



From a childhood immersed in addiction, criminality and abuse to an Expert by Experience

Every Step of the Way



Michaels' Story

Mixed race, Michael grew up in the midst of a large Irish catholic family in which addiction, criminality and physical and verbal abuse were the norm.

An outsider in both the Irish catholic and Asian communities, his path to addiction began in his early teens. By 17 he was alcoholic and a heroin addict by his early 20s. He was in and out of prison on remand so often it was like a second home, the prison officers welcoming him in on a first name basis.

When his Nan moved into a care home he lost his base and began living in hostels – he has lived in 40-50, often experiencing them as dangerous places that fuel addiction and violence.

The potential for change came when Michael met an Expert by Experience. “She had been where I was,” he explained. “I trusted her.”

After being referred through the No Wrong Door Network to the services he needed Michael is today a participant on Birmingham Changing Futures Together's Every Step of the Way service and through this is involved in the Beyond the Basics Programme. “I've been dry for over two years and not touched any drugs for almost a year. I live in a dry house, and am now working as an Expert by Experience myself.”

Forced from home for having a mixed-race baby, Michael's mother, who was one of 16, moved to London when he was born. An alcoholic, she was abused by her next partner, the father of her next two boys.

All the children were emotionally and physically abused and when he was aged about three, Michael's grandmother took him back to Birmingham, getting kicked out of the family home herself in the process. But she was missed and eventually welcomed back, along with Michael.

Addiction and criminality were endemic in his family. “I loved my family,” said Michael, “but there was constant racial abuse. I didn't fit in anywhere else either. Coming from an Irish catholic family, I was racially bullied at my largely Asian first

secondary school. When I went to a largely white school, the bullying came from the other side. ‘Wagging’ off to go fishing seemed like a sensible option.”

One violent incident stands out from his childhood. Michael explained: “One of my uncles was going to beat my dog. I asked him not to and ended up taking the beating myself. As usual, I was told I would be taken into care if I reported it so told the police nothing when they asked.”

To try and fit in somewhere he got involved in gangs, then it was drink and drugs and the start of his offending behaviour. He was even remanded for kidnap when an uncle grabbed his children from their home; Michael had gone along with no idea of his uncle's plan.

Revolving door of a prison

“By 21 I was addicted to heroin,” he said. “I'd had a few jobs but soon became a ‘professional shoplifter’ dressing in suits to avoid drawing attention.”

In the context of his family this was normal behaviour. Short prison sentences followed; he was in and out so often they knew his name. And when not in prison there always seemed to be a warrant out for a missed court or bail appearance.

By his mid-twenties, he was more settled. “I stopped drinking, was happy living with my Nan and got a steady job as a window fabricator,” he said, “which I kept for the next ten years. It funded my heroin habit.”



He started a relationship with an alcoholic toward the end of this period and began drinking again. He often stayed at his girlfriend's but didn't move in. All 'ticked along' until he broke his ankle. In a wheelchair for nine months, he lost his job and then his disability benefit when his uncles reported him, saying he no longer lived at his Nan's.

Michael explained: "Then came hostels; I've stayed in about 50. They are often violent and generally full of other addicts, making it incredibly difficult to get clean and dry."

In 2015, he met Collette.

"An Expert by Experience, she understood me and listened to my story," he said. "She gave him hope, made me believe change was possible."

He entered re-hab and has not had a drink since. He did, though, relapse on drugs and for the next eight months was back in hostels. At Christmas 2016, he tried to get re-arrested to have somewhere to stay; he thought there was a warrant for his arrest and that he would use the drugs he had hidden on him as 'currency' in prison. But there was no warrant and they didn't find the drugs in the search.

Not getting into the 'safety' of prison, he decided he'd had enough. Not having had a drink for two years and remembering the spark of hope planted by Collette, he accepted a referral through the No Wrong Door Network to the support services he needed. He moved into a dry house; all the residents have random drug and alcohol tests. He also started going to Narcotics Anonymous and has not had any kind of drug, not even pain relief, since.

"I never want to go back," he said. "One recent event shows how far I have come. I was on a bus when I noticed someone had dropped their wallet. My traditional default would have been to nick it. Instead I told the person and he picked it up; it was a relief."

"I'm on the Beyond the Basics programme now. It's helping me move forward at my own pace and start to think about my future."

Michael is now involved in Birmingham Changing Futures Together's Every Step of the Way programme, working as an Expert by Experience himself, engaging with and supporting others as they move away from addiction and helping to change the systems around this support to better engage and support those with multiple and complex needs.

"I'm enjoying it," he said, "but, for me, the really important point is I now have a future."

Contact the BVSC Birmingham Changing Futures Together team for more information.

www.changingfuturesbham.co.uk

The Birmingham Changing Futures Together Programme

Birmingham Changing Futures Together programme improves the effectiveness of service provision to those with multiple and complex needs. It does this by bringing together organisations in the sector, identifying and sharing best practice and establishing new approaches.

The No Wrong Door Network

At the heart of the Changing Futures approach, the No Wrong Door Network is a group of organisations working together to ensure service users, with at least two of the four complex needs (homelessness, substance misuse, offending and mental health) can have access to a whole system of support through one referral.

Engagement in the Birmingham Changing Future Together programme is not limited to those charities and organisations formally part of the No Wrong Door Network. All other organisations can benefit from the best practice approaches being developed and shared with sector members through learning events and the Birmingham Changing Together website: changingfuturesbham.co.uk.



Every Step of the Way

Every Step of the Way is the flagship user involvement and engagement programme. It supports, trains, enables and empowers people with multiple and complex needs to participate in the Birmingham Changing Futures Together programme.

Beyond the Basics

This post-programme workstream aims to prevent the "falling away" of support services once an individual is deemed well enough to 'move on'. The workstream is broken into three phases for each client, moving at a pace that suits them. The first is "Engagement" with the BTB team, second is "Progression and Development" through the workstream, with the third being "Moving Forward" into the wider community.