think I would have gone under myself. I'm a much stronger person for having been involved with GASPED and I can't thank them enough. The support is always there whenever I need it. Things are still hard but with the love and support I'm doing ok. Just remember, if you are reading this you are not on your own.

I just want to thank all the staff at GASPED for their valued help and support. x

One day at a time

Joanne

My name is Joanne, I'm an alcoholic, and this is my short story of my journey into alcoholism.

As a teenager I used to go out with my friends to pubs and clubs and had a very good social life, lots of friends and good times, needless to say a lot of time spent drinking. Because I was with a large group of friends I didn't feel I was doing anything other than the norm, although when I wasn't drinking and going out I felt life was very boring. I always wanted to chase that buzz I got from a good night out, I never wanted it to end. My weekend started on Thursday and ended on a Monday night after the 10p a pint night in the local bar in Wakefield. I didn't feel there was a problem at the time. Why would I? Everyone was doing it.

I then met my husband to be. He was a professional sportsman so the socializing was endless and we had another group of friends to drink with. We would go out and drink to the early hours and wake up the next day with huge hangovers. I could never face food or anything the next day, but always felt ok by the time it came to going out again. Needless to say I was painfully thin at that point.

We went on to get married in 1989 followed by the birth of our daughter in 1993. The drinking and nights out had slowed right down at this stage. We just did the odd night out with neighbours and friends, although I still liked a drink in the house on a weekend.

I went back to work when my daughter started school and was working full time, as was my husband, as his sports career had ended at this point. We both worked hard and money was plentiful, we enjoyed luxury holidays and cars etc. Life was good but there was something in me that wasn't quite right. I had everything I could want but there was something still missing, I didn't know what. I carried on working and I was under a lot of stress at work,

so on an evening I started to have a couple of glasses of wine just to relax after a long hard day.

After a few years I became ill and started to have panic attacks, not just little states of panic, FULL BLOWN panic attacks. Anyone who has suffered from FULL BLOWN panic attacks will know exactly what I'm talking about. My God, I thought I was dying. I went to the doctor's and she gave me some tablets to help me sleep and control the attacks, which they did to a certain extent. They helped me sleep on a night but they didn't stop the panic attacks through the day.

When I was working and had a panic attack I used to go home for a while until it passed. I only lived round the corner. One day something different happened. While I was having a panic attack, I took a drink, WOW! I had found a miracle cure! The moment I had a drink the panic just disappeared. From that moment on I used alcohol to control it. The problem was they did happen quite often so I was self-medicating quite a lot. My boss was very sympathetic to my situation so he gave me the freedom to come and go whenever I needed to.

I was constantly going to the doctor's. She suggested therapy, which I attended; I was desperate for something to help. The doctor was always asking me how much I drank but I just lied, as I did to everyone, I didn't let them know I was controlling the panic attacks with alcohol. They didn't need to know; I had it under control. I carried on for ten years working for the same company, still with a lot of anxiety and depression. The panic had slowed down but I knew it was always there. I was just keeping it at bay with the alcohol and tablets.

I decided I needed a change of job, and to work fewer hours. I thought this would help with all the anxiety and stress that had built up in me. So I opened my own business. I was working even longer hours than before, but enjoyed it for a while until the anxiety and panic reared its ugly head. Business was going good so I altered

my hours to finish when my daughter came out of school. Before long I was drinking earlier instead of waiting until five o'clock. Well it was teatime after all. Before long I was suffering the panic again but it was happening more often, so I was drinking on the way to pick my daughter up from school. Never did I think I was doing anything wrong; I just wanted rid of these horrible attacks, I didn't know why it was happening to me. Over the next couple of years I altered my working hours again so that I had Mondays and Fridays off and worked nine until three, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

The days in which I didn't work weren't spent doing housework and all the other things I needed to do, they were spent drinking. People say alcoholism is a progressive illness, and how right they are! I was drinking more and more and in a very short space of time was drinking from three o'clock right until bedtime, and on a weekend had started to have a drink at lunchtime – well it was the weekend. This carried on for some time, and I still thought I was in control. Before I realised I didn't suffer from hangovers anymore my body had just adapted to the alcohol. This was just the start of things to come.

I remember waking up one morning and it was just as if someone had glued my feet to the kitchen floor: I couldn't move. I didn't know what was happening to me. I was full of fear and felt like I was going to pass out. My mind was all over the place – I couldn't think straight and was shaking and sweating from head to foot. The feelings, physically and mentally, were indescribable. In a state of semi-consciousness I reached for the bottle and took a drink. I don't quite know what happened but whatever it was it worked; after a couple of drinks I felt normal again.

This happened on a daily basis. The hangovers had been replaced by something much worse: full blown withdrawal. I didn't know that at the time. I had no idea it was the alcohol, I just knew that alcohol took it away. My body had become totally dependent on

alcohol and I needed it to function. I remember I started waking up in the night for no reason, so I used to go downstairs and have a couple of drinks to get me back to sleep. The vicious cycle got worse. The morning drink was the only way I could face the day. I would get up and go downstairs and instead of switching on the kettle I reached for the bottle to stop the shakes, the fear, the anxiety which was running through my body. It was the only way to get my daughter to school, and me to get to work.

At work I would be talking to the customers with my coffee cup in my hand, not full of coffee but vodka and coke, just going about my daily routine. It was ok, nobody would know. I was a business woman after all: people like me didn't do things like that. This carried on daily for quite some time but slowly getting worse day by day. I really didn't want to be like this, but I just couldn't help it.

One evening I sat down with my husband and we decided to sell the business, as it was too much for me to cope with, especially with all my anxiety and these horrible feelings. He could see it was making me ill. I'd lost loads of weight and looked tired and drawn. Nothing to do with the drink though! Many times he used to say to me,

'You're drinking too much. Why don't you 'not drink' a couple of days a week? You will feel much better.' I knew he was right but the truth was I couldn't.

We sold the business, which took over a year with the solicitors and one thing and another. It didn't go smooth, put it that way. The customers and staff at this point started to comment on how ill and thin I looked, but I just passed it off as stress from selling the business. I firmly believed in my own head that once the business was sold everything would be ok. Even me.

So the business was finally sold. I was going to take a little time out. All my family and friends thought I would be back to normal in no time. Nobody knew it was the alcohol that was helping me to

function, and I hid it quite well. The sale of the business took place on the run up to Christmas 2008, so nobody questioned my drinking, after all, I had just sold the business and it was Christmas! All the neighbours started to get together at each other's houses, usually Thursday night to have a good natter about life in general; I enjoyed this very much as the wine flowed freely.

Before long I couldn't wait until seven o'clock when we all got together so decided a couple of glasses before I went would be ok. And it was for a while. None of my friends questioned how much I was drinking – they just knew I liked a drink. On occasions we would arrange to go out for a meal. I never really wanted to go as it would interfere with my drinking. I knew when I got up on the morning of the meal I would have to have a drink to function, but as every alcoholic knows you can't just have one drink, so I used to be half cut before I even got there. I started to make excuses as to why I couldn't make it. I just wanted to stay at home in comfort with my comfort blanket (which was alcohol). It had become my best friend.

We had arranged to go away for a few days in between Christmas and the New Year. My daughter and husband were really looking forward to it. I packed up our clothes along with a litre of vodka for the room. I knew we would be drinking a lot as we were meeting some friends there who liked a drink, but I needed something for the morning. The first two days I got away with it: I just kept going back to the room for quick shots to get rid of the shakes. My husband noticed that night that the vodka bottle was nearly empty. He questioned me about it and went mad and poured what bit that was left away. I never slept a wink that night. I was crawling the walls, desperate. My body just needed the alcohol. It hadn't had enough that day so the full-blown withdrawal kicked in. I was going out of my mind. I was in the bathroom shaking and sweating. I couldn't think straight. I was just lost in a state of anxiety and fear, emotionally bankrupt.

My husband came into the bathroom and I just burst into tears and for the first time asked him to help me. He put his arms round me and said he was taking me to hospital. I remember saying don't tell our daughter what is happening. I couldn't face her, I was so ashamed of what I'd done. She didn't deserve this, it would destroy her. So we decided to drop her off on the way at her grandma's while we had a trip to the hospital. I told her we wouldn't be long, that I wasn't well, I had a bug or something.

On the journey home I was begging my husband to call and get me a drink just to help on the journey. He said no way, but it didn't stop me from asking, I was so desperate. We now know it was quite a dangerous thing to do to an alcoholic; not letting me have a drink could have brought on an alcoholic fit. I arrived at hospital and spent New Year 2009 on a drip having a detox. The detox tablets took away all the feelings which I was drinking to get rid of. I have to say it was a relief not to have to drink, to actually be free from alcohol! The doctor told me if I carried on drinking the way I was I would have a couple of years max. I thought he was going a bit over the top, I wasn't that bad, I wasn't an alcoholic. Alcoholics are people who are homeless, jobless, scruffy people living on the streets. Couldn't he see I wasn't one of them? I have a house, a car, a family. I'm just a normal person.

I came home and spent the next few months off alcohol. I had started eating so was feeling quite good and well. I hadn't felt like that for a long time. After a week or so I sat down with my daughter because she had been asking questions, so I told her I had been under a lot of stress and was drinking a little bit too much, which seemed to satisfy her curiosity. Little did I know she was suffering very deeply inside but just kept it to herself.

We carried on a normal family life, my husband going to work, my daughter going to school, and I was able to stay at home. This would enable me to have a few weeks to properly recover. After a couple of months I was feeling really good. My husband and close

family thought so, too. I convinced them and myself that I was ok now and that it had just been all the stress of selling the shop and me working full time that caused me to over-drink. They all agreed as I seemed to be back to normal.

We went to our first party; it was a christening, I said to my husband that I might just have a couple of drinks. He agreed as I was doing so well. Then I started having a glass of wine on a weekend and when we went out for a meal. Things were going well. We didn't go out much, only for meals, so decided that if we just shared a bottle of wine on Saturday night I'd be ok. Then came the progression: Friday, Saturday and Sunday night – well after all it was the weekend.

In no space of time at all I was drinking in the day before I picked my daughter up from school. I didn't drink in front of them. I had it all worked out in my own alcoholic mind that if I drank when they weren't there, they wouldn't get upset and worry. I still thought it was under control. I carried on drinking and justifying why I was drinking in secret, to save them from being hurt and upset. It just shows how progressive this illness is: before long when they came home from work and school I was itching to get another drink. So I started buying vodka and hiding it, mixing it in coke. That way they wouldn't suspect anything.

When one day my husband asked had I been drinking, I denied it, of course, but he must have known. So here I was drinking vodka and coke, pretending to everyone that it was just coke. My daughter became suspicious as well and started questioning me and wanting to have a drink of my coke. I can remember she once went to grab the glass I was holding, so I just drank it down in one. She knew I was lying to her. I told her not to say anything to Dad as he would go mad. The denial was unbelievable.

We were sat down one evening and she was crying. She was devastated that I was drinking again. God only knows what she must have been going through. She was pleading with me saying to me, 'Mum, please stop.'

I love her so much I thought to myself, I must stop drinking. I told her I would tomorrow. I promised her, as I had several times before. But when tomorrow came the fear and the need was too much, it was overwhelming. I just couldn't function without it. I really didn't want to but I just had to.

Because I had failed and given in, I was lying to her once again, telling her that I hadn't been drinking when she asked. So I had to start getting up before her on a morning for a drink to get rid of the shakes, so I could take her to school. Once I'd dropped her off at school I could drink all morning, go to sleep in the afternoon and pick her up from school and she would never know. It worked for a short while, even when I kept turning up late to pick her up. I just used lie after lie as to why I was late, I was becoming sicker and sicker.

The buzz that I used to get when I was drinking had stopped so I was having to drink more and more. But It never came back, it had stopped coming a long time ago. I had gone from drinking to feel good and getting that warm feeling which I loved, to drinking into a state of despair and loneliness. Most days I would sit there feeling really pleased with myself because I had my stash of alcohol but by the time I'd got half way through I would be sat crying for no reason at all, wallowing in self-pity, I couldn't understand why. I became very insecure and withdrawn. I never wanted to go anywhere, and I was like a prisoner in my own home. The only time I had any feelings of being safe, comforted and complete was when I had the alcohol to turn to.

On rare occasions when I did go out to parties with my friends, I was the life and soul of the party, I was the funny one, the one who everybody laughed with. What they didn't know is that when I got home behind the closed door when they had all gone to bed, I was left on my own, feeling lonely and isolated, alone with my alcoholism, not knowing what to do about it. So I did the only thing I knew: I drank even more. It was at the point where I couldn't live without it, but I also couldn't live with it any more.

Life went on, as it does. My mum called down through the day as she did every now and then just to make sure I was ok. I was drunk and she found the vodka. We had a few words, she went mad and went home to ring my husband at work. It was over; I had been found out. I knew if I didn't stop drinking for good I would lose the two people I really loved, not to mention the possibility of me ending up in a pine box.

Still to this day I don't quite know what happened over the last ten years, how I had got into the situation I was in. It all seems a bit surreal now looking back. I often think how could you not see what you were doing to yourself and the people around you? But that is the nature of the disease. That is the illness of alcoholism. I had come to the point in my life where I had two choices: one was to drink and die and the other was to try and recover and live life.

After everything that had happened, after all the things I had tried just to be able to drink normally again – group therapy, tablets, counselling, drinks diaries – nothing worked. I was totally beaten. I have since found out that when you are an alcoholic you can never drink as a normal person does, that it is a progressive illness. I know today that it's the first drink that gets you drunk.

Alcoholism affects men and women, young and old, professional and non-professional. It has no preference to race or creed. Alcoholism is an illness of mind and body. It will kill you if you do not accept you are powerless over it.

My mum has a friend in recovery. He introduced me to the special people who helped him recover. He is thirty-two years sober so I couldn't argue that it wouldn't work, and I decided to get sober. I was detoxed again and joined the wonderful people who are all living the twelve step recovery programme. I must admit at the beginning I just kept thinking how will I ever live life not being able to have a drink? What about holidays, Christmas, my daughter's wedding day? How will I face life without ever being able to drink?

ONE DAY AT A TIME

I know the answer today – by living one day at a time!

I cannot do anything about yesterday – that has already gone. I cannot do anything about tomorrow – it isn't here yet. I only have today!

My life today is full of living, loving, laughter and joy. It sometimes feels bad when things don't go my way, but nothing is that bad that I need to take a drink!

My sobriety date is 2nd October 2009 - One Day At A Time.

Generation X

A drugs worker

I had just graduated. Applying for jobs, I had always wanted to work in Probation or Social Work.

This was almost thirteen years ago. At that time, as a fresh faced graduate I was enjoying occasional factory work in my home town of South Elmsall with little job stress and little worries. However, I felt that it was time to move on and get work in something challenging.

Whilst I was waiting for answers to my Social Work and Probation applications my father offered me a volunteer post in his new workplace.

'It'll open your eyes, son', he said. 'When you were at college things changed, in fact things had been changing since pit shut.'

My dad had been an ex-miner, and in 1993 had decided on a change of course in career. First he had started to help other ex-miners with their debts, benefits and other worries at the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) office. Then he turned to the next generation, 'Generation X', a generation I was a member of.

Generation X grew up after the closure of the collieries. I could go into sociological explanations for what happened to this generation. Unemployment; the employment that there was, was alienating and low paid; easy access to excess, etc. The list is endless. All I know is that Generation X started to use drugs. Drugs which, historically, were not usually seen in old coal mining villages. Drugs like heroin and cocaine. In fact I had vivid memories of returning home as I was one of the lucky ones to go to college.

Whilst at home I noticed that my old friends were looking different. They were skinny, tired and run down. Offering to sell me tablets: 'Ay-up, try these tablets from doctor's. Only a quid each.' The area had seemed to change.

GENERATION X

One of the biggest changes was the scale of drug use and how it took off. It was the time of the 'Trainspotting' generation, where a large percentage of my year group started using the 'hard' drugs heroin and cocaine. Every time I looked around somebody new from my year group appeared to have started this habit.

My father began working with this Generation X. The agency was called DASH line and he introduced me to the role of a drugs worker. DASH back then was a local community action group. It aimed to help families and drug users get treatment from the local GP's. It was here where I began to learn the ropes of being a drugs worker. I was made aware of the issues drugs raised, for example mental health, physical health and damage to family and community. I was also introduced to treatment for dependence. (Back then the options were DHC detox and Methadone, rarely).

Time passed and I began to want to see changes for my 'Generation X'. People who I had known were suffering and the community needed help. In particular the family's suffering affected me. I remember sitting with a parent explaining the waiting list. I remember them, after I gave the obligatory 'they are an adult and have to take responsibility for their own actions' speech explaining tearfully to me, that may be true but they still remembered 'little Johnny/Maggie running around as a five-year old in the back yard, turning to them for answers and help for all their problems.

This was during what I like to describe as the 'dark ages' of drug treatment. This was a time pre-NTA (National Treatment Agency) when drugs workers were trained to have only twenty clients, also to throw people off prescriptions after three warnings and not to really address the needs of family or careers. It also was a time of six to nine month waiting lists, tight control and 'top down' care planning. By this I mean the client needed to reduce their dose based on key worker and GP recommendations rather than any personal choice.

A DRUGS WORKER

It must have been hard during this period between 1998 to 2003. Hard not only for the service users but also for their parents and communities. Casting my mind back to this time I am trying to find examples of people recovering. One that springs to mind is a young man who had great support in the community. Another great advantage for him was his supportive family and the fact that he had just got into a new relationship, with a young child on the way. It seems that these tend to be the common themes for recovery. By this I mean a client, either from their own resources or support, re-integrates into the local community and achieves 'spontaneous recovery' (drug worker jargon, I am afraid).

After 2003 it began to be heavily geared to a new medical model of addiction. The Labour government established the NTA (National Treatment Agency) and the professionals in the field began prescribing Methadone in larger quantities. The aim (based on sound scientific evidence) was to retain clients in treatment and prescribe a clinically effective dose (60-120 mls daily). Waiting lists were also driven down to three weeks and large caseloads became common.

This era seemed to be a double-edged sword. Clients entered treatment quickly, but some of the proactive support that key workers could offer was cut back due to caseload demand. Sometimes it was seen that to put a client on Methadone was enough! I don't feel that this was a view held by any drugs workers but rather became a necessity due to having such larger numbers accessing treatment.

There were lots of advantages to this era for clients. Primary care surgeries began prescribing for them rather than the only option being to go to a central treatment agency. Heroin use was cut down and controlled and clients' health did improve.

During this period many clients began to address their drug use. One client in particular springs to mind. Again notice the common theme. It was a young man that used heroin. He had a supportive family and had just begun having a family. He began to find a job

GENERATION X

and began work. He became re-integrated into his local community and settled down. During the treatment he had to deal with some difficult situations and I endeavoured to support him in these areas.

It appears that a new era is beginning to approach the drug treatment system. New words like recovery and avoiding 'parking people on Methadone' are being used. Rehab and recovery is the priority and outcomes will be high on the list.

I don't know about the new era. However, the conclusions I have learned over the last thirteen years are as follows. Recovery requires good social support, willingness by the client to learn and develop new skills, and a belief in change. This needs to be backed up by motivated drug workers who only wish for the best for their clients. Simple, I know, but sometimes doing the simple things leads to success.

Now I must finish on a hint of caution. This 'Trainspotting' generation is beginning to get old and it seems that a younger generation of drug users are beginning to turn away from heroin. Instead of the 'brown' they are using alcohol (in vast amounts), speed, amphetamine and legal highs. Hopefully the treatment system is ready to respond to the group and they will become Generation Y bother.

I've lived his life too!

Maggie

It started when he was thirteen years old – cannabis. Then it just got more: amphetamines, other pills. A dabble here and a dabble there. Then at the age of fifteen he was onto heroin. And that's how it's been for sixteen years.

I could tell that there was something wrong about my son, something different about him, when he came home that night when he was thirteen. My first thought was that it might be alcohol but he didn't smell of alcohol. He wasn't falling all over either. He was just very giggly, very happy. At the time there were a lot of young teenagers dying from sniffing aerosols and I wondered if it could be that. So the next day, after getting the children off to school, I went to a drug and alcohol misuse service in Pontefract to get some advice. I told them what had happened and that something seemed wrong and from my description they said that it sounded like cannabis. They gave me some leaflets about it and so that's where I had to start educating myself in drug misuse.

Prior to that I had never come across drugs in my life and had never taken them myself so I had to read up on it. I would eavesdrop on his conversations with his friends to see what I could pick up. He knew that I knew he was taking it but he was listening to his friends who said it was harmless. Given that he was only thirteen and it was an older group of friends that he was going around with he believed them when they said, "It's only cannabis. It's not hard drugs. Cannabis can't do you any harm." And it just escalated from there.

Then when he was aged fifteen I was tidying his room one day and I found two syringes and needles. That's when I knew that he had gone onto heroin and that's when my battle began.

I suppose I felt all the normal things that any parent would feel in the same situation. I felt like a failure as a mum and wondered if

it was my fault. I asked where I had gone wrong. And then of course there was the shoplifting that he carried out to fund the habit. Because he was a juvenile I used to go and sit in on all the interviews and go to court with him. If he got fined or had court costs awarded against him or had to pay compensation then it was down to me to pay these as he was a juvenile. This was hard as I had brought him up by myself and was on benefits.

At the age of sixteen he got his first prison sentence. For the thirteen years since then my life has just been one of visiting prisons. I think I have been to every prison in Yorkshire – I've been to Hull, to Armley, to Wetherby, to Doncaster. Typically he would get short sentences of a few months and come out clean. Then soon he would be back on heroin. Sometimes this would be after a month; sometimes after a day; once he met up with his dealer within fifteen minutes of getting out! He was classed as a young offender as a teenager and the pattern was one of a few weeks inside; a few weeks out; a few weeks back in and so on. There was a time over a period of three months when he was arrested thirteen times. And that is how it has been the whole time that he has been on drugs: shoplifting; a bad habit; in prison; clean; out; then the same again. At the moment he is just out of prison. The problem is that he doesn't know anybody who isn't on heroin. His whole circle of friends is made up of users and dealers. It's like a vicious circle.

Of course when he reached the age of twenty-one he was classified as an adult and went to Armley as his first adult prison. It is an awful, heart-rending feeling as a Mum when your son first goes to an adult prison because I associated such prisons with stories of abuse and of getting beaten up. And I was scared that an older prisoner might sexually assault him. None of that has actually happened as it turns out. He has got into a few minor fights over silly issues like games of pool but he has never been picked on, abused or bullied. He has told me that no matter how many times he's been sent to prison, the first few days are hard and then he

just settles down and concentrates on serving his time and keeping his nose clean.

After the last time he came out of prison, two years ago, he came back to live with me. He had been in a relationship since the age of twenty-two but it had started going wrong and he had nowhere else to stay. It is hard to say whether he ever actually left home, in fact, because he's always been in prison. Prison has been his home. When he was out of prison he would be staying with me sometimes. But at other times he would be staying at some horrible bed-sit full of other drug users and dealers. These are places that are full of tin foil and with pins everywhere, and which stink. Once the drug habit takes hold the drug user doesn't wash and doesn't change. From getting up to going to bed it is just heroin, heroin, heroin.

When he came back to live with me, it was nice us being together at first, having brought him up alone. But then his need to finance his habit took over. He would take money out of my pockets, my purse and my bank account. He would harass and intimidate me for money. I only live in a one- bedroomed flat and he would sleep on the sofa. But when I got up in the morning there would be pins lying about. Every few days the police would be turning my flat over looking for stolen goods. In the end I said that he just couldn't live with me anymore. Then he went back to prison, has only just come out of prison now, and I don't know what the future holds.

I don't know if he will stick to being clean this time or what he will do. He has got things in his life that are worth staying off drugs for. He has got a seven-year-old son from one relationship, and a five-year-old child from the relationship that started going wrong two years ago. He would love to be a father to his children. He did try to go clean before once and succeeded for two years.

This effort began seven years ago after he became seriously ill. Because of his drug use he had blood clots in one of his legs and he developed septicaemia. He was in hospital for two weeks and we

didn't know if he was going to make it or not. Once we realised that he was actually going to live, we didn't know if he would get to keep his leg or not. The experience really frightened him—really really frightened him. He went to Turning Point, the local drug treatment agency, and he was placed on a Methadone treatment programme. He did brilliantly and he put on weight. He has a big build but he can get down to seven stone when he is on heroin and isn't eating. But now he became clean, decent and respectable looking. Now that he no longer had a drug habit he was not worried about raising money any more. He went on courses and became a skilled plasterer and builder. My son has always been a very intelligent person and he picks up things and learns quickly.

But then he suddenly threw it all away and went back onto heroin. I don't know why. Now, after a break and going back to it, his heroin addiction became far worse and it all just escalated. He was now taking cocaine and crack too, on top of seventy or eighty milligrams a day of Methadone. It is as if he went back to it with a vengeance to try and compensate for the two years that he had missed. Or maybe it was because he felt like a failure and felt guilty about getting hooked again, so he would take even more in order to numb those feelings.

Those last two years that he was living with me before going to prison he would not admit to Turning Point how bad his habit was. He said he was on a bag or two of heroin a day but he was in fact on more than five a day, as well as being on the cocaine and the crack. As a mother I used to dread getting up in the morning because I would think, 'What if he has overdosed in the night?' I was scared that I might find him dead. Every time the police came to the house I wondered if they were just coming looking for him or if they were coming to tell me that he was dead in a ditch somewhere.

As a mother I mourn because I've lost my child. That thing in front of you is just a shell. It looks like your child but it isn't your

child. And you mourn because you have lost that child and you have lost those years.

Now I am just going to have to face what's what in the future. Only he is in charge of taking control of his future. Only he can decide what way he will go. At the age of twenty-nine he is not a little boy any more. When he was little I did try to control his drug use. I did this with posters! This goes back to his early drug use aged thirteen. He was going around with sponsorship forms and using the money that he collected for sponsorship to buy cannabis. I warned him about it but he still continued to do it. Then I actually caught him in town with a sponsor form doing it so I dragged him down to the police station and handed him in. He got a caution and went straight back to doing it. So then I had these posters printed with his name and photograph on, and they said what he was doing and warned people not to give him any money and to call the police if approached. These worked for about ten months. When he first saw the posters he ran to me horrified and said,

'Mum, do you know what someone has done? They're putting up these posters about me.'

'Yes I know,' I said. 'It was me who put them there.' This hit the local television and newspaper headlines. I actually went back to the newspapers a few months ago and asked why, all these years on, still nobody can do anything to help my son.

My son's whole life has just been heroin. He is on every relevant website going as a prolific shoplifter. This thing came into his life and his addiction is just so bad. He loves his family very much. But even though he loves his children, his girlfriend, his mother, his Nana—sadly heroin has to come first. Sadly his Nana, my mother, died recently while he was in prison and he had to attend the funeral in handcuffs.

I don't know why heroin has to come first for him. I have sometimes wondered if he had that attention deficit hyperactive disorder that no-one knew anything about back then. He was very

intelligent and hyperactive and he would have good spells, but then he would just go off the rails. I have come to see his good spells as the calm before the storm. It's as if he is just this totally addictive person. We have not really talked about it a lot but I do know that he doesn't like being a heroin addict. He doesn't like what it does to him and he doesn't like how he has to rob, steal, lie, cheat and con to get his next fix. He feels bad that he is not the dad that he knows he could be for his children and that he is not the son that he should be.

For sixteen years I have lived the life of a drug addict too, without taking drugs myself. I get to where I don't really care about how I look and can't be bothered either. It has been a struggle to keep him and to feed him whilst getting by on benefits. He would cash his giro and it would go straight on drugs and so I have found it financially hard, yet he would be on at me for money too. I would be trying to juggle living on benefits, supporting and loving my child, learning what I could about drugs, loving him while not liking how he behaved. All of that has been combined with a great heavy sense of grieving because I've lost my child.

While he has been in prison I have been able to put down my mobile phone, my money or my bank cards on the table and I know they will still be there when I go back for them. It is such a nice free feeling.

My son has never been on the streets. He has always had my full support at police stations and prisons, where he has received regular visits and postal orders from me. He has never been without my support until now, which is the first time that he has been in prison without a link to me. I have done this deliberately in the hope that it will force him to stand on his own two feet, but it has taken me sixteen years to withdraw support. It is a hard thing to do. I had another son before him who died of meningitis when he was only six days old. Because I lost my first son it has made me doubly protective towards my second son. I have always tried to

keep him safe no matter what and this is why I have hung on and stuck in there for so long.

Even though you grieve there are times when you hope. I think grief and hope go together like love and hate. My hope is that he turns his life around. I hope that it is not too late. I hope that he gets his life back with his children and becomes the person that he wants to be and that I know he can be. My son is a real human being under that drug addiction. He is intelligent, caring, kind, sensitive, thoughtful, respectful, well-mannered and polite. He just got in with the wrong crowd at an impressionable age. He was hitting his teens and puberty at the time, with all those hormonal complications and no male influence in his life. And he played with the older lads from the estate. He had always been an outdoor person and played outdoors all the time. Until he last went into prison drugs were his friend and the only people he knew were drug users and dealers. He has just come out of prison and I hope that this time it is different. While in prison he has managed to come down from a high dosage of Methadone. Now on his release he is on a maintenance dose of Subutex and so far has stayed away from heroin. He seems to be trying to stand on his own two feet and I am optimistic for the future.

Overall I have found the experience of being the mother of a heroin user very isolating. I have wondered why there is help and support for drug users but not for the families. Recently I have come across GASPED, a family carers' organisation in Wakefield. I have been with them for two months at the point of writing this and it has been a real help in overcoming my isolation. They have also helped me in practical ways, like supporting me when my Mum died. I think that we need more resources to be put into the drugs problem generally, both for the users and for the families and loved ones.

You are not alone

Elaine

We were just a normal family: Mother, Father and five children, working for a living and bringing up our family to be honest and good citizens in an ex-mining town. We weren't well off but we weren't poor either. Our kids didn't want for much but were far from spoilt. We worked hard and did the best we could. Our children grew up and went to university, all except one, my son, who was introduced to drugs, heroin, by friends.

To say that our lives were turned upside down seems a cliché but that doesn't really cover how much this drug has blighted our lives. It seemed a generational thing – he and most of his friends became addicted. It was as if our area and his age group had been targeted. I have watched many young people become stunted in their lives. They are almost like Peter Pan figures, living in a time warp of their own creation. They don't move on, they don't start meaningful relationships, they don't start careers; they just continue much in the same way that they did when they first began taking heroin. Their lives revolve around getting their next fix. Some of the people my son used to know are no longer here, some have managed to break free and rebuild their lives, many, like my son, continue to live under the spectre of heroin. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to who will live, who will break free and who will die. It is a terrifying lottery that they play every day.

I could tell you many stories about how his addiction has changed all our lives. I could describe to you how he begged on his knees for money he knew I didn't have, or the times he lay on the sofa for months on end looking like a corpse, the times when I expected him to die at any moment or the times when I thought he had overdosed and met with the scorn of the ambulance staff as they came to the door. My other sons and daughters could tell you how it felt to live in the same house as an addict, of how any money had

to be hidden away, of how all my attention was sucked up into his world with very little time or energy left for anything else. I could tell you of the thousands of pounds I have borrowed to pay for rehab that ultimately has been unsuccessful or the family Christmas dinners that have been spoilt by an addict at the table.

It ended my marriage and, at times, made me feel suicidal. It took a heavy toll on my health and my relationships with others. Sometimes things were so bad I felt that the only way out would be to put him out of his misery to end his nightmare and mine. You live your life under a black cloud.

My son has been a heroin addict for over ten years. Many of those were without help and support, and those were dark days indeed. He has been on the Methadone programme for a couple of years now. Is he still an addict? Yes, but it has made a vast difference to our lives. I have no idea how we could have survived if things had carried on like they were. GASPED made me realise that we, as a family, were not alone. Their support carried me through some of the darkest times and I will always be grateful for their help. It is vitally important that organisations like theirs continue to exist.

More recently, my son was turned down for rehabilitation because it was felt he did not meet the criteria. I disagree with that decision because I think that he was considered a perfect candidate by his drugs counsellor. I believe that one of the reasons he was turned down was that many addicts who had gone through the process recently had relapsed. What this has to do with my son, I have no idea. This typifies the experience we have had with more 'formal' avenues of help – they are strangled by red tape and largely ineffectual and indifferent. GASPED is literally a breath of fresh air in this scenario and lets you know you are not alone.

I have no idea whether my story will have a happy ending or not. I don't know whether my son will win this lottery. What I do know is that GASPED helped us along the way.

Just One More

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Just one more use, it's not abuse
To make it through my day

Just one more day is all I want
To take away my pain

Just one more time to fly up high
And touch those unreachable stars

Just one more hit is all I need
To make it all okay

Today is hard, tomorrow will be better
I will stop another day

What can it hurt, just one last time
No one has to know

I need that prick so make it thick
To stick in to my veins

So let's get high and make time fly
To end this worthless day

One more time is all I ask
It's just too much to bear

Tomorrow I can try again
Today was too unfair

It's just one use, it's not abuse
To make it one more day

The 2010 Drug Strategy published in December 2010 sets out the Government's approach to tackling drugs and addressing alcohol dependency. The Strategy has two overarching aims by which success will be measured against:

- To reduce illicit and other harmful drug use
- To increase the numbers recovering from their dependence

The Strategy has three key themes:

- Reducing Demand
- Reducing Supply
- Building Recovery in Communities

The Wakefield Substance Misuse Commissioning Group is responsible for the commissioning of drug and alcohol services within the community and prisons.

The services they currently commission include:

- Adult Community Treatment
- Clinical and Psychosocial Interventions
- Shared Care – GP Practices
- Drug Intervention Programme
- Drug Rehabilitation Requirement
- Alcohol Community Treatment
- Integrated Drug Treatment – Prison
- Parent & Carers
- Service User Involvement & Mutual Aid

If required contact:

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