

# MY STORY

20 years on from the creation of the Good Friday Agreement we ask a group of young adults, women, refugees and asylum seekers from North and West Belfast to tell their stories, detailing their past and current situations and aspirations for the future.

# MY STORY

I want to dedicate this book to my Father, Michael Doherty, who died in an accident at work 5th March 2018. He was the real storyteller. He loved listening to and sharing stories. He was my role model, my listener, my hero who always inspired and encouraged me to do good. He made me who I am and for that I will be forever grateful. Love you always!

Rory Doherty -  
Project coordinator, Quaker Service.

## Letter from the Chair

Quaker Service has been translating Quaker values of peace, equality, truth and simplicity into action in Northern Ireland since the 1970s. Our vision is a society where people are valued and fulfil their potential. Our aim is to play our part in reducing violence, suffering and disadvantage by delivering practical, social and emotional support services that value and empower people just where they are. We seek to meet need, particularly where it might otherwise be unmet.

Our work has always been underpinned by the belief in the worth of each individual. We respect and accept all, regardless of circumstance. In so doing, we promote increased self-worth and confidence and enhance mutual understanding and respect.

Storytelling is a powerful means of expressing that unique worth we seek to recognise. 'My Story' gives voice to eighteen individuals who might otherwise be unheard, empowering each one to shape and share their experiences, to tell their story. The courage of those who have shared their stories is inspiring and there is a real sense not only of their resilience but of their determination to make things better.

'My Story' speaks truth to power, illustrating with raw honesty how lives for many in Belfast have not improved significantly in the twenty years following the Good Friday Agreement. By increasing understanding of how things really are and suggesting what needs to happen for their lives to improve, the participants in 'My Story' show that they have in themselves the potential to bring about change.

**Elizabeth Dickson**  
Chair - Quaker Service

# Intro

## My Story

**Have you ever thought about your story?**

**Where it would begin?**

**What about those who are close to you, do they know your 'true' story?**

**Do you know theirs?**

**Why not take the time to find out?**

The concept for this project was developed back in May 2017. We saw an opportunity with the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement approaching on the 10th April 2018. We wanted to use the international celebrations to innovatively 'speak truth to power' and "Campaign for Change". The 20th anniversary celebrations give us the opportunity to explore with people, on both sides of the peace wall divide, changes experienced, both positive and negative, since 1998, '20 years on'.

Previously we have delivered storytelling projects resulting in publications with young people from North and West Belfast, 'Our View'; young men in Hydebank Wood College, 'Inside Out'; and with women from within the criminal justice system, 'Emotional Journeys'. All the stories within these publications have been powerful for the reader and transformational for most involved. They also helped highlight an awareness of the needs within their communities and within the criminal justice system; however they failed to bring about any real changes at policy level.

We were delighted that the funders of this project (highlighted on page 90) supported our idea of creating 'My Story', 18 personal stories from a group of young people, their family members, refugees and asylum seekers along with a short film (see QR code on back cover) highlighting the daily struggles which still plague some of Northern Ireland's most deprived areas 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement. With hate crime and racial attacks on the increase, we felt it was important to include the stories of refugees and asylum seekers. They are part of our society and their voice needs to be heard. This second group from Homeplus NI worked separately through the process until the residential stage when they joined with the group of young people at Quaker Cottage to share their stories.

This publication 'My Story' is the first stage of the project providing a platform for stories to be heard with some participants having suggested possible solutions to the problems. The second stage will involve empowering a group of the participants to become activists, creating a compelling catalyst for change for themselves, their local communities and wider Northern Ireland society by speaking out about their personal experiences and campaigning to positively influence high level policy decisions impacting on their lives. Often young people in a post-conflict society are those who are most underserved and their voice often goes unheard. They are often viewed as the problem within society instead of seeing an opportunity to engage with them to promote and experience positive solutions.

Storytelling is a means of personally expressing one's feelings and communicating anxieties, fears, loss, trauma or even hopes for the future. Throughout this storytelling programme, reflective exercises were used to help the young people critically reflect on the key events in their lives and how these have helped shape them into the person they are today. Often the participants realise that they have been victims of circumstances with many having experienced traumatic events which they had no control over. At Quaker Cottage we provided a safe, supportive environment where the young people began to openly explore these events with others. For some, this was their first time disclosing personal events. The process helped the young people become more resilient with hope for a new future direction.

Sean 20, said;

"After reading my story back to myself it has made me realise that there were a lot more things that have happened in my life that have affected me. Until you take the time out to read your story you don't realise how much other things that has happened in your life and the way that it affects you. My hopes for the future would be to work with young people and to help bring about some sort of change which is really needed in Belfast today."

Throughout the process, young people were encouraged to be creative by using three different art mediums; painting/drawing, photography and drama. Some used painting and drawing to make collages of their identity and draw timelines of their lives. Some chose photography to creatively express their lives and Nickie and Matt from Prime Cut Productions delivered a series of drama workshops for the group. Through this artistic process, young people produced a visual re-enactment of their experience which portrayed the depth of their story, the depth of their despair, and the inspirational depths of their courage. The young people saw the project as a safe, therapeutic tool enabling them to explore parts of their own past, often for the first time. At the end of each session we sat in a circle where young people were free to share parts of their art/photos with the group if they wished. Week by week young people became more empowered to take ownership of their story by sharing small pieces at a time and as the weeks passed, they grew in confidence enabling them to share their full stories during a residential.

Through short interviews, each individual was given the time, space and support necessary for their own story to be shared and captured. Once transcribed, the young people had opportunities to read over their story and edit it, this process enabling them to reflect upon their lives, empowering them to become their own author. This, I felt, was an important aspect of our storytelling project. The translation process, from the first interview to the final editing, gave them a sense of control over their stories and lives that they hadn't felt before.

The two individual groups met for the first time during a two-day residential. For two of the young people, this was the first time they had ever left Belfast. It was an incredible experience to watch young people editing their stories, creating more images to illustrate their lives, having fun together and sharing personal and often difficult memories with a group they came to deeply trust and care for. The support and empathy within the group was almost tangible.

The stories revealed in the following pages are real stories from real lives, but to maintain personal privacy, details have been altered to prevent their identification. I hope these stories will serve to promote an understanding of Belfast lives, and at the same time, take each individual on his or her own personal healing journey, and give the reader hope for a better future.

**Rory Doherty**

Project coordinator, Quaker Service.

# Homeplus

Homeplus NI is a homelessness charity founded in 2000. In 2006 Homeplus opened a Drop-in Centre for destitute migrants and in 2011 the services were extended to help refugees and asylum seekers. The Centre is now mostly attended by refugees and asylum seekers and practical support including:

- Food
- Advice
- Emergency financial and accommodation support
- Signposting and referrals to other agencies
- Help with accessing and medical services
- Clothing and food banks
- Shower and washing facilities
- English classes
- Art projects
- A computer room
- Volunteer opportunities
- Diversionary activities
- De-stressing sessions
- Support with school admissions
- Support with funding applications for further education and training
- Employment and tenancy support
- Community allotment plots
- Women and children's room

The length of this list goes some way towards illustrating the number and breadth of issues that new arrivals, in our strange land, have to negotiate.

Homeplus is aware that racial hatred is an increasing problem and we deeply appreciate the initiative that Quaker Service is taking by including the voices and perspectives of young migrants, alongside those from both sides of the peace walls, in My Story.

Five young migrants who have used the Homeplus drop-in participated in the project. These young people shared their stories of life in very different places and experiences as new arrivals in Belfast – to them an 'other' place – with young people who had an intimate and in-depth local knowledge but frequently very limited experience of any 'other' place.

Many of the young people who come here in search of safety left behind full and comfortable lives – lives that changed drastically in the blink of an eye. Many have been forced to grow-up quickly, taking on responsibility at a young age, helping their families negotiate harsh and punitive immigration systems. Often it is children who 'pick up' English and translate for their parents and siblings in appointments and meetings that they would not, in normal circumstances, even attend. These experiences take their toll. Anahita, who appeared to be so strong when she shared her story admitted: "Yes, Elfie, I'm strong but I am tired".

The difficult experiences that are told in these stories evidence the need for statutory organisations and institutions to ensure that staff are properly trained and aware of the situations people are coming from. These staff are often some of the first people asylum seekers come into contact with, it is so important that everyone is treated with sensitivity and accorded respect.

More positively the stories of all the people included in this book show the amazing ability of children, young adults, and their carers to adapt in intelligent, resourceful and brave ways. Many of the young people who come through the doors of Homeplus possess talents and enthusiasm which is all too easily quashed during a long and frustrating asylum system, a system which leaves many in limbo for years, unable to work or study. This wasted time is not only a loss for the young people but also for us, their new communities.

Telling the stories was an emotional experience for all involved. All had been forced to tell these stories many times before; to home office representatives, to police, to charity and aid workers, often in atmospheres that are hostile and intimidating. Migrants' stories are cross-examined, and every detail approached with suspicion. This project gave the participants a space to express themselves in the way they wanted, in their own time. When the two groups came together and shared their stories, one-by-one, it became clear that suffering and, more importantly, empathy is universal across cultures, genders, and religions. Awareness and understanding of each other's past and present realities opens doors, banishing blind prejudice.

The Good Friday Agreement was designed to bring peace for all living in Northern Ireland but as Sahib exclaims; "Since coming to Belfast I have found peace, but it's physical peace I have, not mental peace". The bombs may have gone but the need for real change to overcome division and divisiveness remains.

# ESC

Alongside this publication, the Quaker Service of NI worked in partnership with Belfast film-making charity ESC ([www.esc-film.com](http://www.esc-film.com)) to capture some of these stories on film. ESC specialise in working in sensitive and challenging environments and use storytelling, drama and film to help people gain a new perspective on their traumatic experiences. They were ideally placed to work with the participants on this project to help them tell their stories.

ESC came up with the concept of staging an anniversary 'celebration' of the Good Friday Agreement in the empty Stormont building, at a time when the government was not operational. They wanted to frame the young people's and the refugees' stories within the context of what the Good Friday Agreement promised and the reality of life in 2018. You can watch this film by scanning the QR code on the back cover of this book.



...four gunshots fired into the crowd which hit one of my mates...

**My name is Jake, I'm 15 and I'm from West Belfast.**

**R: Okay, so Jake where does your story begin?**

My story begins when my mummy got a house in west Belfast and we all moved with her. I started making loads of friends in the area. And then when I got into Secondary School it was alright for about two, three years and then my Granda died and I went out with my mates and smoked loads of cannabis. I ended up getting onto different drugs and doing something stupid and I was getting in and out of stolen cars. And when my mummy found out, she went mad at me and threw me out of the house. I had to go and stay with my Granny. But when my Granny found out about it, she threw me out of her house and I had to go and live with my Auntie. My Auntie just let me live there for a bit.

I was doing bad at school and I wasn't getting nowhere. I was saying 'fuck off' to all the teachers and getting suspended a lot and then I was only thirteen, but it got good at the end of the year - I turned fourteen and it was in the summertime. When I was in fourth year, I was being better than what I was in the third year. I put my head down and starts to work, staying in the class instead of walking out. But I was still smoking cannabis and I was still doing my own thing you know. And it was hard. But I got over it in the end.

And then a couple of months later down the line, I went out with my mates one night. I'll never forget this night.

It was about eight o'clock, we were all standing at the flats just all talking and having a laugh.

We went for a wee dander and there was a car - a stolen car - we were all just talking, and I was sitting having a smoke, talking with one of my mates. The stolen car was flying up and down. We were all just focused on the stolen car and then the next minute we heard footsteps from behind and then I turned around and there was four gunshots fired into the crowd which hit one of my mates. Everyone (but me) scattered through all the alleys. They were scared. I was scared too. But I was left there by myself with a person lying on the floor and I had to do something. I had to phone the ambulance. So, I got him in the ambulance and I went with him to the hospital and then when we got in to the hospital he started talking and he started coming around a bit.



**...“Listen I need a bit of cannabis, I need something”...**

**R: And how did you feel at that time when this all happened?**

It sounds like a lot to take in. I was scared. I didn't know what to think at the time. I didn't know if anything was going to happen to me, but I still stayed there with him. He turned around and said to me "Kid, I thought you were going to run like the rest of them". I says no, no I wouldn't do that and if someone needed my help I'd be there for them. And he put his hands out and he shook my hand and he said to me "They're all associates kid, you - you're my mate now. You're one of my mates". I'll never forget this night.

**R: Yeah it sounds traumatic to go through. To experience that - to witness that.**

And then after, I went out with one of my mates, but he had nothing to do with it, so I just stayed in his house. I was stressed out that much I said to him "Listen I need a bit of cannabis, I need something", so he grinded up a bit of green and then he give it to me and I got the fuck out of it and then we just watched a film. It was still stressing me out in my head. Some nights I still see it in my head. I still dream about that night and it's hard to go through at my age like, but things just happen, and you don't know what's around the corner.



**R: And what is it like growing up where you live in Belfast?**

It's hard, so it is. You get stopped by the cops a lot, they search you, and find nothing on us. And that's good because I didn't want any of my mates to go inside. We just went on and forget about the cops. Blanked them out, and just got on with our lives.

**R: And what about the car crime and stuff then? Did you ever get back involved with that or just stop it when you moved to your Aunties?**

Yeah, I stopped it when I decided to do boxing. If I'm going to do boxing then I can't do that, I can't do certain stuff. Like I can't go and smoke a bit of grass because the boxing coach is strict, so I had to stop the grass. I had to stop it and just move my life forward. Just start thinking about what I want to be, where I want to go and what I want to do.

**R: And what do you want to do?**

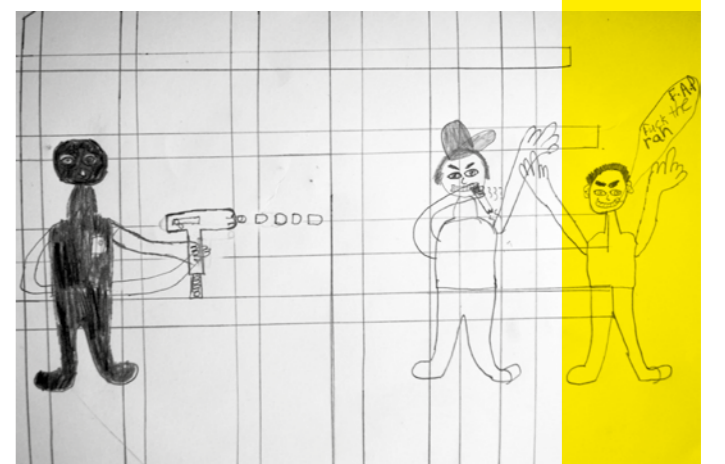
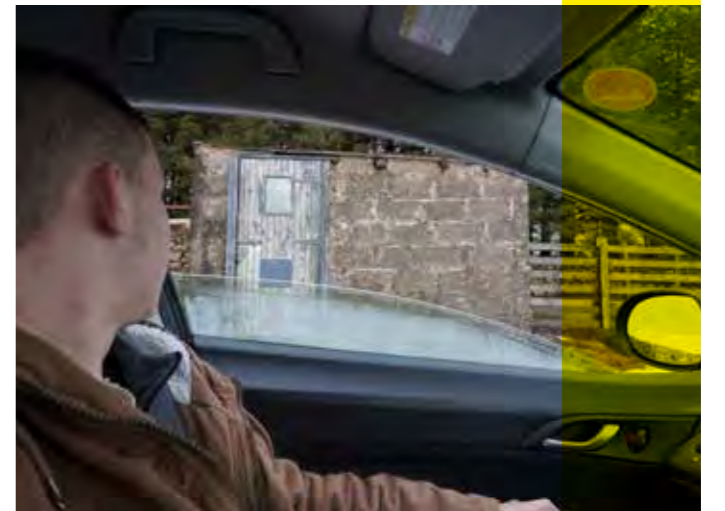
I want to be a boxer, but I want to have a job on the side too.

**R: It's good to have a back-up plan. And what would be the job on the side?**

Either a bricklayer or a roofer.

**R: Cool. Do you want to talk any about the Troubles? Have your family been involved in the Troubles before in the past? Have you heard stories what it was like where you live in Belfast during the Troubles?**

Yeah, I've heard a lot of stories about where I live. My Granny told me a story about my Granda. He wanted to fight for his country. And the only way he saw that he was going to get it was through fighting, through guns, and so he got into the paramilitaries. When the Brits came into the area, my Granda and my Granny switched all the lights off and my Granny put the guns into the pram and put a pillow on the guns and put a blanket over the pillow and set my mummy into the pram and she wheeled it to her sisters and not once was she stopped. So that's how they moved guns about.





...You can change, you can change big time, you can turn your whole life around...

My Story

**R: And what way do you think it is now with the whole peace process?**

I think it's completely different. All the better like. You wouldn't see riots nowadays the way you'd see back then. You just wouldn't. And I don't think there's that much sectarianism in Belfast. I know people who were murdered and people who actually had their legs blown off because of the Troubles. But they've told me their story and it was pretty bad. They said to me if it kept going on and on and on there was never going to be peace in Ireland, so the two biggest parties had to come to an agreement to end the Troubles. They had to put an end to it to make the peace process and it's going good, it's working good like.

**R: Yeah, it's a lot quieter and more peaceful now. And what about like refugees and asylum seekers coming in to Belfast now? How do you feel about that?**

I mean the refugees in my school are all right. They come over and talk to me. There was maybe only about twenty, thirty in the school, and now it's sort of becoming like a multi-cultural school. Um I don't have nothing like against them or anything. I think they're all right because most of their countries have been at war exactly the way Ireland and Britain have been at war with each other. That's the way their countries came to war too.

**R: So, you have an understanding then. Is there anything else?**

This is only obviously the first recording. You will get a chance to read over it and add to it. You can take stuff out and put stuff in but is there anything else that you feel you want to say now which you haven't had a chance to say yet?

...first day I heard, about the boxing club, I ran straight over to it and I joined up...



Um, there was a street gang I was becoming part of. It was about two years ago when I was thirteen and it was called Hoods Liberation Army, that's what it meant. And you had to prove yourself, you had to do things you didn't want to do. You can change, you can change big time. You can turn your whole life around.

**R: And have you done that?**

Yeah. I've done it because the person who got shot, I've stayed in contact with him, but the people who he was hanging around with - yeah now he's stayed away from all of them. I kept myself to myself because I thought that was the best thing

for me and just started being around my family more. And that helped me. I could have ended up in jail but in the end, I wasn't stupid. Everything I did I knew exactly what I was doing, and I knew what way to do it.

**R: What did you do?**

I took drugs, I smoked cannabis, I took glues, when I did feel the hit it was almost like I was floating in the air, like I didn't know what I was doing and of all the poor people who I was hanging around with, it was just me and him. He says to me "Come on into the town". I said right. He started hoking and poking at cars and he managed to get one.



It didn't open so I was just looking around, I didn't know what was going on and he just grabbed a stone and smashed the window. The alarm went off and he says, bounce on the car. I put my foot at the steering wheel and he twisted it round so he could snap it and he pulled all the wiring out of the casing and he got the car started and we were driving about just basically doing our own thing, just breaking the law, doing crime and he dropped me off and I told him to watch himself, just in case something happens or you get caught. I was like 'what did I do there? What was going on?' But when I got home, tears were rolling down my eyes coz I remembered he said, "You helped me do that". And I was like "What do you mean - helped you do what?" And he said, "You helped me steal that car". I was like "when was this"? - "the other day - on Friday." And I goes I didn't even know what I was doing, I didn't even know where I was. But the person I was with obviously had took hits of this drug several times, so he knew what he was doing but he didn't see or know what I was doing because I had only took them once. I felt really bad about it - the fact that I didn't know what I was doing and the fact that I even done it. Yeah it was hard like, getting over it. But I ended up getting over it in the end. I'm staying in school and keeping my head down.

**R: It sounds like you're trying to turn your life round, and you're focused. And you want to do well, and you've been staying out of trouble.**

I mean, like if I would have took them drugs again, if I went down the same path of what I did, I wouldn't even be sitting here, I wouldn't even be in school or I wouldn't even be going to my Granny's, my Uncle's, my Auntie's, or my Mummy's. I would have been probably sitting locked up in Hydebank or any Young Offenders, Prisons, whatever. Yeah, I've turned my life around.



**R: And why do you think so many young people from like, say, where you live, get involved in gang culture or get involved in crime?**

Because, I mean, sometimes there's nothing to do. So, first day I heard, about the boxing club, I ran straight over to it and I joined up. Yeah, I've been keeping at it and I've been trying to get fights sorted and buy stuff for it so that I can like try to get out of this country. Coz, I feel like I can do it, I believe in myself that I can do it.

**R: Would you not want to do it in this country?**

I would, but I would like to travel and fight. It was hard, and my family just kept me going, kept me strong. When my Granda died, hurt me bad. And then I started doing drugs, stealing the car, and fighting a lot. And when one of my mates got beat up, we all fought them, and we ended up hurting them. Sometimes you don't mean to do anyone wrong, but you end up doing it anyway. And you have to live with it. I didn't make good memories on the streets. The night when my mate got shot I thought that I was shot too, his legs were pouring with blood, his blood was all over my hands. I was like what the fuck is going on here? But you have to get over it.

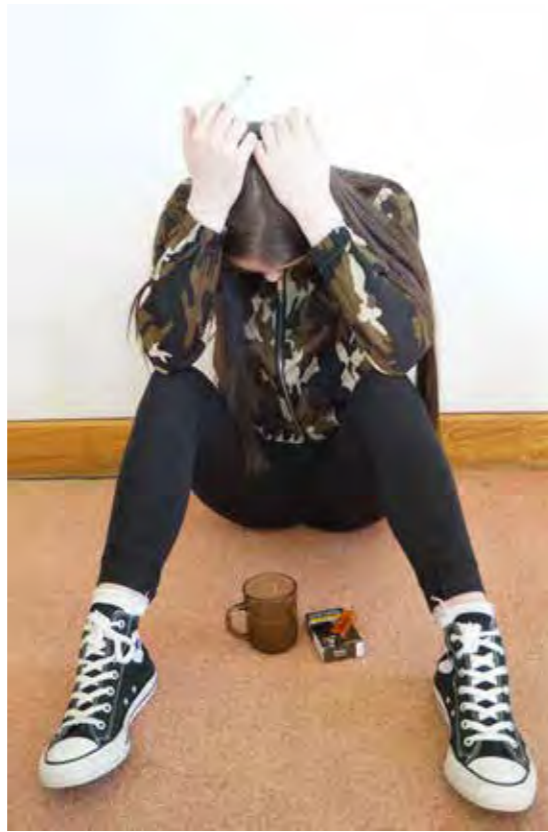


...Coz, I feel like I can do it, I believe in myself that I can do it...



...I would have woken up every morning and my mummy would have had a black eye or a mark on her...

My Story



**I was originally born in north Belfast and then we moved west, but we were in and out of hostels.**

That was most of my childhood, that was when I was younger, like I was still a wee baby. Whenever I started to become a bit older I had my eyes opened to my mummy and daddy's relationship. I noticed then that it was abusive, everyday it was just constant shouting. I would have woken up every morning and my mummy would have had a black eye or a mark on her and I didn't know where it came from. I didn't understand that it was coming from my daddy.

My daddy always used to drink, and he just wasn't a nice person whenever he drank. There was always police at the door, my daddy was always getting thrown out. I was starting to see it with my own eyes. It was just really hard. All I wanted to do was protect my mummy. Obviously, I couldn't do that because I didn't have the type of power to do that. I was only about 9 or 10. If I had of tried to protect my mummy then he would have turned on me. I was defensive, and I couldn't really do anything, so I just had to sit there and take it.

**...My daddy always used to drink, and he just wasn't a nice person whenever he drank...**

There wouldn't be physical abuse anymore it would be more emotional. There would have been times I would have just exploded, then I would get everything. Then there was sometimes I would have to stay out of the house for a while, just to take a breather, just to like... relax. Because it was really overwhelming. He would belittle you because he knows he is getting to you. He gets something out of that too, you know what I mean?

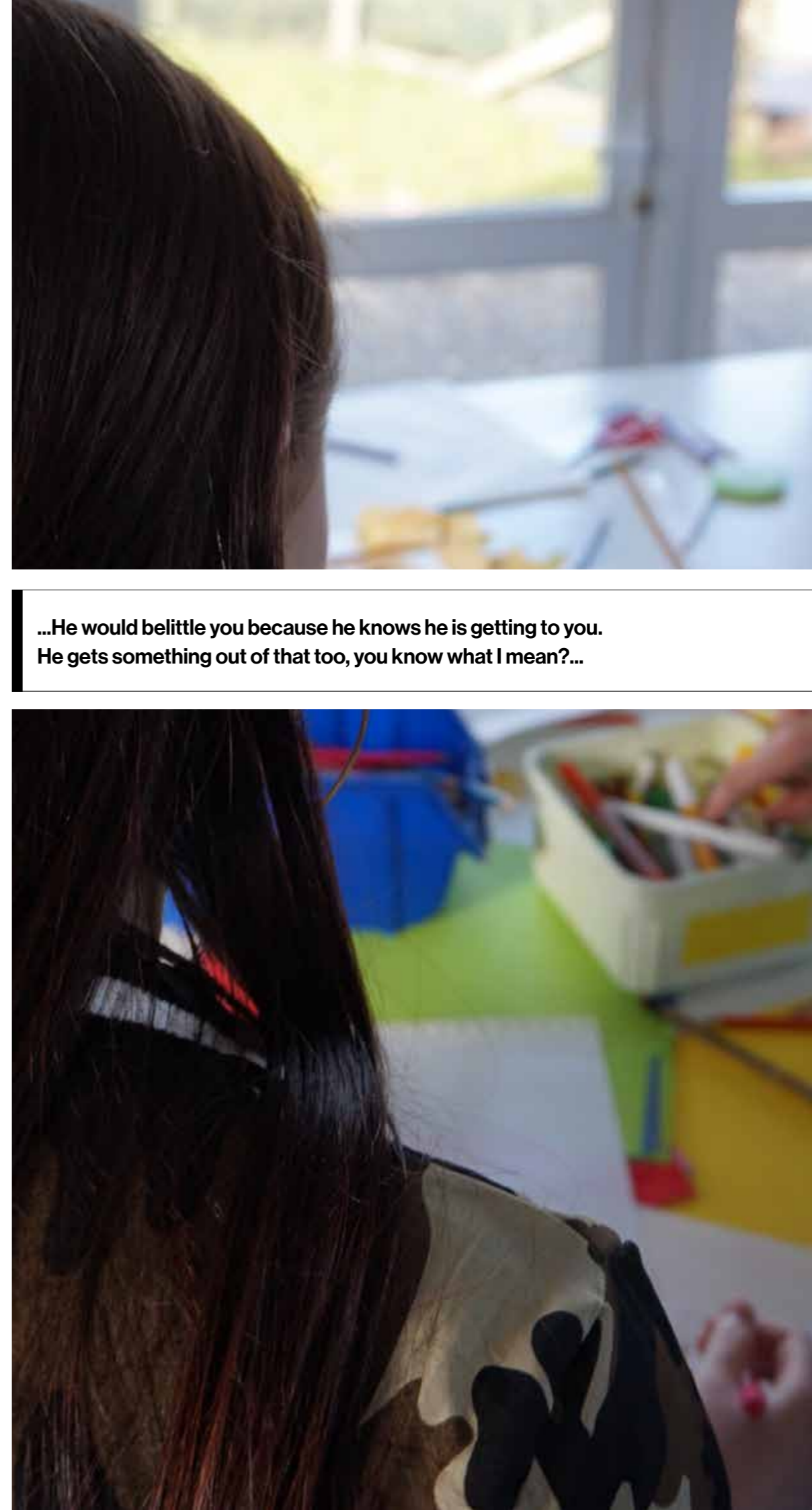
I would go to my nannies or my aunties when I need space, just as I got older. Before when I was like young, I didn't really have any ways to deal with it. School was kind of respite, like I went to school, and I was just able to relax. I always would have went to the library and I would have just sat in the room for hours and read. I found that was something just to distract me from the whole thing. I would have read a load of books and I just would have got lost in it. Time would just pass, for hours and hours. It was just something for me to do. Just to forget about everything.

As I got older, I found different things to get me through it. Like 4th and 5th year, things are kind of getting a bit more stressful and obviously not dealing with family, but also peer pressure and everything like that and just falling into the wrong crowd. Every crowd I have found they are druggies or they sleep about or they're just not nice people.

I was always really happy and all, no one would have thought about what went on behind closed doors in my house. I didn't really speak to anyone about it. I had Quakers and all, that's why my mummy came up here because it was a place for her to escape. Quakers helped us because they put us into a hostel once. That's why I was really close with Sharon and Phil, they were really there for my mummy.

Boys were just a big regret. It started like just the first boy and all, you thought it was really good and all, got them wee butterflies and all of that. It started getting more serious and it just progressed into heavier stuff. That's a big thing to take on in your life, do ya know what I mean? I think boys would be a big impact on my life right now coz I'm just constantly around boys. I just didn't like being around wee lads when I was younger, I just didn't feel safe at all. I was never able to speak, it would just feel like my throat was closing over.

**...He would belittle you because he knows he is getting to you. He gets something out of that too, you know what I mean?...**





...I just don't see a point moping about and feeling sorry for myself. If I just get up and get on with things - be positive...

My Story

I had one serious relationship, this wee lad Jo that I went with. I went with him for a while, there was sometimes where he treated me right and all of that, but he just showed me off like a trophy. Out in public and all he was just really affectionate, like 'oh look what we can do' all this, that and the other. That changed my perspective on wee lads, coz, like each experience just changes it more and more, you lose trust. You just assumed that every wee lad is the same, being used and all of that, that can really hurt ya. Now, even with anyone, I barely talk to anyone that much coz a few years ago I would have just been a very open person I would have told anyone anything. I was an open book. See now, it would just take so much to get out of me, to actually say something. I would only really talk to people that I get that safe feeling off, that I trust. I would very rarely get that.

I would very rarely talk to my mummy. We were close before; my mummy was like my sticking plaster and I told my mummy everything. I never would have lied to my mummy's face or nothing. Now I would very rarely talk to her because I just feel whenever I tell her things she's just constantly jumping down my throat. Saying 'don't be doing this, don't be doing that' and all 'you're too young to be doing this' and all, it's stupid.



Just with all the wee lads, with school, with peer pressure and with my family – as I said earlier, reading helped me deal with a lot of stuff – it was an escape, but as I got older I found other things to deal with it. I turned to drugs and ... I think in a way; wee lads were kind of a distraction too. Doing stuff, it was kind of a distraction for a while. I turned to drugs and all of that, at the start it probably would have been grass or something or dope. I would never have really touched anything else, I never would have smoked a feg or nothing. I always swore and all 'I'll never smoke, I'll never drink, I'll never do nothing'. As I got older, I tried fegs, I tried grass and dope, but I never thought I would touch anything heavier. And then... as people would say, grass and dope would be a gateway drug. I just kind of built up, I was getting sick of the feeling. It wasn't numbing me enough, because I was constantly doing it. I was more or less doing it every day. It just wasn't having the same effect for me. So, I obviously turned to other drugs to numb me, nothing else really was. I turned to cocaine and ecstasy that was doing something to me, that was numbing me. It made me forget about all my problems for a while. I think just doing all of that just really fucked me up in the head, just because I was so wrapped up in it. I just didn't care, and I wanted to be numb from everything.

Even when I'm drinking, people tell me to stop, because I'm just so numb and I just don't care. I just continue doing it and I get myself in these states. I think that all just fucked me up in my head big time. I started getting distracted in school and I was losing friends and I just lost the relationship between my mummy and daddy. I just didn't really care, I genuinely didn't care at all. Even though with my daddy and all, like with the rough upbringing, I still would have been a daddy's girl. But now, I can't talk to my daddy at all. I would be the same with my mummy.

With everything, the drugs and all of that, it just fucked me up in the head big time. I think I just became severely depressed. I was going out every single day, I was never in the house. In school, I just wasn't paying attention and my head just wasn't there. It led to self-harm and everything, so it did. I never told my mummy, I never told anyone about that. It just led me to be a bit more private. When I was self-harming and depressed I was covering up my body. Every night I was crying myself to sleep and all. I just had that constant feeling like I was a burden, I honestly had suicidal thoughts. I cut my body really bad because whenever I was doing it obviously... like the drugs they just weren't working at all, so I went to self-harm. It was a way to numb me... I just lost all happiness. People would have seen me as a really bubbly person and everyone just noticed I was quieter and I just wasn't really talking as much. I didn't go out as much because I was always out, but I started staying in more. I was always up in my room, I never really went downstairs, I never spent time with my family.

There was times I thought about suicide and all, I just didn't see the point anymore. With school and all, wee lads, and with my family. I just didn't see a point anymore. Then I started getting help. My mummy started talking to me more, she had found out about the self-harm. She took my phone off me for a while, so she did.

The first time I told my mummy I wasn't happy she was like 'Wise up, it's probably all the wee lads doing that to you' but it was something in my head, I just wasn't happy, just genuinely not happy. Mummy would say 'it's only a bad day, not a bad life', I just knew that there was something not right with me. I started getting help with my youth leaders, I was going to one-to-one talks and I was starting to talk more. I was slowly coming out of it.

Even now, I would still get those times where I would feel down but I've just learnt to get on with it. Just put a smile on my face. Through them dark times I was just feeling sorry for myself and I was just constantly sulking but now I just prefer to get on with it. I just don't see a point moping about and feeling sorry for myself. If I just get up and get on with things - be positive.

My mummy has her own problems going on, so the person I would talk to would be my auntie or my youth leader. But I would just try to keep it all in and put a smile on my face and all and just try to think positive. Sometimes though it just gets to the point where I just explode because I just build everything up. Whenever I do that, I would go and stay in my aunties. I literally speak to her about any problem I have. See if I was to go into her house, she would just know straight away there is something wrong with me. She would just sit me down, talk to me and give me advice. She knows how to cope with everything, she knows how to talk about things because she knows what way kids are nowadays.



**...she knows how to talk about things because she knows what way kids are nowadays...**

Even now, it's still hard but I'm just trying my best to get on with things, just to put my head down in school. I'm just gonna like try and settle down and just keep quiet for a while, even try and change my friend group. I'm gonna try and keep my head down in school and - try my best to be happy.

Well, I feel there should be a centre for younger people. There should even be a young centre where people are able to go in and hand themselves in, or even family members. It could be a rehab like that. I just think there needs to be a place that is welcoming and open to young people.



...I couldn't understand why men could have four wives at the same time! Why will my husband have another three wives?...

My Story

**My Name is Lily and I'm from Iran. I am 21 now. I was born in Tehran the capital city of Iran.**

I had a really nice life in my country. Up to the age of 15 I never believed in God, I thought there was no god in the world and I thought everyone who thought there was, was just fooling themselves. In school they taught us about Islam. When I was in religious education classes at school I couldn't accept it at all, I thought the idea of it was really silly – I thought it was a joke - I couldn't believe it. I couldn't understand why men could have four wives at the same time! Why will my husband have another three wives? My teacher was always putting me out of the classroom because I answered all her questions about religion logically and she would get angry with me.

In Iran they forced us to do our daily prayers at school. If we refused they made us do the prayers at lunch time instead of eating. I hated it – it made me think all of religion was a lie, a joke.

But then when I was 15 I met some spiritual people who preached peace and they taught me about God. These guys had spent a lot of time in India and they taught me everything they learnt there. When I met these people I started to believe in God. I started to see things more clearly. They taught me how to understand, how to know myself. They taught me how to understand myself.



Since I was a child I have always preferred black and grey colours, mostly black. Because I like these colours people think I'm weird, or a Satanist. But these are just the colours I like – wearing them doesn't mean that I don't believe in God. People thought I was evil because of the way I dressed but it is not true. People used to judge me and bother me a lot because of the way I dressed. As I got older, police started to stop me in the streets and detain me because of the way I dressed, my hair, and my piercings. One time I was walking down the street with my ex boyfriend who has a lot of tattoos. The police stopped us and asked us if we like the devil? If we are Satanists? I said no and they took me to the police station and the police woman made me take off all of my clothes. I had two piercings close to my hips at the time. If you look you can still see the scar. The police woman asked me to take them out, I said no and she ripped them out from my skin. I was bleeding everywhere. Now every time I'm shopping and I see jewellery for those types of piercing it reminds me of that day. I couldn't express myself, or my style in Iran. I couldn't understand why they cared! You couldn't even see the piercings because we had to cover our whole body with clothes. Why did she do that? It makes no sense.

**...I couldn't express myself, or my style in Iran. I couldn't understand why they cared!...**

After that event the police took my student ID for a month and I was unable to go into university. They are not the normal police, they are a special group that wear normal clothes and live among the people; they are very crazy and scary. After the month had passed they gave me an appointment to go back for my ID. When I got there they told me I could only get my ID back if I worked undercover for them and told them about other people who were like me, who dressed like me. They wanted their names – crazy. They wanted me to work undercover for them in my university. They wanted me to help them. I could never do that, so when I left the police station I just smashed my sim card and ran off.

My mother was so mad at me at this time, she couldn't understand why I wanted to bring all this attention to myself – she didn't get it. I had a lot of problems living in Iranian society because of the way I dressed; because of the way I am.

My mum had been a Christian since I was 16 and she started to teach me more about Christianity as I got older. When I started to read the bible I learnt that God was good and kind and he touched my heart. But I had to hide being a Christian in Iran. It was hard for me because a lot of people were saying a lot of bad things about Christianity and I couldn't say anything. If they figured out that I was a Christian they would come and kill me so you just have to listen to shit and sit there and be quiet.

One day my mother picked me up from university and took me to my aunt's house. After dropping me off she went to the House Church. It's really hard to go to the House Church in Iran; the people have to really trust you before you are allowed to go in. I left my university stuff; my laptop, books etc in the car. Because sometimes people steal things from your cars, my mum took my bag into the house church with her. My mum had parked outside someone's house and she left a note on her car saying that if they needed her to move to please call this number. About half way through the church service my mum got a phone call from the guy who lived in the house, so she went out to move her car. She left her things and my bag inside the house church.





...This is when we knew it was not safe for us in Iran. We went into hiding in another city in Iran...

My Story

It was a very busy that day so my mum had to drive for about 20 minutes to find a place to park. She found a place two or three streets away. My mum then walked back to the house church. As she approached the church she saw a crazy scene, there were a lot of police outside the church. It was mad; a van, twenty cars, lots of men in black clothes. My mum saw that the police had already taken everyone and everything so she ran away. My mum had left all of our things in the church when she had gone to move the car so she knew that the police would have our names and addresses and information about us. This is when we knew it was not safe for us in Iran. We went into hiding in another city in Iran. When we were hiding we learnt that our house in Tehran was raided by the police. When we heard about the raid we fled Iran.

The journey was very difficult; we drove on the back of a lorry through Turkey. When we arrived here we had no idea what country we were in. The smuggler brought us to an area near a big Tesco, I remember seeing the Tesco. He left us on the road and told us to stay there and that he was coming back to pick us up. We stood there for over 6 hours, we were freezing, we didn't have anything with us – we didn't have any money. He never came back. After we lost hope that he would return we went to a police station and they took us to the detention centre in Larne where we stayed for 5 days.



**...I could be doing a good job somewhere but it's not allowed. I feel stuck here, I can't do anything here. It's so annoying...**

Even though it was really scary coming here, it was good to be in a safe place. And my faith in God helped me. Everything was very difficult coming here but it's better than dying. They wanted to kill me, yes, I have problems here but I'm safe. I don't care about money anymore because you cannot buy your life with money. I left everything behind me; I had everything back in Iran. My money was my money; I could buy my own clothes and food. Now we have to budget really well. It's hard to live on £36. You know we can't even work here – it's not fair. I have been in university, I could be doing a good job somewhere but it's not allowed. I feel stuck here, I can't do anything here. It's so annoying.





# ...They bully me because of my disability...

## I'm James from west Belfast and my story is gonna be about bullying.

I'm 14. It began when I went up to the shop when I first got out, when I got out from the garden, cuz my mummy let me out. She was a bit scared to let me out. I got out and went up to the shop because I knew people, but I didn't know they were gonna like... bully me if you know what I mean.

I had to stay in the garden from I was a wee baby. It was horrible, I didn't like it, got bullied in the garden too. Kids bullied me in the garden and all. Threw stones at me. Trying to call my bluff like I'm not going to hit them. They were trying to put my head away. One day there was this wee lad like, a kid, but he knew what he was doing, if you know what I mean. I got him a cracker. He ran right across the gate and I grabbed him, he jumped. I says 'You better stop annoying me' – but he didn't leave me alone like.

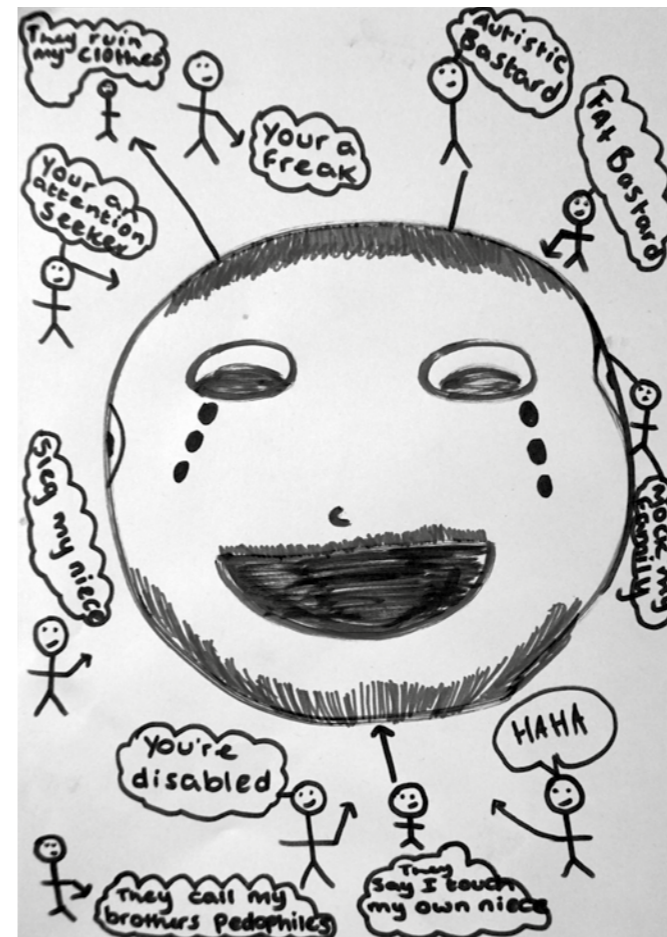
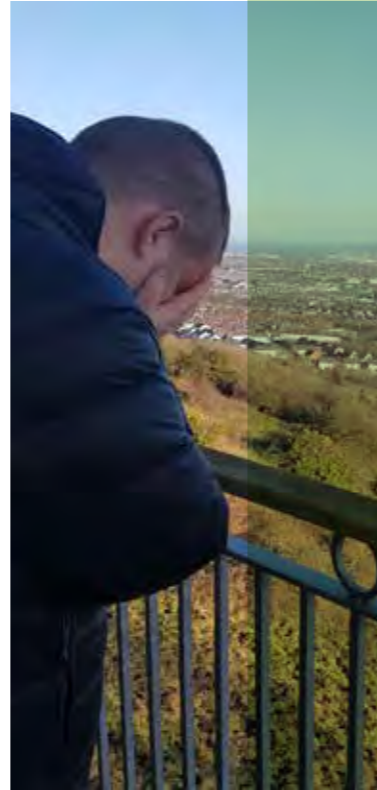
They bully me because of my disability, they think it's funny to pick on people, because they think disabled kids can't breathe like, can't live. We're not allowed to live. Down syndromes, flippin'... autistic kids and wheelchairs and all that there, we're not allowed to live, we're not allowed to breathe. Makes me feel sad... it actually does like.

Kids with disabilities, they're not allowed to be accepted or anything, in society. It's not right. There should be more done about it, there should be changes put to it. Like stop... for kids getting bullied and all. There should be a law brought out that kids with disabilities shouldn't get bullied. Needs to be change, I don't know. Go to big people, like, higher people and ask them to see.

They think it's funny - kids with disabilities, they think they're funny. There was this one time I was up at that shop. I was just doing my own thing, like minding my own business when this wee lad pulled down my trousers and exposed me... and everyone laughed. My mummy went up crying her eyes out. Then he just laughed in her face, he thought he got away with it. After that I was minding my own business and they took my phone. I was wanting my phone back, cuz it was my phone. I was like 'Give me my phone back or I'll go round to my mummy and get the police'. They gave me my phone back eventually, but they tortured me first.

## ...it's good to get my story told...

It's not right getting like a hundred pounds worth of tracksuits and all and then getting them burnt. Then getting a hundred pounds worth of shoes and getting them wrecked. People flick feg butts at them, cuz they think it's funny. My mummy is only on the brew, she's not like everyone else. People's mummies and daddies work you know. My mummy says, 'I try hard to get all that stuff, but it just gets wrecked'. It's not right. Getting feg butts flicked at something that's brand new.



## ...There should be a law brought out that kids with disabilities shouldn't get bullied...

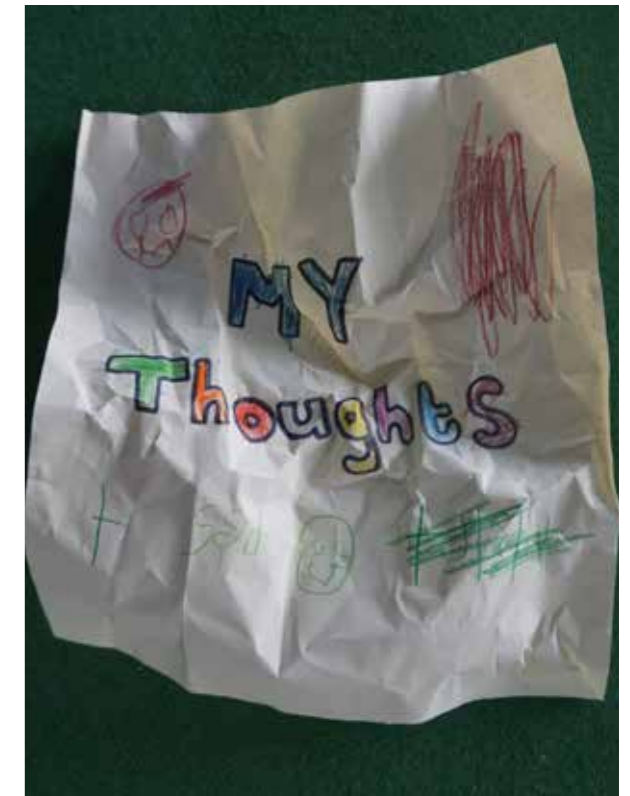
There was this one time I had my coat and all, they flicked a feg butt at it. The only coat I had at the time. I don't know why I ran about up there. It's because I didn't know anywhere else that would accept me... I know now, like the Falls, the walkway, anywhere like that... but now I know.

On the worst day I felt upset, thought I was gonna cry like. You wouldn't wanna know. I've been through hell and back. I'm telling you Rory. It's not all lies, I wouldn't have come up with it for nothing. It makes me feel horrible, it makes me feel upset. It makes me feel a wee bit like...horribly sad, terribly sad. It's sad. Then they use things against me, they bring my family into everything. They don't even know my family. It's sick.

I turn around and they flick feg butts at me behind my back, then I turn around and like...you don't know who done it. They wouldn't do it to your face, they do it behind your back. Horrible horrible people. Then they expect me to talk to them after it's happened, like 'Oh, you alright there mate?' – I'm not your mate, I don't wanna be your mate. I don't wanna talk to you, why are you talking to me? That's what I feel like saying to them. I don't wanna talk to you's after what you's did to me.

I'm getting a wee bit emotional here like. It's good to get my story told. It gives people a chance to understand people. People with disabilities have a right to live, they're not animals. They're not people just to be thrown away. We're people. Just like everyone else, we have a right to be in society. Flip. Get all this from my mummy so I do, but like, you know what I mean. I get shivers down my spine. It is difficult.

Living with a disability it's actually... it's alright like. I can't help the way I get on. It's not my fault. I didn't ask to have a disability, I didn't ask to be here. I didn't ask to be like... the way I walk and all, I can't help it. The way I get on, the way I dance with the crowd and all. See ever since I left that shop, I haven't looked back. Ever since, I have made a whole lot of new friends up in Falls and all, down walkway and all. I've thanked them for that like. Down in Divis, people down in Divis know me from I was a wee baby and all.





...I am strong. I can't fight like, but I can talk...

My Story

It's not fair like, people deserve to live. See what they call me and all, 'You're disabled, you're nothing but disabled, you'll never know nothing, you're a rapist'. I'm not a rapist. They say my 2 brothers are rapists, my brothers aren't rapists. They're dickheads, that's the thing that gets most to me, that's the thing that wee lad uses against me, to try and make me go nuts so I can react. I don't know why he hates me, I've never done anything on him.

Vulnerable and weak, they think it's funny. It's not hard, it doesn't make you hard. See if it was someone else, it would be a different story. Someone else would just go up and punch the head clean off them.

I am strong. I can't fight like, but I can talk.

Last night I bumped into him, he says 'Look who it is, Fatty McFat'. I turned around and says 'What?'. He hit me a big slap once round the face. My mummy gave him chances after chances because my mummy's just scared... He has people who could come up to our house and wreck the place. They're all bullies, the whole lot.

They put up a photo of me holding my niece when she was only born. Then they put up the photo and says 'I touch kids'. My niece like? They wouldn't like it if it was themins. See that there like, that's wild. I'm gonna be sick. I'm trying to forget about it.

...I'm only trying to be happy and...belong...

I haven't looked back, I've made loads of good friends. You understand, that's the good thing. My mummy will tell you all the bad times too. She went up crying her eyes out going 'he's only a human being, he's only trying to fit in with society, he's only trying to be like everyone else' I'm only trying to be happy and... belong.

**R: What are your hopes for the future?**

Better, better, better – a better understanding for kids with disabilities. Not to be made fun of. People said it was only stupid slaggings – it wasn't, it was slaggings that could put your head away. Then people bully me and think it's funny. I don't know why it is like, I think it's because they think they're hard. But you're not hard bullying a disability kid are ya? It's not hard!

They should teach people in schools about kids with disabilities – that they can't cope like everyone else that they take everything to heart and that they can't control themselves, it's not their fault the way they get on. They didn't ask to be here, they didn't ask to have a disability. I feel that disability kids get used, even my mummy says. I don't think anyone really cares about them. I think they get used for slavery – I don't know why I came out with that but.. it's not their fault they didn't want to be here in this cruel world.

Like see my story will it be put into a book?

Like all of our stories together?

Yeah

And like put out to schools and all?

Yeah

Mad. That would be good.

**R: How do you feel about that?**

Hopefully it changes somethings. Change people, let people understand a lot better, that kids didn't want to be here with disabilities, but they have to cope with it. I'd say to other young people who are getting bullied to keep their head down, keep your head down. Don't do anything back, I learnt the hard way. Like I stick up for myself, but I wouldn't go too hard into it, like I know things about people's families, but I would never bring it up, cause what's the point.

My advice would just be to try your hardest just to get through life, because no one gets out alive. That is true like, no one gets out alive in life. It's true – no one gets out alive.

**Like see my story will it be put into a book?**

**Like all of our stories together?**

**Yeah**

**And like put out to schools and all?**

**Yeah**

**Mad. That would be good.**





...I didn't really know what a Fenian was. Our lives were a living hell, we suffered a lot...

**R: Looking at Belfast after the Good Friday Agreement – do you think Belfast lives have changed?**

It has changed considerably, but there's still a lot going on in the background. I think there's still stuff going on because you still hear about people getting shot, young ones getting taken away then shot. See, something like that could spark something off and then it all could start up again dead dead easy.

I don't remember much about the Good Friday Agreement, see I lived over on the East at the time the police barricaded all the Catholics in and they all woke up - they done it in the middle of the night. It was on TV. See it was coming to the end of the troubles, we lived in Protestant estates, nobody knows this. See my mum she was that stupid she reared us in Protestant estates. She reared us in them estates because she got an offer of a house in a Catholic area, but she wouldn't take it because she was scared of her sons joining the IRA or something. So, which is worse - the devil or the deep blue sea?

We got attacked, petrol bombed. I mean I didn't really know what a Fenian was. Our lives were a living hell, we suffered a lot, we couldn't have went out without getting beat. I remember once we got petrol bombed, in through the back window, into the back kitchen. The kids were upstairs, and my mum fought to put it out. There were ones running over to help my mummy, but the guy fell, and he would have seen them helping so they couldn't. We knew who it was anyways.

I have memories of the lamppost outside that house, I use to swing on it all day on my own because no-one would play with me. I used to ask people all the time, play with me, play with me, but I didn't know why they wouldn't, I was only a child. Mum used to pay ones to play with me. I didn't know it was because of religion, I was only a kid. I can remember looking out the window once and seeing a police man walking up the estate and next thing he fell, my mum pulled me away from the window, he had been shot dead. I didn't ask anything, I didn't want to know... We ended up getting put out of there.

When we moved, I was 10 going into secondary school and we stayed there until I was nearly 17/18. And we had the most horrible life. That's when we found out what she was and that made it even worse. You couldn't have walked. My mummy didn't realise ... we didn't have a windee. We lived in that house and hadn't a windee. We had windees with bricks through them, big holes in the windows. At that time the housing didn't put them in and St Vincent DePaul put them in for her and then they done them again. It was like the big main window that got put in and the upstairs windows. Also, men with hoods over their faces came in and told her to get out, she still didn't leave. She stayed there, don't ask me why, don't ask me. And then we couldn't have moved without getting beat, I was getting raped. Couldn't have gone out without getting raped, my mummy didn't know any of this... any of the Protestant wee lads would have seen me, they would have been a bit older than me, they would have gripped me and that would have been, I would have been getting raped and stuff like that happening to me.

But also, we didn't ask her to move. She was never there anyways. On St Patrick's day I got beat stupid – big bruises all over my face, two wee girls done it. It was always me, I think because I was the older one. I'm 5 years older than the rest. Ones would have chased them, maybe got beat but my young sister never got raped, that mainly happened to me whenever we lived there.

I was sexually abused by my father, but I don't call him that, he's the person she had sex with and put me here. I don't know who he is, he's dead now anyway. He had sexually abused me when I was a child. Then another time one of my cousins tried to rape me, only my mum gripped me in time and she thought it was funny. Then I said, 'she's not all there', I said, 'You shouldn't have had me, you shouldn't have had me, you should have killed me, you would have given me a better innings'. But then I wouldn't have had Peter. But I would have had a better life though, we didn't really have a great life with her being the way she was, then the granny would had reared us while she done what she had to do, so the granny was the man of the house. So, we would have been murdered - you were getting it in the house then getting it outside and should have killed yourself, you should have been dead by now. People in my family goes 'you're not strong you're very weak - you're very weak'.



**...I can remember looking out the window once and seeing a police man walking up the estate and next thing he fell, my mum pulled me away from the window, he had been shot dead...**

Anybody I had a relationship with would have controlled me, so it took me a long time to catch on because I am so stupid and naïve, but now I have caught on and it's too late and I'm near 55 coming and all I have is Peter and that's my life. And I just want my Peter to be happy and to be aware of dangers and be aware that there can be people that come across nice but can be dangerous and can turn and be very dangerous, because I have had that in my life. In one relationship I had four to him, they are all to the one daddy. We lived outside Belfast. I had a child and it ended up my child got took off me, which is better – OK it was sad, because there was no one there to support me or look after me, no one knows my business, no one knows that. Nobody knows anything about me, my kids know some of the stuff, but they don't know it all.

My mum had put me out and I had nowhere to go. I had to sleep here and there and with this one and that because whenever I was getting older, me and my granny use to clash, and she just put me out. So, I would have had to sleep with someone to get staying or knocked about or whatever. Anyways, their daddy was very, very violent to me. I had nowhere to go. I had a child with him and I had nowhere to go. I ended up staying with him, on and off for 14-15 years, but he gave me a hard life. Very cruel, he beat me when I was carrying my kids, I would have to say to him, 'hold on until I put the child down', and I had to try and protect the child that was in me. What could I have done? I had four to him and lost about three or four kids to him. Because he beat me when I was pregnant as well. I would have been lying on the other side of the room and he would have went wallop, just thumped me for no reason. He tried to strangle me one night, you should have seen the marks around my neck. He even tried to stab me one night, they came and took him and locked him up in the nut house, or whatever you call that place, wherever you put them. He ended up getting out. As well as beating me he would have called me a fenian bastard. So, everyone in the place knew I was a Catholic.

I ended up leaving him once and he met someone else and got her pregnant. I moved to a hostel in the east of the City. I found that your own don't accept you if you're not from that area, if you're not reared with them. I was with the kids on the Ormeau road and the kids got attacked and then they couldn't go to school and then my head was turned. My head was away with the birdies. There was one time the police had blocked everyone in, everyone woke up and the police had everyone blocked in. I near died, I had never seen anything like that in my life, oh my God, Jesus, Mary and St Joseph and there was a road block on. They were sitting on the road and all that there. They were beating the Catholics and trailing them off the road. They were shooting up at them, and my Jo came in and he was grey he was only about 4 or 5. I didn't realise but he seen that, and maybe that's what happened to him, that was maybe playing on his mind. Because he came in and was hiding. The ones who did the shooting came in and ran through my house, because my house was a corner house, I didn't even know, it was my son who seen it, he was told to keep his mouth shut. One other time a young guy came running in and hid in my house from the army, I let him because I didn't want anything happening to him.

...I have a son at 27 – he's called Tom – he hasn't had much of a life, he's a heroin addict...

**R: How do you think life has changed since the Good Friday Agreement?**

About a thousand times better but I think the fear is still there...the fear is still there of it starting up again. I fear for Peter, I fear that something could happen to him. He goes into town and maybe there is a crowd of Protestants and you always get one that hates you, that bullies you, hits you, spits on you. I says 'Peter, make sure you watch your back'. He went down to a Protestant street behind my back to meet a wee girl and I went mental, I went mental. I says 'Peter, not all Protestants are bitter, but you always get one or two who would say come here mate down to this house and you wouldn't get out of it'. I don't class all Protestants with a tag, I don't, because I have run about with nice ones too. I would mentally torture Peter, it's not mentally torture but I keep going on and on at him to try and keep him safe.

**R: How would you feel about the peace walls coming down?**

For Peter I would be frightened, because, say they are all up there fighting, he would be up there, all the young ones with drink in them, oh aye. Sure, half the young bucks now are left to do what they want. I am not saying I am a brilliant parent or anything because I'm not, I mean I have faults as well. I had mine murdered to try and control them to keep them away from this or that. I didn't murder them, but I would give them a smack.



**R: How do you feel about refugees and asylum seekers coming over here?**

I have nothing to say about it, at the end of the day they are poor and have nothing. Their children are dying. Out on boats, look at the wee babies dying. They are human beings, they can't help it. What if that was us? How would it be that way?

I don't care who lives beside me. As long as my Peter is alright and myself and don't bother me. Yeah, because they're human beings. Because at the end of the day we haven't got green or orange blood. When you cut us we aren't green, red or gold, they have just the same blood as what we have. It's just different kinds of situations. At the end of the day, them people need safety. They can't help it, they have wee babies and all. Them wee babies are starving to death, at the end of the day, what can you do?

I mean, where we live, apparently people say they have gold teeth, this and the other thing. That's neither here nor there. At the end of the day I don't know what they have nor do I want to know. But I would always give a couple of pound. Because the girl down there needs to buy baby milk, and I would throw a couple of pound her way. Coz that could be your baby. Needing that milk. At the end of the day our country is... it might be what it is, but we take most of it for granted. Because we have a lot of opportunities, we have a health system, a lot of people take the shit out of DLA and all that. People get that and don't need it, and there are people that need it. And they are not getting it, unfair. I don't agree with that. But that's not my decision.



...I have nothing to say about it, at the end of the day they are poor and have nothing. Their children are dying. Out on boats, look at the wee babies dying...

**R: What are your hopes for the future?**

For Peter just... for Peter to have a good life, for Peter to be happy. Hopefully the troubles not to start up again, how could we all cope with that again? People getting shot and bate and took away in cars and killed and stuff. From one area to another.

Them other shootings to get their own back. Shooting people in front of kids and all.

I have Tom, I have a son at 27 – he's called Tom – he hasn't had much of a life, he's a heroin addict. He suffers from mental illness and he thinks he's okay, he's not. We try to tell him to go and get help, I just worry one day he'll be found dead. At the end of the day, I don't really worry about myself, I just worry about my sons. I asked Tom to go to the doctors, but you can't bring the horse to the water that doesn't wanna go. I've tried.

I've another wee one there who's over in England at the minute, he's a heroin addict as well. I don't really know what's happening with him, as far as I know he's off everything... I don't really know but I pray that he is. It's just my sons I worry about, it's just my family. Even my daughter, she's doing brilliant, her and her boyfriend are settled, she has kids. Even though me and her don't get on she's doing alright. It's just my sons I worry about. So really, what can I hope for myself? Nothing much at the end of the day.





We want our stories to empower young people and to let them see there is help no matter how bleak the situation.





...I got involved with drugs it wrecked my life like. I can say that there...



**My name's David, I'm from west Belfast and I'm 15.**

**R: So, when does your story begin?**

The start of my story is when I first ever run about with people I didn't know, they got me involved with smoking. And then I started to run about with bigger crowds like. They took me in as good mates and then they got me smoking for a bit more, and then like I started smoking grass and all with them. Then when I got involved with drugs it wrecked my life like. I can say that there.

When I was fourteen I got caught by the Police on my quad, and they put me in handcuffs and put me in the back of the car and took me down to Tennent Street Police Station. I was sitting there for about two and a half hours just waiting on my Mummy to come down, and they brought me into a wee room and said that I had to come down to court to see what happens. And then I went to this thing called Youth Justice. I still was taking drugs, but I went off them coz I was making myself out to be a bad person. I was always snapping at people for nothing. And then I lost my good mate, and I actually went off drugs because of it.

At the age of 15 I was going with my, like, another girl, who was called Jane. And me and her was meant to have a child and then like four weeks after she found out, she had a miscarriage and then that's the day I actually started to stop taking drugs, cleared my head, started to wise up.

And then as I was doing that there, trying to wise up, the courts found out that I had a miscarriage and all and they says they were sorry for me and all. I was like, sweet. And then I was still doing the Youth Justice with them, and when I was doing that there, I got caught again on the motorbike and was sentenced for another year of doing the Youth Justice. And when I was doing the other year of it, they seen the difference in me, from when I've lost the child I was meant to have.

I started wising my life up and went to school and learnt my mechanicing. Everything's around mechanicing, I just got involved with cars, motorbikes, anything to do with engines. And from that there then, I just wanted to be a mechanic. People says, if you had a criminal record, you weren't going to be a mechanic. So, when I found out I wasn't going to be able to be a mechanic, I just started wising up. And then done my Youth Justice completely, and when I found out I was done with it, I was actually proud of myself for what I'd done - stopped taking tablets, stopped taking grass,

stopped everything, and moved on. I actually haven't touched drugs since. And my Mummy caught me once with grass and all, and then she didn't want me or nothing, so that's why I stopped taking it, because if I got caught again my Mummy was going to beat the head off me. So, there was no point, like fighting with my Mummy over drugs. It's not even worth it.

**R: So, you've obviously been through a hell of a lot though at such a young age when you think about it. Everything you said to me there now, losing the child and stuff. And what was that like?**

It was hard like. At the start, I was even scared to tell my Mummy coz I'm only like 15, so when I told my Mummy, my Mummy started crying and I was like, why are you crying? And she goes coz you're one of my youngest sons who is actually going to have a child. And she's like, you're still one of my wee babies and she started crying, and then she's like "Is it definitely positive?"

I was like yeah, and then when we were back from our first scan, I got my Mummy to drive me down with her to go to Jane's house after she went to the hospital. We were sitting in Jane's house and then Jane gave me the photos of the scan, so I have a photo and Jane has a photo and my Mummy has a photo and so does hers. I was glad of that. I have mine in my wallet and on my phone, and my Mummy has hers in her wee photo album.

Then when I found out I actually was definitely going to be a Daddy, my Mummy started near crying, like properly crying and then my Granda, he was going mad. My Granny was like alright but happy for me, because she says she seen a difference in me over the few days after. I started winding my neck in and helping about more. Because I never used to help my Mummy, and then see after that there I just says to my brothers and sisters "right, there's going to be a new wee child here", and I says "right, you help Mummy clean up". And everyone just listened to me coz I was like louder than my Mummy and everyone looks up to me. Like my brothers, they both look up to me the way I get on, and my Granda, he was going mad, so he was. He was sitting arguing with me because he said he thought I wasn't going to help him no more. And I said to him, "Granda, I'm going to help you, honestly, I'm not going to leave you sitting to do everything on your own". And he says, "ever since that happened to you, you've fairly changed, and wound your neck in and all". And I was like, "I know". And he says, "well I'm actually proud of you, that you're sticking up and showing that you've done it, so you're going to have to live with it". I was like, "aye I know". And then he's like "well it's not going to be easy and all but we're going to be here to help you".

**R: Do you sometimes get melted thinking about it all?**

Oh aye, it just goes through my head, and then I would end up fighting if someone said the wrong thing about it. Like if someone was to say "aye, like you're going to be a Da and all", I would hit the roof and all because of it. It's no-one else's business who's going to be a Da and who's not going to be a Da. It's your own stuff, it's your life.



**...And then I lost my good mate, and I actually went off drugs because of it...**



**R: It's tough. You know you can talk to me as well any time, if you're melted or anything. You know you can easily message me on Facebook or we can get you up here and get your head showered.**

I don't even really go out no more like. The furthest I go is probably my house to the shop, and from the shop just squat in the shed and just sit there with everyone. See now, see because of the paramilitaries, they've like closed the parks because you can't drink in them or nothing, you can't go nowhere or there's either someone getting involved in fights. You can't go nowhere and you're fighting with everyone. I was like, right now there's no point in me even going out because I know for a fact that if someone was to start on someone, I'd end up getting in the middle of it for nothing.

I got threatened by the paramilitaries for running about with Catholics. But as I say, I'm not a Prod, not a Catholic. I'm just in the middle, I don't care if it's a Protestant or a Catholic, I like both people. I said to my mother and all, I don't want to be a Protestant or a Catholic, I'd actually rather be in the middle of it because my girl now, she's a Catholic, and the way she gets on with my mother, I actually think she's really dead on and all, Mummy thinks she's actually good, she's not like someone who is going to be sectarian and all to you.

And I was like, "Mummy, do you think she's dead on and all", and she's like, "she's actually one of the nicest wee girls from a different side who has come over and not been sectarian or nothing", so I was like alright with that there.



...I want to pass my Maths and English and help her, go to work, get a good education, live a good life...



...Yeah, they came in and put a baseball bat to my head and says if I don't stop running about with Catholics I'll either get my arms and legs broke or took away...

**R: So, do they give you a warning, like come into the house for hanging out with Catholics?**

Yeah, they came in and put a baseball bat to my head and says if I don't stop running about with Catholics I'll either get my arms and legs broke or took away. And I was just sitting there, and I says to him "but why? Protestants or Catholics are both near enough the same, just different religions and I don't mind them", and he goes "well it's not us, it's just people saying they've seen you in different areas that you shouldn't be in". And he says "well, if we get another warning or another call came, this is your warning, and if we have to come back, you'll get took away or your arms and legs broke". I was like, "that's all right".

**R: What do you mean, took away?**

Like take you away out to the hills or something and shoot you and all. That's what they do to you now. I wouldn't even recommend joining up with them. I know people that's in them and all, and they says if they got offered it again they would say no, coz it's a far different life. You're always doing something, and to someone else who you know. Like you could be joining up to the paramilitaries and sent to go and shoot one of your best mates or something, and you don't want to do that like because you've known them all your life and you don't want to go and shoot your mate over something probably stupid like that there.

A wee lad here got his arms and his legs broke, and then he got threatened by getting shot and they pulled a gun and put it to his head and all. And we were all walking down the street and we seen it. He was one of my old mates and I just never talked to him no more, coz it was him got me involved with drugs and stuff like that there.

**R: It must be really scary when they can come into the house and threaten you like that.**

Aye, coz you don't know who is coming into your house, coz they have balaclavas and all on, baseball bats, guns, all over them. My house was covered. They had my back door, my sides, the side of the house, the front door. They had the big jeep and all sitting outside, in where the driveway was. So anyway, if I was trying to run, you weren't going to get nowhere like coz they blocked you in. It was one of the scariest moments of my life like.

**R: I'm it sure was, and scary for everyone else in the house too.**

Aye. My Mummy and all started crying, stuff like that there.

**R: Who all was in the house?**

There was four of us altogether sitting in the house. And then they turn up to the door. I just got shaky and all, then my Ma goes "are you sweet" and I was like aye, and after that there, I just decided to sit in all the time. I never went out no more because if I had gone out I would do something wrong and then they would come back to the door. So, for about a month straight I actually just sat in the house and just helped my mummy clean up and do everything, made my wee brothers and sisters dinner and all, stuff like that there. I just couldn't be bothered going out to get caught doing something stupid with them, so I couldn't. If I'd go out I'd end up doing something really stupid with people probably that's in the paramilitaries, and then they'll end up reporting it back and they'll come back to my house or something, and then kick my mother out into the street. And telling her that she has to move away in 24 hours.

Aye. They say to you that you have 24 hours to leave the country. It was one of the scariest moments like.

I put my head down in school, got my carpentry and joinery and mechanicing GCSEs, so I've got two GCSEs now. I failed my Maths and English, got a U in Maths and an F in English, so this year I'm re-sitting them to get them done, That's the only two classes I'm doing now.

**R: Is there anything else that you want to put in your story?**

Probably about only finding out about my Mother having cancer now. She's only had it for not that long now.

It's affected me a lot like. When she told me, I broke down. That's the first time I ever actually broke down in front of my Mummy. She just told me that everything is going to be all right and all. I was like I'm always here and I says I'll even take the kids and all out with me. And she's like, no it's okay, and then my Mummy did like tell me that she can't survive it now. And that's when I hit the roof. And then when school and all was ringing my Mummy I was always answering the phone and telling them not to ring back and all, trying to block their number. They keep ringing my Ma's number. The school asked why was I not in, and I go coz my Mummy's not well and then my Mummy rung the school and told her that she had cancer, and my Head of Year came round to my class and pulled me out and goes "well I'm sorry to hear that your Mother has cancer and all", and I was like, "it's none of your business, I just don't want to be here, it's nothing to do with yous". And they're like, "we can help, we can help", and I was like, "I don't care, I want to be home with my Mummy, helping her". And they're like, "you can't, by law, you have to be here", and I was like, "by law I don't have to. Like I can drop out, coz of the way my birthday falls I can go on to the Tech", and ever since my Mummy said that like I don't even want to go out, I just want to stay in and help my Mummy. Just help her about.

**R: Well what would your mum want you to do?**

My Mummy says to me like, just go to school, get my GCSEs. I want to pass my Maths and English and help her, go to work, get a good education, live a good life, and I was like, "yeah. I'll actually do that", and I promised my Mother and all I'd stay in school, I'll not do nothing, I'll not fight with no teachers, not fight in school for nothing. And then she's going, "like if anyone ever says anything, just you beat them, I don't care what they say". I was like, "obviously I will".

My wee brother and sister listen to my Mummy and all, and then when I come home, they're always in bed, sleeping. Because when I come in, they go to bed straight away coz my Mummy can't shout now because of the cancer. When I come in, I have a louder voice than my Mummy, so I would even shout to my wee brother Alan, "Alan are they in bed?" And then Alan would tell me if they are or not, and then if they're not in bed I end up going upstairs and turning everything off on them, taking their phones, taking their tablets, get them in bed. And then I get up early in the morning, get everyone up, let my Mummy lie on in bed, and then sometimes I would actually even take my wee brother and sister on down to school, as I'm in my school uniform. We get the bus down to where their school is, and from where their school is, I would get the bus up to school, and then if I'm ever late I just say I was dropping my wee brother and sister down.



**R: It sounds like your Mum's lucky to have you there, it sounds like you're a great help.**

Aye. Even my Mummy says, the first time she ever seen a big change, difference as well, is whenever I lost the child, and then the second time was when she told me she had cancer and that's when I would have started saying, right, I need to wise up. No point hanging about with people who are probably going to learn me how to do drugs again. I know how to take them anyway, but I wouldn't touch them. I've stayed away from them for the last four months and two days today, and ever since I don't want to touch them, don't want to be near them, don't even want to be near a fag or nothing.



...I was abused by my uncle from I was 11 til I was 13...



...I used to argue a lot with my mummy and all, coz I was so stressed out... Obviously she didn't know why...

I'm Joanne, 18, from Belfast.

My story started whenever I was 11. I was joining first year, picking what school I wanted to go to. Mummy worked all the time, my daddy was always at my house, but him and my mummy weren't together... and I was abused by my uncle from I was 11 'til I was 13. I told on 1st of October 2013 and that night the man was arrested before my daddy had found out.

It was hard, weird, different, sad, uncomfortable.

I'll tell you the story about how it came out. I'd asked my auntie to pick me up from the Youth Club. I was scared of the dark because I obviously knew there was bad people like that about there. I didn't want anybody else abusing me or nothing. So, I asked my auntie, would she pick me up. Her car was broke and obviously she didn't know, so she sent my uncle down to keep me safe. But nothing happened. Then, it was just weird, I felt annoyed about it, this was when I was 13. This was on the 30th. I got home, I was wearing a grey and purple Nike tracksuit, white Nike trainers, pink Helly Hansen waterproof coat and I sat down on the sofa while my mummy was watching TV. I just turned away from her and just sat on my phone. She said, 'what's wrong?' coz she had heard me crying, but I didn't realise. I said 'nothing, it's alright' and she kept saying 'there is something wrong, tell me'.

During the process of me being abused I acted very weird, I used to argue a lot with my mummy and all, coz I was so stressed out... Obviously she didn't know why. I told her, I said that he had been abusing me and she started crying and just hugged me.

Then she phoned him and just started shouting and he was just saying 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry'. My mummy phoned the police because they were based facing us. So, I went up to get my jammies on and that's when I heard her shouting at him on the phone calling him a bastard. So, I got my jammies on and came down and the police was there. They were asking me questions and all. Two police officers went and lifted him out of the house and put him into custody overnight. About half an hour after that we phoned my daddy. This was when he still drove a motorbike. We didn't tell him before he came down in case he flew that fast he came off his motorbike or something or ended up in a serious accident. But we also didn't tell him because he literally would have killed that man and done time for him. I would rather lose the other man than my daddy. So, my mummy phoned my daddy and asked him to come down ASAP. He came down and he said, 'What's wrong?' and I was sitting there in my jammies and he said, 'Alright JoJo'.



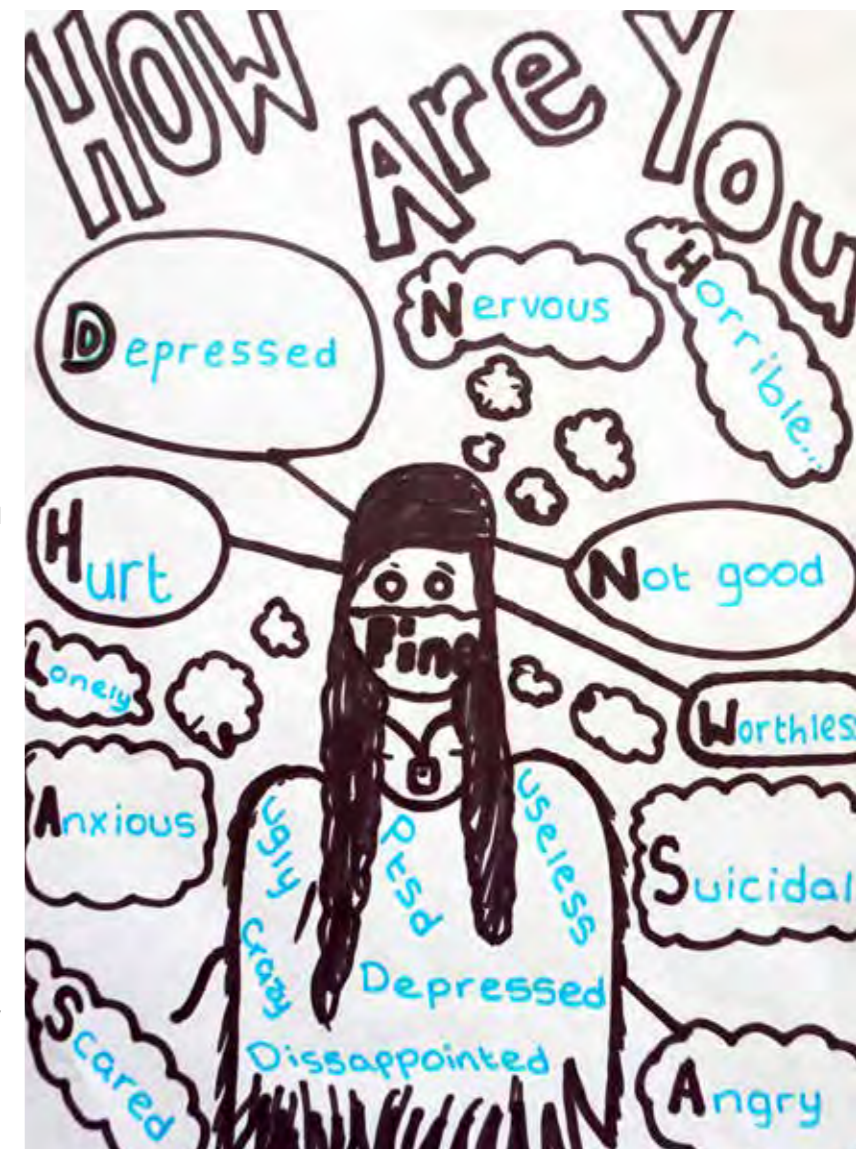
...I'd never missed a day of school because I knew when I went to school that there was less chance of me getting abused as much...

The police went back over to the station to get more requests or something. Then my daddy came down and my mummy told him, and he started crying and just hugged me, he was screaming 'I'm gonna kill him' and all.

Then, obviously my auntie had found out, like she didn't sleep for a couple of weeks and all after it. I felt like it was all my fault. Now my auntie still doesn't really bother with me. She would say hello and all, like she wouldn't be nasty toward me, but I feel like I'm an idiot. I don't speak to her either because it's not worth it. If she doesn't wanna know me, I'm not gonna know her.

I'd never missed a day of school because I knew when I went to school that there was less chance of me getting abused as much. So, I went to school every day and then that day I had to take the day off because I had to go up to the ... it's like a centre for young people, it's called the Rowan Centre, it works between doctors, nurses, and police. They had to record a CD and all and I had to get tests done and stuff like that and make sure there was nothing wrong with me, make sure I wasn't harmed. And I had to take my clothes and stuff that I was wearing the night before in case he did try and touch me, and I didn't say.

Then I went home, me and my mummy got a taxi back and we stopped at my other aunties. Everyone started crying and giving me hugs and all, it was just weird. Then I went up to my other aunties and waiting on my cousin getting out of school and sat with her really. It took my mind off things. But then, it was only like last year I found out that my auntie, like the man's wife's two sisters had went up to the jail to ask why, but apparently the two of them sat in the waiting room in the cafeteria. None of them even told me, the fact they even went up to see him just hurt me. I'm sure they probably just wanted answers, but they didn't even let me know they were going up.





# ...I have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, so I do, and bad depression because of it...

My Story

I didn't have to go through any of the court cases or nothing because I was too young. I think it was after a couple of months he pleaded guilty. It was very hard. He got 9 years, but if his behaviour's good it's cut down to 4 and a half. But he got put away on the 1st of October, so it's 4 and a half years then he will be getting out in April 2018. So, I'm really scared about that and like, I'll be having a good day and if that comes to my head I'll just have a bad day and have really bad panic attacks and anxiety and stuff. I just, I think I can't do it no more. Obviously, I can do it but that's what I think at that moment in time.

I have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, so I do, and bad depression because of it. It doesn't really affect me apart from that I'm a worrier. If I walked, I would probably worry that my shoe's not tightened. Or if my mummy is watching TV and I say something and she doesn't hear me, I think she's angry at me or annoyed or something. Being depressed, it doesn't really annoy me like because I don't know if I show it. Its only once in a while that I would show it and that's when I'm having a really bad day.



I was taking my anti-depressant the other day because I'd forgot it and a classroom assistant that works with my friend in my class was like, 'What's that?' then I said, 'Sure I told ya, I'm on anti-depressants' and he said 'Do you know what Joanne, you really wouldn't think you're the type of wee girl who's going through something or is depressed coz you're so happy and bubbly, you're so good and you're really keen to work'. I don't try and put on a mask, this is me. But sometimes I'm sad. I used to put on a mask years ago, but that's obviously because I was behind a mask. But I don't know, I do show my emotions now.

I'm really glad I'm part of this project because I love coming to Quakers. I'm not really worried about having my story out there. I would want my story to help other young people like. No matter how many times you say it, it's not always going to be that easy because other young people are going to think different. They're young at the end of the day.

My advice to other people is to tell someone who they can trust and not someone who is just going to let it pass by like a bit of wind. Tell someone who's actually gonna believe ya and that's gonna look further into it and get something done about it and get justice for ya. No sentence is long enough for abuse. He only got 9 years and that's not long enough because he cost me my life. That's 2 years of my life I'm never gonna get back. 2 young years, never gonna get that chance to go back through my education properly. I'm always gonna have that at the back of my head, even when I have kids and everything. When I have a partner, that's always gonna be there.

In 1st and 2nd year, I did try and focus but I knew what was coming. Now and again, like it didn't happen every single night but majority of it, yeah. But I knew what was coming, so I was constantly preparing for it and thinking about it, worrying, what's he gonna do? What's gonna happen? I threatened I was gonna tell my daddy before and he told me if I did, he was coming back to kill me. So obviously I'm worrying about that now because I did tell my mummy and daddy. Coz you never know, people say it's not that easy, he'll not be back and all, but anybody can go under disguise. That's just me being realistic that's not me trying to create another scene or making up excuses, that's me being realistic. Knowing the possibilities.

I'd feel safe from him if I knew he had passed away, I don't wish it on him but sometimes I do. He does deserve it, but a lot of other people won't agree. That's their opinions.

#### R: Where do you see yourself in the future?

I see myself working with children. I think I'm so over protective and I wanna work with children because I want to protect them and safeguard them. Like with my cousins and stuff, I'm so protective I don't think anything could get past me because I'm constantly there. I didn't have anybody that close with me. Nobody.

What I went through was tough but if I was to give anybody advice now it would be to speak up before it's too late. Because it has ruined my life and it always will, it will haunt me... but I have to learn to live with it. People can stop that if they stop it quick enough. It will not leave them, but it will not affect them as much if it isn't happening on a daily basis.

I can't remember how it came about that I had depression. I think I was always upset and my mummy booked me a hospital appointment. I think maybe that was what they said I was diagnosed with. I have PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I don't take tablets or nothing for it, it's after you've been through a traumatic point in your life, most people would get it.

I don't think I would ever trust anybody the same, but I'll have to learn to be nice and give things a go.

People won't go to the doctor because it's hard. It's one thing knowing you're feeling that way yourself, but it's harder to admit that. Because you don't want people to have a bad opinion of ya. That's a part of it. I know everybody is judged in life, but some more than others on certain occasions.

In my opinion, I think doctors do as much as they can because if you think how many people there is in Belfast and there's like 3, 4 hospitals. They can't help everybody. They try but they can't. And some people just don't want the help, but you need to want to help yourself before you can let anybody else help ya. And a lot of people as well, their mental health becomes worse when they start using drugs and abusing alcohol.



**...Tell someone who's actually gonna believe ya and that's gonna look further into it and get something done about it and get justice for ya...**

I've had to go to A&E before because of it. I wanted to end my life. They kind of calmed me down and gave me a sleeping tablet and stuff. I was referred to Beechcroft the next morning. I had my very first appointment the day after. It's a hospital for people with mental health problems. They were really helpful like, I think I've went to maybe 6 counselling places and there's only 2 that I have really liked and that I could go back to again. Beechcroft is one of the best places to help ya and I believe that once I had their help I didn't need as much help anymore. I just went to basically a lower down counsellor. In my opinion, I think there is enough being done. It will improve in the future; the numbers aren't going to increase.

It seems to be that people are giving more back to the community nowadays and looking after each other and offer help. I think the place is good. There are obviously a lot of bad things that could happen. But that's people with bad thoughts, it's mistakes that they make. Sometimes it can be evil people, I don't want to give everyone a label.

#### R: Do you have any advice to give to young people in similar situations?

Don't look back coz you're not going that way anymore. Keep going forward. If you wanna keep going, then try hard. If you believe, achieve, and succeed. If you believe it, you'll achieve it, and if you achieve it, you'll succeed it. I was going to get that as a tattoo before, but I just have 'believe'. I have a Friday 13th tattoo but it means I got a lucky escape when I was 13. Coz 13 is meant to be luck, either bad or good, but this one was good because I got the escape.



...I would have got bullied but not for being gay or anything, but for like other reasons...

**I'm Sean from west Belfast and I'm 16.**

**R: So where does your story begin?**

My story is going to be about being brought up gay from the age of 13, whenever I realised. I kept it to myself for about three years, and then I actually ended up coming out as bisexual first because I always thought that it wasn't normal being gay. Like if you're gay you're still something abnormal. Like now that you have friends and family to help you out, it made me realise that it's okay to be gay, like it's nothing that big. It's nothing to be afraid of or anything.

**R: And what was it like growing up then in Belfast?**

Growing up in my area, oh God, it's really difficult as a gay person in that area. Cos there are smicks, you're seen as different, whereas everyone else is all the same cos they're all smicks and people who are gay are scared of them. But whenever you're seen, you're just like, oh it's okay, like there's nothing wrong. Like I feel as if people wouldn't acknowledge you. I still feel that like. Like if you just walk past people and they act as if you aren't there. But I feel like that anyway.

**R: And why is that?**

Because if you live in that area like no-one else can really say cos they've never been there. I've been living there for thirteen years so you're the only one that can really speak for yourself. Like no-one else can speak for you.

Obviously, no-one knows someone's sexuality, like you could have an idea, but like you would never want to say to someone like "are you gay or are you straight or bisexual?"



In that area I would say there's not a lot of people that are gay, so you are always going to be seen as different. I don't really know what to say. For me it's just that you can't really tell unless you live there like.

Like my friends' group in school, like everyone is gay in it. There's about six of us. So, whenever you're with them ones like you maybe feel as if you're always getting dirty looks, or you're always seen as different cos well my school's crazy. Because most people would be seen as hard lads. I would have got bullied but not for being gay or anything, but for like other reasons. From first year to fourth year. Then fifth and sixth year was okay, cos sixth year it only started. But fifth year was okay because I would have known everyone from the start of school. But sixth year was somewhat crazy cos I'm out from just before starting sixth year, so I've been out from it, so you would always feel as if you were getting looked at differently or judged or stereotyped.

It was scary coming out and telling people for the first time, that's the way it is for everyone. The first person I actually told was my cousin because she told me that she was lesbian. So, you would feel as if you would have that bond with them. And then I kept telling close friends and cousins, but I didn't get to tell my Mummy. My cousin went and told her without me knowing, so she told me a month ago. It was in October that she told my Mummy that I was gay, so I didn't really get to tell her first. But I asked my Mummy to tell my brothers and my Daddy and all about it. But that was when I told them all that I was bisexual, but obviously my mummy has now told them all I'm gay.

They're all supportive like. Even the older brothers, they always say if anyone says anything to you, come and tell me and I'll go and get them, but obviously they wouldn't go and get them, they would just say something to them like. They wouldn't actually go and beat someone for it like, so they're very protective like and supportive. Mummy and Daddy always says to me if you ever need to talk about it go and talk to them. Whenever I said to my Daddy, my Daddy said that it's

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something that he's new to; he's obviously never experienced it in his generation, so he doesn't really know what to be doing or how to be dealing with it. I don't even talk that much to people about it, like I would talk about it if it came up, but I would never go and talk to someone out of the blue about it. Like I would never go and just say to someone "oh yeah, I'm gay," I would always like to keep it to myself. Like I'm not uncomfortable talking about it for now like, but whenever I'm older hopefully it's not such an awful topic. I just want to be that comfortable with it.

**R: What about society as a whole, what do you think they think of the LGBT community?**

Most of society like, they would be accepting of it. Then obviously you're going to get the moron that would not be okay with it, cos you would always be seen as different or I don't know, like you would always get judged. That's why I kept it to myself for that long, like I probably would have kept it to myself if my cousin hadn't have come out to me. That's what I like about that, you see with the community you're in, your own, like the LGBT community, like you see how much people share their stories and their experiences, that gives you the confidence to tell others about it. Society as a whole I think, most people, they agree with it. I think in Northern Ireland as gay marriages aren't legalised or anything, I don't like that so obviously I want that to change. But obviously I can't change it.

**R: That was going to be my next question. Why then did you want to get involved with this project?**

Well it's such a different thing to do like. I don't think it's seen as normal because there's such a small minority of it. This project will hopefully make a good impact for the LGBT community in this area cos it's such a different thing to be. The LGBT community in this area is so small - you wouldn't really see that much LGBT people.

Hopefully this will give them the courage and confidence to come out. But I don't think it should ever be a difficult thing to come out. Like I don't think it should be so difficult to come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, whatever. It should be seen as normal. That's my point of view anyway, like it shouldn't ever be seen as such a difficult thing, but it is, because I think society makes it a difficult thing to do. People don't have to come out as straight, so why do LGBT people have to?

**R: I think you're very brave for sharing your story and being open and honest and for trying to then help other young people relate to your story so that hopefully they find the courage to come out and talk.**

That's it. Well whenever I first came out to my friend, he ended up coming out to me, and then my two other friends, they ended up coming out, so I'm thinking that I've given other people courage enough in our group of friends so that now my friends can step up and I don't really focus on who's gay or who's straight or whatever. It doesn't really matter now. I don't think it should matter to a lot of people.

No, obviously it hasn't always been so easy and straightforward, people go through different experiences like. For me, I self-harmed and got suicidal about it but you didn't really talk about that to other people like, you would usually keep that to yourself unless you really, really, really trust someone. I think there would only be like one other person I would talk to about that. But for most people, some people find it easy and some people couldn't care about what others think about it. But for some people, you don't have tough skin, or you can't 'man up' because it's such a difficult thing to do. Whenever you're getting slagged for being gay like, someone shouting "gay boy" or "faggot" like affects me, but for most people it doesn't affect them because they've tough skin, but for the ones that don't, well obviously that gets to them. It got to me like because I self-harmed a couple of times, but not just because of being gay like, obviously for other reasons. I would never just self-harm because like I say, for being gay or whatever. There's a lot of other reasons building up to it but that would be one of the main reasons.

Suicidal thoughts only happened this year. I think speaking helps a lot. I only ever talk to a very very very select few. I would talk to a few people, if I self-harm, or if I think I'm going to, or feel suicidal, I would go and speak to someone about it. So, if I keep it to myself, who knows what will happen.



...But whenever I came to terms with my sexuality I ended up saying, it's normal like, it's nothing to be ashamed of...

My Story

**R: Well I suppose that's the whole domino effect of everything - like the bullying and keeping it all to yourself and not being able to talk to people. Then, it being in your mind leading to self-harming and suicidal thoughts. But once you start talking about it, you're going to feel better.**

I kept it to myself for three years. In society you're always seen as like growing up with a wife and having children, but obviously you can still do that, like you can have like husband/husband, wife/wife and still have children. You can adopt, or you're able to foster, but that's why I always kept it to myself because I thought it wasn't ever normal to be in a relationship with the same gender. But whenever I came to terms with my sexuality I ended up saying, it's normal like, it's nothing to be ashamed of. So, for me, in the future, I would love, like I would want to have a husband, and I would love to have a daughter and my own house but hopefully I'll have them.

**R: And I hope so too. And I hope you're able to get married in this country.**

Hopefully. I think that being homophobic or transphobic etcetera is wrong, and it shouldn't still be a thing in today's society. There's not a lot of places where I feel comfortable being who I am. Quakers is one of them and the youth club I go to, but that's about it. I hate it whenever people say that being LGBT is a 'lifestyle choice' because it's not. It's the way a person is born, and they can't help that, so society just needs to learn to accept it.

I like Belfast itself, but I don't like the people in it. I don't think conflict should be a thing. I think it's come from the older

generations, but it's got brought down upon us like. I don't think it should be affecting us, but it is. It's weird to think about.

**R: What would you want for Belfast in 5/10 years' time?**

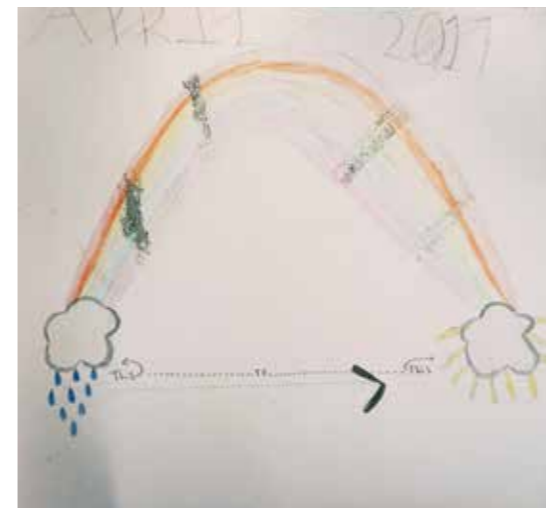
I would want the peace walls to be taken down. I just don't see why they aren't getting along, Protestants and Catholics, I don't see why not. I don't think it should be a big deal. I don't think there is enough trouble (for peace walls to be there), except whenever there are bonfires, that's it.

**R: Do you think we have peace today?**

I don't really know. There is a minority who do have peace between them and there is a majority where there is not. There is always fighting, I would always see it on Facebook and all. You would see that there has been an attack or something. I don't like it, it scares me. The fights can be over anything. It pointless, they will find a reason to fight because of their religion. Religion always gets brought into it no matter what. Like if it was a fight over personal problems, religion would end up being brought into it. I would think that anyway.

**R: Do you think Belfast has come a long way from what it was?**

I think so anyways, well... my Granda was shot like in the troubles. So that's been a big part of it, and I have no other recollection of anyone else getting shot from that, in my family anyway. So, from that it's come a long way. He's going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. I've never seen him walk like. I'm almost sure it was before the Good Friday Agreement. My daddy wanted to kill the person that done it because he knew of him.



**...I think that being homophobic or transphobic etcetera is wrong, and it shouldn't still be a thing in today's society...**

It's still affecting us, it's been such a big part. My Granda had to do a storytelling project too; his story is in a book.

It affected our view of the other side, but from Quakers and all, my relationships with Protestants hasn't been bad. Mine has been all good experiences, but obviously for my Granda it wasn't. But I feel like that opinion is trying to be brought down onto us four. But it hasn't worked for me.

I just want peace. That's all I want. I think it's a good place, but there's just too much conflict and too much fighting.

**R: How would you help young people to stay away from any religious conflict?**

I don't know, it's their decision if they want to start it. But if they don't want to, they can go to places. They don't have to always be out, they can go to youth clubs and stuff like that. But it's their decision if they want to or not.

I've only ever been to one integrated residential centre, I've never been to an integrated youth club. I don't know of many integrated youth clubs, but it would be good for that to happen. Everyone can come and get along.

Maybe one day.



...she obviously took too many drugs and overdosed herself and passed away...

My Story

It started when I was 16. There was a lot of stress on me not to turn out like my sister, not to turn to drugs and all, because people my age were doing that, and I got accused of taking drugs, but I've never taken a drug in my life. For years I wasn't allowed near my sister before I was 16 because she was taking drugs. I wasn't allowed to see her, so I used to sneak off without my mummy knowing and I would sneak to her house. I'd pretend to my mummy I was going to stay and a friend's house, but I would have stayed with her. Just to be with her.

Then my sister started going really bad with drugs and my other sister tried to control her and it made her worse. My other sister got her, her own flat and all but she didn't like living on her own or like the dark. I had shared a room with her from when I was born to when she moved out at 18, so I was always with her and she had never been on her own before. She got a flat on her own and was staying by herself and she started to have schizophrenia and hear things in her head.

She was more of a people pleaser - what she had she would give to other people and she would invite people she didn't know into her house - homeless people and people from the streets, trusting them because she was a trusting person and she would have parties with all these people she didn't even know.

One time I beaked school and went to her house to see her without my mummy knowing. She was having a party and just something clicked in her head and she just started going crazy... she tried to throw herself out of a window and I caught her by her hair. I basically saved her and then she just went nuts and threw a pole at a UVFs man's car and then the man next door was hitting her and beating her. I was standing watching, then she got arrested. She was never mean, she just couldn't control her anger because she had problems, so she got arrested and had to spend the night in jail which made her worse, obviously because she didn't like being by herself.

Then when she came out, my mummy didn't want anything to do with her - that was the last string. Neither did everyone else and I was the only one who stuck up for her and all.

About a month or two months before Christmas she came to my house and she was on drugs and had nowhere to stay. My mummy said 'yes, we'll take you in' and my mummy tried to wean her off the drugs and she was off them for a good while. She went to my other sister's house to stay, I don't know why she went but she just went to stay for a couple of nights. Then on Christmas Eve she had a seizure in my sister's house and my sister phoned the ambulance, but she wouldn't go with them to the hospital. See my sister has an autistic child and she said she can't be taking drugs around him so she had to go to her own house and stay. So, she went to her own house.

She texted me on Christmas Eve night about asking me what I got for Christmas and all. And then she went out on Christmas night with her friends to a party and obviously took too many drugs and overdosed herself and passed away.



...My mummy said 'yes, we'll take you in' and my mummy tried to wean her off the drugs and she was off them for a good while...

I don't think it's ever got better ever since, it's really raw, it was only last year. See I think the worst part is my mummy never went through anything like that, I never saw her cry before - it just broke my mummy.

Before she went away, she didn't think anybody liked her, she just didn't understand how much she has broken my family apart. You see all these people my age taking these drugs and just ruining their lives and they just don't understand what they are doing to themselves, and when you try and tell them they just don't care. They are not understanding that they are ripping their families and themselves apart. They don't think it is going to happen to them or their families or how it is ruining their lives. There were times when I saw my sister take 10 drugs but when she died she only took 5. It's how the body takes it, take one drug and die. I thought it would never happen to my family and I didn't have to worry about my sister, I always thought she would come out of being a drug addict, but she never did, and I think that's the worst part. You have so much hope and you think this is never going to happen to you.

People didn't understand the impact on someone else - people may say they hate someone, my sister thought everybody hated her and that everyone was against her, she just didn't understand how much she meant to my family and how she left her family or how the drugs would have affected her. She didn't mean to do it - it wasn't on purpose - she thought she could keep in with people by taking drugs, she didn't realise that there were mean people in the world - spiking her with other things.



...I want to tell my story to raise awareness about what drugs do to you, your family and your mental health...



She died from taking Lyrica, prescription drugs – they're also called buds. Last year, lots of people died from taking Lyrica and it was all over the news. They don't understand what they are doing, so many people take drugs and don't think it will happen to them. They don't understand how the body deteriorates, they see themselves as normal, but their features change, they lose weight and her attitude to the whole world changed.

When Michelle was living with me she was happy, like she had her bad days and her good days like a normal person, but when she started taking Lyrica, she was trying to kill herself and all. That was never her. When she tried to throw herself out the window, me and my mummy took her to the mental hospital over at the Mater and asked what to do if she tried to kill herself. They said it was up to Michelle if she kills herself – that was ridiculous to say to a mental health patient. We didn't feel supported. My mummy tried to get Michelle sectioned, but was told that she could only get her in if she paid £4,000 there and then. She contacted the Stephen Nolan show but he didn't reply until after Michelle's death. She had texted and emailed them saying that her daughter had been turned away from the Mater mental health team. But he never got back to her and then she texted him again on Boxing Day night saying, 'Just to let you know that the person I was asking you to help has died' and then that's when he replied. He replied when it was too late.

She had tried a few paying places, but you had to pay right away, and she didn't have money. You weren't able to pay it off and no one has that kind of money straight away.

I want to tell my story to raise awareness about what drugs do to you, your family and your mental health because Michelle was in contact with the mental health team from no age. She suffered from ASD and Asperger's. We need to raise awareness of what needs to be done – too many young people are killing themselves and nothing is being done, too many young people dying because of mental health.

There are buildings lying around not being used, where the homeless could go to feel safe, where young people being kicked out of their home can go because that causes mental health problems - they can't go to youth clubs after a certain age. There needs to be somewhere for older young people.



People need to know what drugs really do to you, what it is like to take drugs. Mummy and Michelle had a fight a couple of weeks after she was 18 and she said she didn't want to live at home any more. Mummy had babied her because she had mental health problems and she protected her more than she would protect anyone else. She would only let her out at certain times and later she started taking drugs, went straight to Lyrica not grass. She wouldn't have taken drugs if she was in my house or she wouldn't have taken them but for her friends. She just gave in to peer pressure, which happens to most young people these days.

Drugs are so easy to get now, people adding you on Facebook with drugs as their profile picture. Drug dealers messaging you – police don't seem to be doing anything about it. I had a friend whose father got caught with drugs and was released on bail but was still doing drugs.

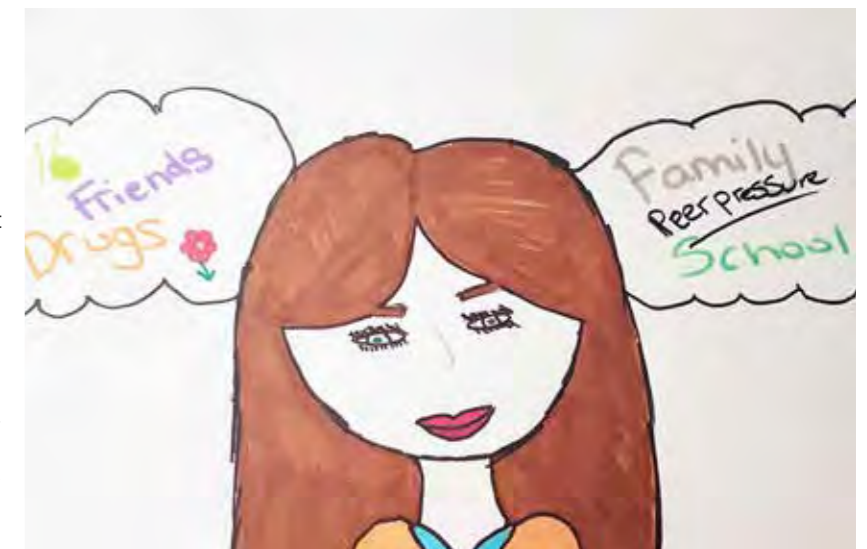
Michelle was found in a drug dealer's house. He tried to kill himself and all after it - police said they weren't going to do anything. My mummy wanted them to take him somewhere – she would like if he could get help because no one had done that for Michelle. Police don't seem to offer enough support that people need.

On Boxing Day, I was at a friend's house. Mummy phoned for me to come home - she didn't say anything on the phone but there was a policeman at the house. He said that they had found someone dead and asked my mummy to describe what Michelle looked like. They should have left a liaison officer with us, but they didn't. This was at 4pm and they didn't phone back to say they had confirmed the body. Then mummy had to phone the police station at 11pm and the police asked if it were men in uniform who were at the house because they didn't have any information of anyone with that name being dead. So, it gave my mummy hope that it wasn't my sister and then another police officer phoned back and said it was her, so they were just contradicting each other.

**...they don't understand what they are doing, so many people take drugs and don't think it will happen to them...**

My mum didn't want any press or anything and on the day of the funeral there were photographers hiding behind trees at Roselawn and taking pictures of mummy and my sister looking at the coffin. They even asked if they could take a photo of Michelle's body. They didn't care, just wanted a photo for their paper. We didn't have any privacy, there was no sympathy, they didn't care. Michelle was just 21 - still young. It was tough sharing all this but that is all for the moment.

The Good Friday Agreement promised us a peaceful, safe world, yet mental health is such a big problem here. My family and I suffer the loss of my sister every day, because those in government failed to keep their promise.





...Shootings and stuff, they still do it, there was someone shot around the corner from us last night - 5 times they shot him...



**R: What was it like growing up in Belfast?**

When I was a kid there was constant knee capping, bombing, shootings, all from opposite side, so Catholics fighting Protestants, paramilitaries fighting against the cops, and I used to fear every time when I heard them shots. I used to be scared, didn't know who it was or where it was, thinking was it someone related to me. In them days you couldn't move across til the other side as such, like you couldn't have went into a Protestant estate for the fear of being shot or blew up.

I remember one day in school, my older brother who was 18 worked in the linen factory. While I was in school I heard someone saying 2 young Catholic men were shot where the factory was, and I panicked, my heart stopped because I thought it was my brother, even though it was in a Catholic area. Sometimes that's what they did; they went into the others and just shot them. I had to ask the school to phone home and make sure it wasn't him. Lucky enough it wasn't but it

was in the same place where he worked. Nowadays I wouldn't even think twice if it was a relation of mine like. I wouldn't be afraid, I would still have doubts of letting the kids go into a different estate or area but that is only because they have Irish names, and some people are still like that. You do have people who don't want peace although the majority do want peace, are not bitter.

We couldn't go into the other one's estates, you couldn't do that then, like you can do now, we couldn't have done that but now the peace is here they can go in and around their own area and other areas without worrying that they were going to get hurt, would still be a bit wary but nothing like it was back then 20 years ago.

As a kid I used to lie in bed and think was there a bomb going to go off, was this and that going to happen? I know with my kids now when they are lying in bed at nights, they don't have all that going on in their heads. It still goes on in our estate like the beatings, shootings and stuff, they still do it, there was someone shot around the corner from us last night - 5 times they shot him. If you know there has been a shooting in the area and it's like that it's a paramilitary one, they have done something wrong against their own people, maybe drugs or whatever else.



**...That's what you get, shouldn't be breaking into houses, stealing cars or dealing drugs. If they done that and someone else shot them I would say fair play to them...**

Years ago, if I had of heard of the IRA shooting someone like for stealing a car, or touching someone else's kid, I would have said like wise up, leave the people alone, who do they think they are, they don't have permission, let the police deal with them. Now I would say they need it cause even if they'd get caught by police now, sure they're let out the next day, where years ago if that happened, like breaking into houses or beating elderly people, they were dealt with in their own communities and it was over, you would not do it again. Nowadays they get out from police next day and go do it again because they haven't been dealt with like years ago. It's either the police don't want to deal with it or they can't. I think sometimes the police are even scared of them.

Some people say the ones who are let out the next day or a few hours later are touting on their own community. Years ago, if you were touting you would have been shot. They need to be dealt with in the community like years ago cause now they are destroying this place, it's going to the dogs. It's crazy nowadays, I mean they are getting away with everything now cause the paramilitaries have took a back seat, they don't deal with the joy riding, house breaking, and all that, that's why they can go out and do it again. Years ago, that's why there wasn't as much crime in the area. It's the only way you are going to get things like that to stop again.

If my kids done any of that I would shoot them myself, I seriously would, if I found out that they stole a car or broke into someone's house I would break their hands with a baseball bat and they wouldn't do it again. That's what you get, shouldn't be breaking into houses, stealing cars or dealing drugs. If they done that and someone else shot them I would say fair play to them.



...So maybe the psychiatrist was right and maybe all them wee parts is a part of my OCD...

Years ago, we could have gone out to the shops and left our doors open, nowadays you can't even lock your door and go to bed, they are trying to get into your house. That's all you hear when you look at that Belfast Live or all over Facebook in the mornings, that this house was done and everything else, cars, bikes. Even a drugs page about these people selling prescription drugs to young ones, naming and shaming them. How many kids have died lately because of the drugs, either taking them or their heads went after as a cause of taking the tablets and they have committed suicide. Years ago, if you were caught selling prescription drugs you would have been killed like.

So, to me personally, yes, it was great - less shootings and bombings now. When I was young it was every other day someone was targeted. The ceasefire was good in that way, but then, society has went to the dogs. Some of the paramilitaries are still policing the communities now but obviously not enough, not a great deal only the odd time you hear of shootings, kneecaps. Nowadays you have to constantly do it before they would shoot you, where years ago if you did anything once you were punished for it.

Years ago, during the troubles my father-in-law was shot by the UVF for a mistaken identity although they did know it was a Catholic they were shooting. He was shot and paralysed. I witnessed a shooting being carried out years ago in Springhill in the old 3 storey houses that were there years ago. We were playing and heard the bangs, seen the ambulance driving up and followed it up to the old centre and there was someone being carried out on a stretcher. He had just been shot in both legs, and that really scared me. You could see him and hear his pain even though I didn't actually see him being shot. Years ago, it was your own shooting your own, your own shooting the other side, them shooting back, them and our own shooting the police. Now when they are bombing the police it's the breakaway organisations that's doing it not the IRA cause they done the deal resulting in the ceasefire.

**R: How do you think the past affected you?**

I have OCD. Years ago, the psychiatrist told me that it could be down to something happening to me growing up, you may never recall it or maybe it was just the fact of always being afraid growing up during the troubles. And I can't pin point what it is either. But it could be that. I remember lying in bed one time at my friend's house, and I says to her I have a funny feeling a bomb is going to go off now and just as I said the word 'now', a bomb went off a couple of streets away not that far away from our actual house and I'm telling you I jumped and shook, so thinking about everything, it could be all those wee things why I have OCD. There was another time, I think I was 14, I was babysitting for a girl next door to me and it was the time of Michael Stone when he threw hand grenades at the funeral. A girl who I was babysitting for was wearing a long blue coat and she still hadn't come home and it was on the news. I had seen a girl wearing a long blue coat and I had seen someone being interviewed with blood and all and I thought it was her. But it wasn't, but even watching it, knowing that the girl who I was babysitting for was at that. So maybe the psychiatrist was right and maybe all them wee parts is a part of my OCD. Because he said that worrying wouldn't help, because I'm a constant worrier now and I don't know if that stems from the troubles or if you can be born a constant worrier. My mummy used to be a constant worrier as well. She got calmer as she got older, but me now, my anxiety is sky high, I can barely even sleep. I'm on medication for it, mainly at nighttime. I need my tablets before my anxiety starts or if it starts after I have taken my tablet I can't do anything about it.

And I remember years ago the brits coming in and raiding our house when I was about 9. They pulled everything out. I remember they had guns - it was scary. I needed a drink and was dying for a glass of water and one of the brits had to lift me over the washing machine as it was in the way. I was shaking just because he had a gun and he was in my house raiding. Jesus I was shaking just because he had a gun. I was like, oh my god, and I was only 9 then. I was thinking is he going to shoot me or something.



**...And I would love to see something in Belfast - I don't know if there is an all-night centre which is open 24 hours. So, at 3 o'clock in the morning if you're feeling down and you think you are going to go and kill yourself, that you can just go and walk off the street and sit there and talk to somebody and have a cup of tea...**

**R: What would you say are the main issues for growing up in Belfast now?**

Unemployment and drugs. I think a lot of the anti-social element stems from drugs, people stealing to get money for drugs and doing robberies because they need more money to get drugs. I don't know why, but years ago there wasn't anybody taking prescription drugs, yea maybe older people but it wouldn't have been a big thing the way it is now. I don't know why it is the way it is now, between that and suicide and even years ago when we had all them bombs and shootings there was never suicides like, if anything you would think people would want to get away from the bombs and the shootings. One person killed themselves 19 years ago but growing up I never heard of anyone taking their own life and that was probably because there wasn't a big drug epidemic. They didn't need to break into people's houses, they didn't need to do robberies, their heads weren't away with it because they weren't on tablets. It probably stems from the unemployment, the boredom.

My older brother is addicted to prescription drugs. I don't know why he is addicted. My friend died three years ago too, she was addicted to them as well. People being depressed as well, I know my brother is depressed; he has been in rehab three or four times now. But even before the cease-fire there wasn't as many people depressed and we were living in the troubles - bombs and shootings every day. And people weren't on anti-depressants like they are now. You would think that if you were growing up in a war zone you would be on anti-depressants more with all that going on around you.

**R: What would be your hopes for the future?**

I would like to lose weight, move out to the country and I would like not to have as much anxiety. The only time my brain switches off is when I'm in the middle of doing something, even then my thoughts creep in again.

My hopes for my own area would be that the drugs were taken off the street. Do you know what I always wanted, people are always talking about there isn't places out there for people to go and talk to someone. Maybe someone wants to go and kill themselves because something has just happened there and then, and maybe you are indecisive about killing yourself then it's good to talk.

And I would love to see something in Belfast - I don't know if there is an all-night centre which is open 24 hours. So, at 3 o'clock in the morning if you're feeling down and you think you are going to go and kill yourself, that you can just go and walk off the street and sit there and talk to somebody and have a cup of tea. Something like that in each area of Belfast, because maybe then that would stop some suicides. Because even sometimes you just want to get outta the house, but you have nowhere to go, you don't want to burden your friends or your family. Sometimes my heads going and I'm like, 'Jesus I can't cope, this has happened and that has happened, and I need to get out of the house'. But sure, you don't want to go to your friend's house - she has six kids of her own running about and you're not going to go and talk to your mummy because she is sick herself, what am I going to do. Like Quakers is a good place but if you need somewhere in the middle of the night and you need to go somewhere. Some people just go 'actually I'm just going to go for a walk and actually just hang myself'. Where if they had somewhere to go to, like a drop-in, they could go in and have a cuppa tea. I think it would be a great help for Belfast.



...We went from Iran to Turkey by car, but we crossed the border and drove through Turkey on the back of a lorry – it was very hard...

**My name is AnAhita and I'm from Iran, I was born in Tehran, the capital of Iran. I lived in the north of the city, near the mountains. It's a very beautiful place.**

It was just me, my mum and my dad, but my cousins lived two streets away – we grew up together. I always wanted an older brother – actually, my mum had a miscarriage before I was born – she lost him because of stress at work. That was a year before I was born. She became depressed after that and used to say that she didn't want to have any more children. In fact, when I was born she didn't want to hold me – she also wanted to have a boy - but that changed after a couple of months. She is a very good mum.

I had a very good life, a lot of good friends and a close family. I grew up as a Muslim – but my family weren't strict, I just acted like a Muslim in school and university, but I never prayed or fasted. Most of my friends were the same. When I was a child my father stopped practicing Islam and throughout my childhood he never pushed me to pray.

My father is a musician. He was part of a band and he used to play in a lot of concerts – he played a traditional instrument called a Ney - it's like a flute. He really wanted me to play it, but I never got the hang of it – I used to play the piano though. Because I'm an only child my mother wanted me to do everything – ballet, basketball, music classes, painting, English – she wanted me to have a chance at everything, but I only continued with the English classes.

I was studying before I came here, I studied maths in high school and in university I studied architecture – I loved it – I had been studying for 3 years. I only had one year remaining to finish but then I came here. All my friends are graduating, but I didn't get the chance because I came here.

There has been a lot happening politically in Iran in the last 10 years. Around 9 years ago the 'Green' revolution started, many young people were killed. The people revolted because our elections were rigged, and they cheated, and people went to the streets demanding their votes back – many people died. I remember marching with my mother and family at that time. I have a very scary memory actually, something bad happened. I was marching on the streets protesting with my two uncles, my cousins and my mother. Suddenly lots of special police came on motorcycles and my mother and I just ran - we found a derelict building. Lots of other people were hiding in the building and the men told us to go upstairs with all the other women and children so that if the police came the men would try to stop them and the women and children could run from the roofs.

It was very scary because I remember looking onto the street from the window and seeing so many police outside just beating people. We had lost our uncles and two cousins when we had been running away, they had run in another direction. My mother was crying because she didn't know if the police had taken them. She was trying to see if she could see them from the window but all the other people in the building kept on asking her to come back in case the police saw her in the window. We were so frightened. The police don't care – they just kill people. After one hour of being in

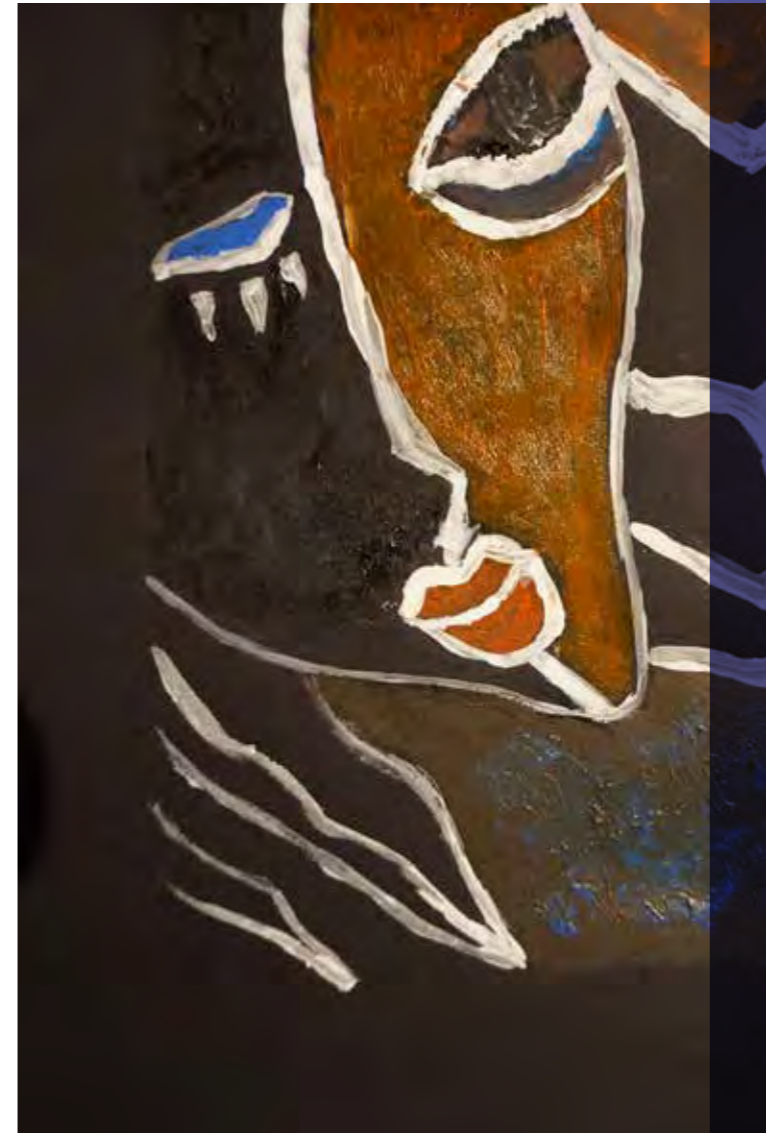
the building the police left and we came out of the building – we went to our car and found my uncles and cousins there.

Things started to change a lot in Iran after that; the police became stronger and more powerful, they killed many young people. Recently, last year, people started to protest again but now everyone is silent because it's too dangerous. People want freedom.

My family converted to Christianity a few years ago. My mother and father came into my room with a bible one night and told me; 'read it – we don't want to push you into Christianity, it's your choice' and I read it and we went to a house church. Something happened to me there – I felt something in my heart and since that day I have believed in Jesus.

But it's not OK to be a Christian in Iran. In Iran they say you should be Muslim – you are not allowed to change your religion. We have two types of Islam in Iran; Shia and Sunni and the powerful just believe Shia – and they do not like Sunni Islam. They let Sunni's live in our society, but they are discriminated against. If they found out you have converted to another religion the police will kill you because they say that the Quran in the perfect book and you should believe in the Quran.

**...the smuggler separated my father from me and my mother. That was the last time I saw my father. To this day we have no idea what happened to him or where he is now...**



Things all changed because my father made a music video for the Green Revolution. He wrote the song, played the music and I made a video for it. We never published it because a lot of people knew my father in Iran and if they knew it was my father that made it, then for sure they would come and kill him. But a few months ago, they figured out my father made this song. My father had given it to his friend and shortly after, his friend was arrested. So, we guess the special police must have raided his house and found it on his laptop.

The special police wear normal clothes and live among ordinary people – so you can never be sure of whom you can trust. They came to our house and raided the whole house a few months back. They pushed my mother to the floor and they took a lot of stuff; my laptop, our bibles, our documents. This was when we knew it was not safe for us to stay in Iran. I was really shocked. They didn't even give us time to cover our hair. I called my father immediately and he told us to leave the house and tell our uncle to pick us up. We left the city that night and we came here. We didn't have a chance to say goodbye to anyone, not even my grandfather who is very old and close to my heart. We didn't have time to organise our things; we just had to leave. At that moment all my aims and goals that I had for my life changed. Now, when I look out this window here and see this view I really miss Tehran because my house is in the north of Tehran and the view from my home is like this.

We went from Iran to Turkey by car, but we crossed the border and drove through Turkey on the back of a lorry – it was very hard. It was my first time to travel like that; me, my mum and my dad on the back of a lorry. We stayed for three days in Turkey but after one day the smuggler separated my father from me and my mother. That was the last time I saw my father. To this day we have no idea what happened to him or where he is now. I still feel really guilty because all of my father's things were in my bag, so he didn't have anything at all.

We flew from Turkey to Dublin with the smuggler and we stayed one night in Dublin. I was really worried about my mother at this time; she had a stroke a few years ago and the doctor said she must never get into stressful situations, so I was very worried that something bad would happen. I never had this responsibility before – life was always easy. I tried so hard to stay calm and not to get upset because I really didn't want my mother to become upset. From Dublin the smuggler brought us to Belfast. When we arrived, the smuggler told us to go to the ferry port in Belfast and buy tickets and go to Glasgow because my father was there. I was really tired at this point; I hadn't eaten for over a day and when we got to the ferry port it was very stressful because we didn't have any ID. When we were waiting to check in the police came and asked for our ID. I just broke down and cried and asked them if they would let me explain. I explained everything; they were nice to us and brought me and my mother food and water. Then we were taken to Larne House detention centre – it was like a jail. I now know that the smuggler was lying – my father was not in Glasgow. He could be anywhere.



...When people ask me why I came here, I just shrug my shoulders and say; just to study. If only I could study...

The first night at the detention centre was terrible. My mother couldn't breathe. We were sharing a bed and I looked at her and she was trying to speak but all she could manage was to say 'doctor'. I ran to the camera and shouted 'help' 'help' and they all rushed in – my mother was unconscious, but she was ok after a while. The next day the immigration officer came to interview us – after two more days they came to us and told us they wanted to release us. My mother actually pleaded with them not to release us because we didn't have anywhere to go. They gave us a train ticket and told us to go to Belfast.

That first night in Belfast was the first time in a week that we contacted anyone back home. We hadn't even had sim cards before that night. My granddad was just crying and crying when I FaceTimed him. I also remember in those first days in Belfast, a guy was just talking to me in the street and he asked me what my religion was and I almost shouted 'I'm Christian' it felt great not to have to hide that.

Shortly after, we moved into the house the housing executive gave us to stay in – it was horrible. I couldn't believe that was where we had to stay, it was so dirty and there were too many stairs. I knew my mother



wouldn't be able to manage. But the housing officer made us sign the paper; we didn't have any choice. We and my mum shared a room and a bed. There was a big window but no curtains – and it looked out on the street. I can't tell you how dirty it was, you couldn't take off your shoes; there were no things to cook with, no glasses to drink out of – nothing! I went to the housing executive every day begging them to move us. I was so angry. Housing officers would come – put their feet up on the table and tell us it wasn't their problem. There were also problems with our benefits and my mother's was stopped for over two weeks. I couldn't even pay for the doctor's letter that I needed to give to the housing executive. I went to different community organisations for help, and they all wrote letters to support us, but nothing changed. I had a very good life in Iran – why did this happen to me? Just before I had left Iran I had redone my room and now we are here; I just cried and cried. Then one day when I wasn't at home my mother fell down the stairs. My phone rang, and it was her – telling me what had happened whilst she was still lying at the bottom of the stairs. I rushed back and called an ambulance and we were taken to hospital. We stayed at the hospital until 2am. When they released us, we went outside into the night – we were in the street alone and we had no idea even how to get home. I couldn't see any taxis and it was too late for a bus. We walked home. I wanted to cry, really, but I just stopped myself. I had to stay strong for my mother.



...Shortly after, we moved into the house the housing executive gave us to stay in – it was horrible. I couldn't believe that was where we had to stay, it was so dirty...



It's hard for me, being here, being an asylum seeker, leaving everything back home in Iran. I never imagined I would have this life. It's a very big change and still I'm not used to it.

I never tell anyone I'm an asylum seeker. I lie, and it's easier to lie than to tell the truth to people. When people ask me why I came here, I just shrug my shoulders and say; just to study. If only I could study.





...About 7 years ago my Ma got put in jail for nine months...

**My name's John, I'm 19 and I'm from west Belfast.**

About 7 years ago my Ma got put in jail for nine months. So, I had to go to school and help my Da with my wee brother and sisters, and we seen her like once a month. It was quiet in the house. My Da was more used to going out working, but then he had to look after five of us, so he couldn't.

Well we all still had to go to school. I was in like second year I think, and everyone knew about it. Like me, Ryan, Kirsty, Lisa and David, I think basically most of us got bullied in school because of it, because my Ma was in jail. Then once she got out, she came back and lived with us for about a month, then she got kicked out by the social workers.

Social services made my Da choose between her and us. My Ma kicked them - told them to get out. She went to the shop, they came back and made my Da choose between us or my Ma. So, then she moved and lived in a hostel for about three months and then got a house. She lived there about a year and then got another house cos she got sick in the first one because of the damp.

The story about her being in jail. It was all round the newspapers before we found out. We were at school when it was all happening. Most people on the road even knew about it before us.

I found out after school. Like I had messages and all of people asking me if everything was okay. And I was like, yeah why? "Did you not hear about your Ma?" We knew she was at court, so we didn't know until my Da came back and told us.

It was weird with her not being there cos we had to look after ourselves, like with cleaning and all.

Yeah it was a struggle, like my Da's family came down and helped him. I can't remember for how long. Cos, he ended up fighting with his brother and they haven't talked since.

We got bullied from primary school through secondary school. We got used to it. I blame it on my older brother cos he was the first one there, so he must have done something.



**...Well it's probably because my Ma's an alcoholic. She's been diagnosed with dependency on alcohol. And depression and all. I can see her a few times a week. And she rings me every day...**



...It was mainly like before my GCSEs. And then my Ma got sick, got put into the mental health ward at the Mater...

My Story



**R: That's awful though having to go through that experience for so long from primary school right through.**

Like, fifth year and all in school wasn't as bad. It was mainly like before my GCSEs. And then my Ma got sick, got put into the mental health ward at the Mater for like a few months, got out for a few months, back in again. Then the next time she got out, she ended up being put back in jail but got sick, so she had to go back to one closer to the jail and she's back out again.

Well it's probably because my Ma's an alcoholic. She's been diagnosed with dependency on alcohol. And depression and all. I can see her a few times a week. And she rings me every day.

**R: How do you feel about it all?**

You see I'm okay with it. I'm getting used to it by now cos it's been that long. And me Da's moving house. I'm okay because I've got my own house, but my older brother and sister don't, so they've to get their own house.

**R: And then you've got another younger brother and sister?**

They're in care at the minute. They have been for over a year. It's like the whole family have been split up. I was talking - I messaged my older sister earlier, asking if my washing is being done. Well you see I saw her at Halloween, and she was drinking. Then she went home. Plus, at the minute I'm still sorting out the house. All my mates are round helping me. I got my own house a few months ago. It's good because I have my own space.

**R: And how do you get money and all to pay the bills - electric and gas and food?**

Jobseekers. - A hundred every two weeks.

**R: That's fifty quid a week. How does that last?**

I don't know but it lasts. I only put a fiver in my gas and electric. It lasts me two weeks because it's a one-bedroom house. I spend twenty pounds on shopping or twenty-five, and that lasts me a while.

**R: So, is it a struggle?**

No. It's not as hard as most people make it out to be.

**R: What would be your dream job?**

Don't know. I've got too much qualifications to move. I've got catering, IT, child care...

**R: You've got quite a few then, that's good. We were talking about this project about the Good Friday Agreement, do you have any memories of the Troubles?**

No.

**R: Nothing? So, the Troubles haven't affected you at all?**

No.

**R: Would you have like, friends that are different from you?**

Yeah, I went to an integrated school.

**R: And what about the likes of refugees and asylum seekers who are living here as well.**

You see not many people can actually judge you on anything.

**R: Yeah do you think though that they should be included in society? Like say, living beside you in your street?**

Yeah, I wouldn't mind. Cos if people are sweet with me I'm sweet with them. Because you don't judge a book by its cover, you need to by the contents inside.



...I got my own house a few months ago. It's good because I have my own space...





We are all just human and we have to find ways to live and cope with whatever life throws at us. Help is at hand for those who ask.





...my sister and me were sat down and told that basically my dad had passed away...

**R: So where does your story start?**

Um, there were many stories before this but the stories that would change my life to make me who I am today would be when I was eight. I was in P4, and the first memory I have is of my auntie coming to pick me up early from school. I just thought, this is amazing, we're getting out early, and she says that my mum had called to take me home.

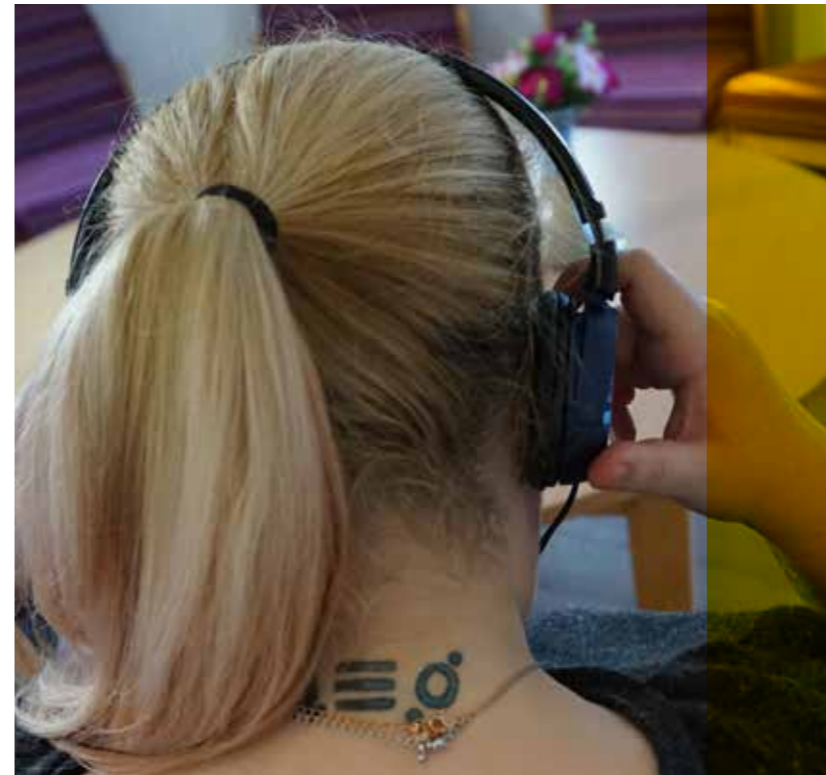
When we got home there was loads of family who I'd never met and who I had never seen before. People were all crying and down and, "Shh, shh," whispering to each other, you know, "Quiet quiet." And my sister and me were sat down and told that basically my dad had passed away. Obviously not knowing (when I was younger at the time), what of, but you know through later years I realised and mum told me, it was suicide. Through the years I tried to forget about it and think of other people, help other people deal with it before dealing with it myself. To me, my mum needed the support and I had to stay strong and be the rock in the family. It took me about nine years to actually grieve properly, to realise that my dad was dead, because I was too busy worrying about my mother and my sisters and trying to make my mum proud by trying to act older and help out.

**R: You were looking after everyone else, not yourself?**

I don't, I always put myself last, I wouldn't put myself first for anything, like my mum always said to me, she says that I need to, put myself first in some situations and to realise things, but, I would rather help others than help myself.

It was hard, because well obviously I was only young, and I didn't realise what death was as it wasn't really big in our family then, so I didn't really realise what had happened and just that my dad would no longer be around. After days passed I had kids in my class tell me, you know, "Oh, do you know if you kill yourself you'll see your dad in heaven" and putting things into my head. And me, not realising, I walked home to my mum and said, "Oh Mummy Mummy, do you know if I kill myself I can be with my daddy". You know, my mum was horrified, and went straight up to the school to tell the teachers what had happened.

And then I'd say about four years after my dad had passed, my mum had a friend who she went out a lot with, and then a year after that they became a couple. And at first, he was nice, you know, and he was lovely, and he was like, "Oh you can just call me by my first name. I'm not here to replace your dad", and you know he was nice to us all, giving us money if we wanted to go down to the shop, or taking my mummy and us out for meals. And then about a year and half after that, my mum got married to him and everything just changed completely. He started favoring one of the middle ones, letting her have anything she wanted, and I was basically shut out and told that I was useless, that I was nothing and that I would never become anything. And if I ever had to call him for something, I would call him by his first name and he would just look at me and say, "that's not what I'm called" and wouldn't reply until I called him dad. This happened every time my mum went to work - it took my mum a few years to actually find out, as he was doing the same thing to her as he was doing to me, only she never knew he was because it was only when she was at work that he would like, shout at me or lock me in my room for something I had said or had done that annoyed him. And every time my mum was on her way home he would come up and because my face was so red from crying he used to say "Oh, just put some makeup on, so it doesn't look like you were crying," trying to bribe me and things like that. And at nights if I had nightmares or if I was emotional and just had a cry about it, he used to mimic my crying through the walls and tell me to stop acting like a child and to wise up."



**...I started to self-harm on myself on my arms and the back of my ankles where my Achilles heel is, and I never told my mum...**

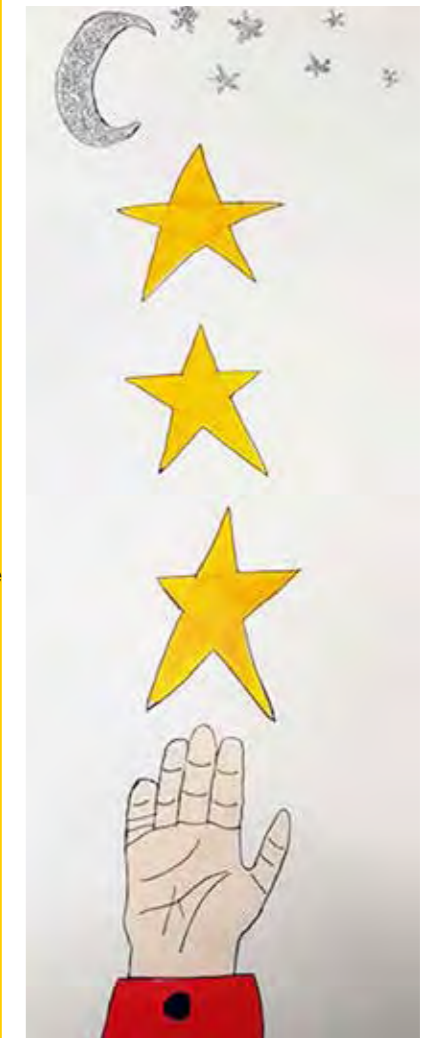
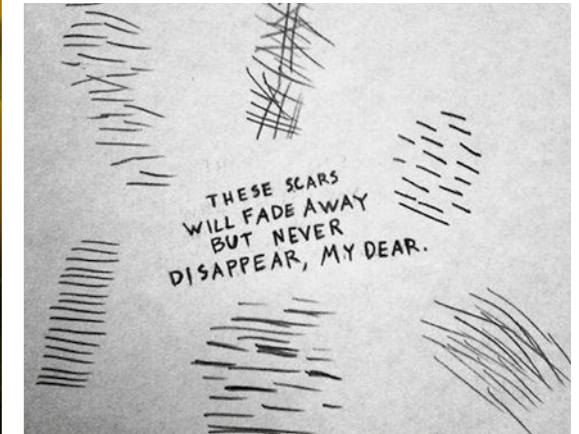
I left and lived with my granny for a few months, and nobody knew why. I confided in my granny and she was like, "You're being silly, it's teenagers, you know, you don't know what you're on about. Stop getting on like that." The only reason I moved back in the house with that asshole was that my mum broke down in front of me and said that she wanted me back, and I was her daughter and I should live with my mum and that she loved me, so I moved back in, and then, um...it just got worse and worse, so I started to self-harm on myself on my arms and the back of my ankles where my Achilles heel is, and I never told my mum.

I done this for months. It felt like such a good release - it took all the tension and frustration away but also still made me feel alive in a world that my soul felt dead in. And I went to a counsellor in school at the time for my dad, to try and get over what had happened, and she had noticed one of the cuts and she told me I had a week to tell my mum or she would tell my mum herself because it was an issue where I was harming myself.

But the counsellor took it one step further and had told the whole school, so all the teachers knew, which means... when, basically, my school, when the teachers know all the pupils know, because the teachers are just braggers, and it was just like everybody just kind of formed a big circle around me and I was standing in the middle people would look at me and it felt like in that circle they were all pointing at me.

One of my teachers... his dad went to school with my granny, and he knew my mummy really well, and he was like, "You know what, don't worry about it," and he was the only one that was behind me, you know, he was like, "It's not the way you think it is". In the whole entire circle that was around me he was the only one to put his hand out and help pick me up again.

After that, my mum found out all the stuff plus what he had done to her about my stepdad and we moved to England for a month with my mum's friends just to get away from everything, and when we got back, she decided to give him one last chance. And I just thought, even my own mother had betrayed me, but a few months after that she realised that she was going to lose her daughter because of it, but also because he hadn't changed like he promised he would. I just couldn't - I wasn't going to do anything stupid, I just couldn't take it anymore.





...Always do what you believe in, just follow your heart...

My Story

And I kept going out and not coming back for a day or two. I stayed at my friend's house around the corner, but she never knew that. And if she came up, I tried to hide under the wardrobe or hide under the bed, just so she'd be like, "Night, night," and then if my mum asked my friend's mum, and then they knew I was there somewhere. I think what had got to my mum, my granny came in, and she was sitting down and she'd said, "You know, your mum had told me you self-harm" and she was like, "you are very silly for doing that and nobody makes you do that, you do that on yourself." For me, that hurt extremely hard because my granny is my world and I love her to pieces but now she is so apologetic you know, "I didn't realise what was happening," you know, but I don't blame them, and I really don't, and if I go up to my granny's today and if the topic came up she'd still be like, "I'm really sorry I didn't know back then and I feel so stupid for not taking your side," and I would say to her that it's not her fault. You know, she blames herself, and so does my mum, but they shouldn't cause it's not, it wasn't them, you know, I just...I try to tell them all the time, just, "There's nothing to be blamed for," "It's never your fault."

After he had been kicked out, I finally felt like I had room to breathe and be me and not be judged for that. So, I went back to my youth groups and up to Quakers and then after that I just got really involved with trying to help other people who have been through similar to what I have went through because it just wasn't nice to be alone. You know, I want to give someone, or give people the help - the fact that you can say, "I'm here for you," "If you have

She was like  
the moon  
part of her  
was always  
hidden away

no one else you have me," things like that, and even just putting a smile on somebody's face, it's a nice feeling to do that. The reason I want to help people also is because I think teachers and schools need more training with things like this, cause, I think they do understand but not fully, and they're scared. But you shouldn't be, like that one teacher, if he hadn't said "It's alright, don't listen to them," my life could have just changed because I felt no one was behind me, but it was the fact that knowing that someone knew, you know, who wasn't like, "You can't cook, you can't lift a knife." It was nice to know that someone didn't think I was deranged or like, crazy.

I think a big part of getting through life would be my music and my movies and stuff, and I connected so much with music. When I was down I used to play the happy songs, the upbeat, to try and keep myself up, because depression runs in my family, and I have depression myself. But I've seen what it does to my family, so I won't take tablets for it or anything because I just don't feel they work, and to me they make you worse. I just pop in my music, and I could be down one minute, and one song that I enjoy, and I'm out of it. I've triggered myself to try and you know, come out of it. And just, things like that, you

know, go into your room, lock the door, and tell the kids, you know, be down in, say, five minutes, because that's all you need, and listen to one of your favorite happy songs, or a song that's upbeat you know, you just want to dance to. And I think it's all you need, I think it's just, something you really connect with that makes you happy. Always do what you believe in, just follow your heart. Things won't work out the way you want them to sometimes but, in the end, if you work hard enough you will achieve what you want. Don't hurt yourself shooting for the stars - make them come to you.

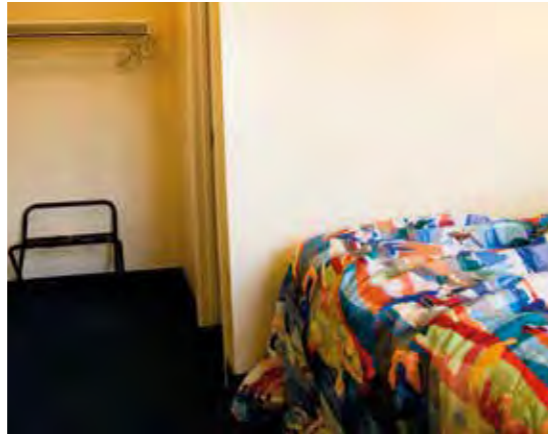
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# ...In total I was in and out of 14 foster families and 4 children's homes...

My Story



The only memory I have of the troubles was the riots on the Ardoyne Road. Whenever I was a child we lived in North Queen Street and the police station would have been on North Queen Street. So, if there was any bomb scares, we would have always been evacuated. That's all I know of the troubles. My life in general was just growing up in care. Growing up in care, changing from different foster families and not making the right decisions in life, putting myself at risk, running away and not being found for days. What anybody done, I tried to join in with them.

I was born in the 80s. I was a late baby and my brothers would have been older than me. My brother died the year I was born, he was 18. He was my mummy's blue eye – Sean. What happened was... he went out one weekend, and he shot up heroin for the first time. She got the phone call – 'Sean's dead'. And there he had a needle in his arm. So, she took a nervous breakdown from that. From then my mother and father's relationship wasn't good. They originally lived in Belfast, but they moved over to England because of the troubles.

My mummy grew up in west Belfast, that's where she was born, and she didn't have a good life. Whenever she was on her death bed two years ago she was talking about punishment beatings that they used to give. They used to burn wee girls' hair and tie the wee girls to the lampposts and tar and feather them years ago. It could have been over something small like talking to a British soldier.

So, then this priest was friendly with the family, he brought me over here to my Daddy's mummy and daddy. I lived with them and it was all good. Every day she would have waved out the window, but this day she didn't. Then I came around and she had taken a heart attack... but she was young I think she was about 58. Then my Granda took sick so they couldn't really care for me.

My granny and granda had two sons and a daughter, but the daughter was very jealous of me because she was the only wee girl. I had taken the bedroom and took her place. So, she would have done really nasty things to me like, she used to hit me with bamboo sticks. So I kept running away to a friend's house and eventually I got put into care.

In total I was in and out of 14 foster families and 4 children's homes.

A changing point for me was when I went to one particular home - the wee girls were from all over because this home was sitting on the border. I never ever got hit or anything, they all looked after me. You were schooled and all in this place. There were units at the top for people who had committed crimes, then there was the care units. So, I would have been about 12 or 13. We used to put ourselves in so much danger like. We would have hitchhiked to Dublin. We would have got into these big lorries with men. Looking back on it now... the danger that I put myself in.

Then in my teenage years in another home, me and a group of friends would have run up to St. Patrick's Training School. It was all boys and girls from the children's homes, we never would have run about with someone who was in a normal family. We were all in them homes because we had problems or families had broken down. It was all madness; stolen cars, joyriding, sniffing nail varnish, sniffing glue. Back then you couldn't have went and bought an e-tab, because they would have cost you 10-15 pound.

And then I met Angela's daddy. We were up at Nutts Corner rallying. There would have been a big show of stolen cars years ago for all joyriders and we would have went up and watched. We would've had a drink and smoke in his brother's flat. I would have stayed with Tom, my home were like 'No, no'. They would have known him from St. Pat's. But sure, when somebody tells you no, you go, and do it, don't ya?

**...I was born in the 80s. I was a late baby and my brothers would have been older than me. My brother died the year I was born, he was 18. He was my mummy's blue eye – Sean...**



I felt like I was trapped. I knew I had to settle down, but Tom wouldn't settle. I still stayed at home and watched her, and everything was alright. It was just hard because I surrounded myself with his family and I felt content in that. I had never felt that contentedness in a family. But they all still carried on partying.

I was really really thin. I remember the social workers coming in and saying, 'we don't think you can take this baby based on your past, we don't think you're fit enough to look after her'. So, I ended up bringing them to court and they says I was going to have to go to Thorndale Family Centre and they were going to watch how I deal with Angie. But Tom was still partying and not coming home for days, and I still carried on. It ended up I went to a solicitor and I says 'look, you can't base my past on what I'm going to do in my future'. The judge says to the social workers 'you have to give this wee girl a chance'. I was never violent or anything like that, so they did give me a chance. I never seen them again. 2 years later we had Ronan. Tom still didn't calm down. Then we had Paul. Just more or less the whole way through they were growing up. He only calmed down like 5 years ago.

Then there would have been the domestic violence. Every time I tried to get rid of him he always came back. So, it just felt like I was trapped, but I didn't want a broken family. So, I was just trying to hold it all together. Some of the violence would have been bad. There was a few times I went to Women's Aid hostels. Quakers helped once getting into a hostel. You were just walking on egg shells all the time... and it would have been for nothing. I've never cheated, I've never ever done anything. I always have loads of friends, he doesn't have any friends, but he does have a big family. I've friends from the homes that have really worked, I have friends who own businesses. So, I don't know if it was a jealous thing.

Some of the beatings were bad. His mummy would have filled him full of drink. Without drink he was alright. He didn't take drugs in the house or nothing. But if he had drank, you knew by the end of the night that something was going to happen. But some of the beatings were bad.





...and he came and booted the door in. He gave me a bad beating then neighbours had to come in...

**...If I was to give someone advice it would be to get out right away. I stayed, because in my heart I still love Tom, because I've been with him 18 years...**

There was this one time near my 18th birthday, Angie was about 2. We were at a bar and all of a sudden, he just turned. Then as soon as we got home, his mummy sat downstairs, and I was upstairs, and he was beating and beating and beating me. It ended up I had to ring an ambulance myself to go to hospital. But the mummy was like 'I'll take your babies, I'll take your babies' and I says, 'no you're not, wherever I go they're coming with me'. So, I think I was unconscious and I woke up on the 8th of January and it was my birthday. The nurse says, 'Happy Birthday', my 18th birthday! I couldn't see out of my eyes I was that bad. Something came over me that day. When I sat down with him I said it would be better if we claimed as 2 single people, so the house was in my name. I told him we would get more money if he didn't live with me and we signed the house in my name. So, from that day I felt like I had taken a step more towards freedom, as the other houses were in his name.

There was loads of times with the police. There was a Christmas, we had got a new PVC door and he came and booted the door in. He gave me a bad beating then, the neighbours had to come in. I had to get a bar behind the door.

The Mummy would fill him with loads of vodka. I don't know why she does it. It's the same with amitriptyline. I'm not sick, I don't take any prescription drugs, I'm not depressed. But his mum would have been like, if you're sitting on your nerves take a Roche. So, they have always grew up around tablets and stuff.

Then I moved up north of Belfast. Then that's when I lost my mummy, so then I lost everything, and I was pregnant with Hannah. So, my mummy died and 4 weeks later I had Hannah early. She was only 4 pounds, so she was tiny. I liked it up there because we were out of the way. Tom sort of calmed down and everything was alright. But see with losing my mummy and having Hannah, I thought it was time to move again. That's what I tend to do. I can't stay in the houses. I say I've been in 20 houses, I feel bad for doing it. I don't know what it is. It helps when I move house, I get about a year and a half out of it and then I have to go again. But I want to stay in the houses because I put so much money into them. It definitely has something to do with my upbringing.



Things have been alright, but then Angie was starting to experiment. I had to pick Angie up one night; she had taken an E tablet. It was bad. I've always tried to keep them safe, but it felt like Angie was going out of the bubble, out of my bubble. I was afraid of somebody taking advantage of her. She wasn't running about with a good crowd. I feel like I'm a constant nag with her, but I'm trying to tell her that she needs the education. She needs the education to get a good job, so she can do what she has to do in life. I feel like I lost that friendship with Angie. Angie was going to Tom's brothers and seeking advice and staying there. I just felt really bad she was doing that, I felt she could have come to me and told me. Tom would always be very strict, but I would like to be like a friend to her, but still set down boundaries about school and having to go to bed early on a school night. But I would still try to give her a bit of freedom at the weekend. I knew this year was important because of the GCSEs. Things have calmed down a good bit now.

If I was to give someone advice it would be to get out right away. I stayed, because in my heart I still love Tom, because I've been with him 18 years. There's days I love Tom, and then... I'm living with somebody with mental health problems. I still get up in the morning, give Ronan his tablets, give Tom his tablets. I'm getting Angie out to school, I'm dealing with Hannah, then I'm dealing with Paul. But I have the strength to do that, I don't know where I get it from, but I do have the strength to do that. What I would say to people, as soon as it starts, you have to get out. You have to go right away. But I stayed on... I always kept them safe as much as I could. I wasn't safe, but they were safe. Maybe it was the wrong thing I was doing because, I don't know if it was because I grew up in care - but I always tried to keep my family; a mummy, a daddy and the children and a house. I do know that it wasn't the right thing to do, I should have got out right away. But I kept getting told, things will change. It did change, it changed for maybe 3 or 4 months. Then if you had of said something, it all would have flared back up again. But I always said, once that beating was over and done with, it would have been smooth for a good while. But that's no way for a young girl to live. I would always say, the first sign of control or abuse, to get out. The main thing is, see with teenagers with the drugs, that's all I'm afraid of because of what happened to me. I know there are going to be times where we make mistakes, but you have to have your wits about ya. There are bad people out there.

We need a better mental health unit for adults and children. We need something for teenagers. The A&E departments need to be better for people going in and saying they have suicidal thoughts. You always hear of people going sitting hours to be told to go home and well, make a referral.

When I left here, after sharing this story, I thought right through the night. Later on that night, I threw Tom out. I had a good chat with Angie and tried to get myself sorted out. I made him go to rehab. And now I do feel like I'm in a bit of control. Not 100% control but sort of in a way now, I look at my kids and I know they're getting older, and I know that maybe I don't have to sit like this every day. I'm hoping one day that if it doesn't sort out, I can break free from it. D'ya know? So, I can live the rest of my life.



## ...A human trafficker brought me here...

My Story

### My name is Sahib and I'm from Somalia.

I came to Northern Ireland in 2012. It's been 5 years now. I came here when I was 16, but now I'll be 22 in February.

The story of how I got here is a bit long and complicated, hard to explain and hard to understand as well. But when I came here, life was different because you are meeting new people, new language, new system and new culture. Everything is different. You have to start from scratch. What is common sense for people here is different to common sense for people in other parts of the world. People have a different mentality. When I came here I was a kid, so I didn't speak any English. I had to learn it, and I worked really hard. I couldn't express my feelings back then.

I remember my first day here. The first day I was walking down Lisburn Road on my own. I saw a guy who also looked east African. When someone like you sees a black person, you think just African - you can't tell where he is from: east, south, west Africa. But I can tell whereabouts in Africa they might be from. So, I saw this guy and I was thinking that he might be from my country, so I had to try and talk to him. So, I said "Hiya" and spoke in Somali.

A human trafficker brought me here and he knew to drop me off at Lisburn Road because he knew that there would be other Somalis around. He was very smart - he knew what he was doing because that's how he gets paid. So, I was talking to this Somali guy I had just met on Lisburn Road and I told him; "man, someone left me here, I don't know what

to do or where to go." And it was true I didn't know what to do - everywhere I looked there were people I had never seen in my life. Nothing was familiar. I couldn't understand even a word of English, so nothing was making sense. I can remember that first day like it was yesterday. Every morning you wake up, time after time. The thing that made me learn English so well was being around the locals. I was staying in a children's home, so I was only meeting people from Belfast. I was finding it hard at the start. You know, when someone comes to you and they want to have a pleasant conversation with you and you can't - this is what is bad. You want to tell them something and you can't, it's mad you know, very mad.

When you learn the language, you can understand and say back what you want to say. After that, you are still learning and still studying. When you are speaking the same language, I can tell you more about me and you can tell me more about you. So, then I met some crazy people, some good people, some normal people. I'm not saying the whole country is bad or even half of it is bad. It just takes time to get to know people. Because where I live now used to be very dangerous. But when I walked down that street, where I live now, back at the start, I used to have eggs and stones thrown at me. I've seen kids throw them. One day I asked them; what's wrong with you guys? Why don't you grow up? In Belfast it takes time, like 10 or 5 years to get used to another group of people. In 2013, when I arrived there weren't that many foreigners, maybe less than a thousand but now there are thousands. So, people are getting more used to it. Everything else is good. I feel like home, so no complaints.

I still don't feel safe though. The reason I don't feel safe because even in my own country I didn't feel safe. It's the whole world now.

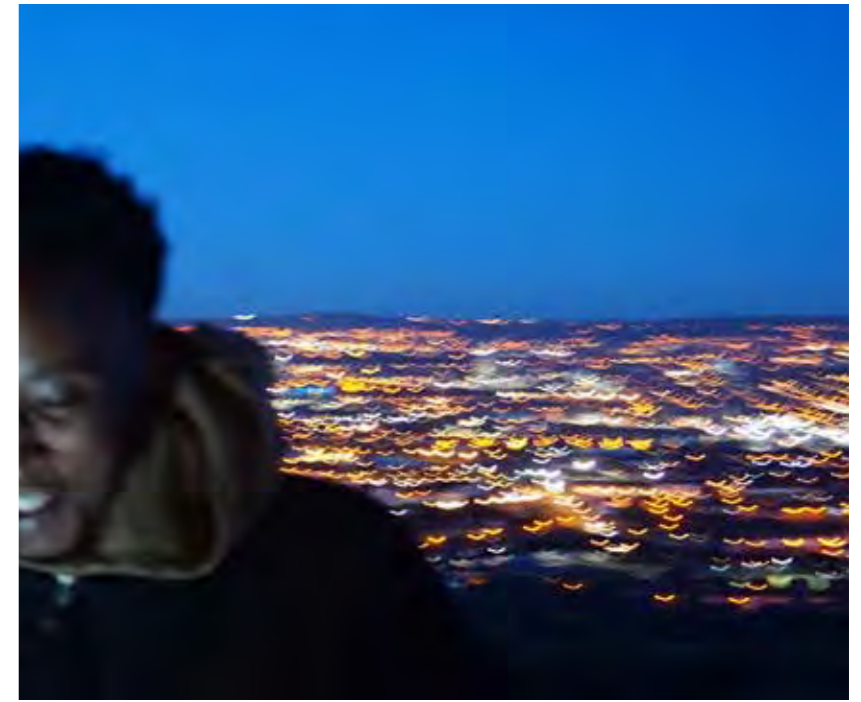
Some people are taking drugs or tablets like crazy. If you are in the wrong place at the wrong time, you get knocked the fuck up for no reason. It happened to me on 12th of July. I was in city centre and I had two girls with me and a bottle of Vodka and I was just standing there. Then this guy came up talking and asked for a drink. We were all talking. Then this car came up and these other guys came out and starting fighting - boom boom! I was watching and didn't know what to do. I wasn't expecting it, but the guy just banged me for no reason, I lost control. I had the bottle. I could take the bottle and smash his head, but it wasn't worth it, so I threw the bottle. The first time he punched me, I punched him so good, knock out. The four other guys, they wanted to leave me dead, fuck it, it wasn't worth it. It's really scary. It happens everywhere and it's hard to stop. 90% people want an audience; want to be the centre of attention. I've stayed in hostels; some people there just look for violence. Many times I could have fought back but there are too many consequences, I kept my hands behind my back. If you keep positive you survive.

I stay positive by staying true to myself and the reason I came to this country. I came from hell. I came here to have peace, to have a better life. There is peace here. At least here there is law and a legal system. If you feel in trouble, you can call police. Even if they can't help you they can try to change something. I know I could die tomorrow so while I'm alive I wanna live and have peace and stability. Sometimes you don't get peace but avoid violence and get your own peace. It's hard.

In Somalia people have been fighting for a long time. If Northern Irish people went to Somalia and saw the people there and the life they live, everyone would come back here and start cleaning the streets.

We have UVF, UDA, pa pa ap, whatever, you know what I mean like. Every group is trying to be like gangsters. Killing people is easy. What's the point of killing people? It's getting better now but I would see people die in their hundreds every day. 300 in a day. You see flesh, blood, everything. It's very mad. You wake up in the morning and go out and you are not sure if you'll make it back home alive. So that's very scary. The only thing that could kill you like that here is a car accident. You get the point?

I like travelling because you see how different people are and it's not a bad thing. You see how people act different, behave different. Like in Mozambique, I was there and when they smoke they light the side of the filter - you see everywhere is different. Some people here you can tell they are sick mentally, when you are walking on the street some people seem so angry. Sometimes I look down with my earphones and walk. But we must look up and see what is around us, what is in front of us. I have had people spit on my face; children will throw stones at you for attention to see how you react. If you go mental and start fighting you will get fucked up there. There were these kids I used to know, normal kids. One day I was walking, they were throwing stones at me and I chased them to their houses. I told their parents; your kids are misbehaving. And they said okay that's okay then that's all I get.



...back at the start, I used to have eggs and stones thrown at me...





...I came to this country, and I was welcomed, I do feel at home, that's the good thing...

**...We are not stone, we have feelings and emotions, when you say hello to somebody you want that hello back...**

Two older guys came up to me after and said "you are good boy" I didn't understand. Then one of them was like "Where are you from?" and I said "here" and he was like "no, where are you originally from?" I said "Somalia". Okay goodbye. He just said, "I know the score", I didn't get it. Next day I was driving my car and I didn't want to park it on my street, so I parked on the next one. Then when I went back to my car I saw this letter. It said, "sorry mate, I know you live at Ebor Street, you shouldn't park here". It said my house number? I didn't know anybody at this time, I was so confused, I was looking around – who put this letter there? I asked a woman on the street. A woman pointed at the house where the letter came from, so I knocked. Someone answered the door and I told them, firstly, I'm sorry I parked my car in your space – but how do you know my address? He said, "what do you mean?". So I said to him "I'm a black and yes, I live at xxxx, that's all you know and that's all you will ever know". Bye Bye. I left him. It was very rude. He didn't know who I am. He was trying to make me paranoid. If he had come and introduced himself as a neighbour and wanted to get to know me I would have welcomed him in my house but that is not what he wanted. It was just rude.

When I came here I thought it was Europe, and it is Europe but people they act like Africans. Like there is no government. I mean it. African Europeans. Some people, they will give you hassle for no reason.

That's how it goes, for example if you see someone on the street and you say hello and they don't say nothing, then the next person you ain't going to say hello to them. We are not stone, we have feelings and emotions, when you say hello to somebody you want that hello back, you know what I mean? So, the first person you see, maybe they don't say hello, and then the second maybe they spit on the street and then the third is someone you already know but you're already in a bad mood, you just walk past them. Even if you try to be nice, talk to people, like last time I was walking I met this guy, he talks to everyone and I like him, he is a humble guy – but other people, they say he is mental because he talks to everybody. I think the opposite. So even if you are nice, people have something bad to say about you.

The life here is not so bad, you can have peace. But the peace you get is physical peace not mental peace. So many people try to put their fingers in your head like they are making pizza dough, they try to melt your head. It's fucked up. It's outside peace not inside peace. Where I come from, people are not stressed, not depressed, no anxiety even with everything going on. People are dying, there is conflict, but we have other things to be busy with – we have physical problems. You get shot, injured but they don't have mental problems. But here you're not getting shot, you're not getting injured, but your head is getting fucked up, toasted, you know? It's mad. It can't be stopped, what can you do man? People like me, those who feel they are strong enough, they will survive but I worry about the kids who are growing up. People are not thinking what they are saying, they are just saying it. When they are speaking they don't mean it. If you try to be sensitive, you are fucked. You get the point?

I came to this country, and I was welcomed, I do feel at home, that's the good thing. But some people they came here, foreigners, they don't feel at home. But at least some of us do. We need to make everyone feel welcome.

But I don't trust the police at all here. Like, imagine I went to the police station because I saw this guy stealing people's stuff from outside McDonalds, I told the police what he was doing, his name, his address – and I know there is cameras there. They don't care, "forget about it – just go home" they told me. From that point I just thought, I don't care, it's easier not to care. When you care you are the only one who gets hurt. Like I have seen this guy, I know he is a terrorist, but why tell the police? I don't care. He makes a lot of money in a very smart way, and I have seen pictures of this guy in Syria, explosions, things like that, holding guns. Scary shit, very dangerous. Who should I tell? I don't tell nobody, I don't care. You get the point? This person could be very dangerous, he could do something bad here, but I have tried before, and the police just told me "go home, sleep", why should I care?

Even when I told police about things that happened when I was living in a hostel, some guy was breaking my door in and at that moment I called the police. When I phoned the police, they didn't come. There are cameras there, the police the found the person who did it and stole my phone and the police, they knew who it was, but they didn't do anything.

Like when I was living in a children's home, this old guy was sitting outside, and he threw a bottle at me. I told the staff what was happening, and she just turned around and said; "maybe he thought you were game." Is that the best answer she could give? I told the police, and when they came I told them to check the camera and they just told me; "we are going to contact you soon". Nothing. Nobody got back to me. There is nothing you can do.



**...I love to capture the good things in life and I love to eat seafood...**



**...But the peace you get is physical peace not mental peace. So many people try to put their fingers in your head like they are making pizza dough, they try to melt your head. It's fucked up. It's outside peace not inside peace...**



...Whenever I got bullied because of my eyes it melted my head...

My Story

**My name is Sean, 20 years old from West Belfast.**

I was born in 1997, I've 3 younger brothers. When I was born, I was born with an eye condition that affected the shape of my eyes. I've had multiple operations in London, Belfast and stuff.

Been bullied all my life because of it ... tortured, beaten, slagged from primary school right up through secondary school, right up to now I've been slagged. It used to bother me when I was younger, going through secondary school, but to be honest then I didn't care what people thought of me. I just let it go over my head. Whenever I got bullied because of my eyes it melted my head. I didn't want to go out or anything. And then .... sorta didn't bother me, well that's what I thought anyway.

When I was 16, I realised that everything I'd been through, slagging and bullying, beatings and stuff, was for nothing, just the way I looked. I realised when I was 16 and it started to affect me. I started to get depressed and all, anxiety, and paranoid and all because everytime I went out everyone started to stare. It done my head in big time.

It was hard, still is, but I've learnt to deal with it, it's the way I look, the way I am, nothing I can do about it. It's just me.

People out there who are worse off, that's something I've realised.

2005 or 2006, sorry, my granny died. That was a big thing in my life. Like, it was bad. 2 years later, my grandpa died. It was another killer. When I was younger I didn't really understand it all.

I was always told when my granny died she just passed off peacefully in her sleep. Whenever I had reached 17, I started drinking more stuff and smoking grass, and all, completely dependent on grass.

When I hit 17 and started drinking bad, I was told that my granny didn't just die in her sleep, she was an alcoholic and she died because she was drinking so much. And because of the troubles and all, my grandpa was shot.

And my dad went off the rails and my granny had to try to try to keep it all together. My grandpa was in hospital for years. He ended up paralyzed and in a wheel chair for his whole life.

During the troubles, it was bad enough with everything and all, my granny had to deal with everything on her own and all. And then trying to look after my dad, and his sisters and all. She ended up becoming an alcoholic. Whenever I found out when I was 17, that was the reason she died I felt very cheated on. .... that's one way to describe it. I just felt lied to, I was lied to for years. Am shouldn't 'a been not told what was wrong, but I understand it because I was young. They wouldn't tell me.

The reason I was told how my granny actually died and the reasons why she died was because I started drinking, following the wrong crowd and started doing bad stuff I shouldn't been doing. So, my auntie, my dad's sister thought it would have been worth my while letting me know that if I'd gone on the way I was, it could'a happened to me too, I could'a started drinking more, and become reliant on drink and all. So, I thought, fair enough, and I cut down my drink and started smoking green even more, flat out every single day, it was just constant.



That's the only thing that keeps me sweet, keeps me level headed, people say when you smoke green it makes you more paranoid but, to me, it doesn't, it gives me the ability to be able to go out and walk about the streets and keeps me calm and keeps me chilled. That made me flip when people are staring at me and stuff.

So, I can keep my cool ... I have done all my life. I always said to myself, because of the life my da had whenever he was younger, because he had troubles, my grandpa being in a wheel chair, and he going off the rails, he was joyriding and drinking and everything and all different shit. I always told myself I was going to do better, and I was going to make a better life for myself. I was going to get my qualifications and all, I was going to stick by it. Now I got all my GCSE's, got everything I needed, that was my plans, done it.



Next plan was to do me A' levels and make something of myself cause no one else in my family had done it and I wanted to be the first. I wanted to show everyone I was capable of something. So, I went and done a year and a half of A' levels, was sitting on two distinctions and a merit and then I started falling in with the wrong crowd, the very wrong crowd. Started taking more drugs, started taking e's and coke .... That became a regular thing, it was every single weekend without fail, going on to take all sorts of drugs.

As months went on I started to get more involved in drugs... started selling them, started off with a bit of green, making myself a few quid, so I wasn't paying for any smoke. Then things progressed I started taking e's and all and started partying more... thought it was good making a bit of money and all .. thought it was class and then three months after I was pulled as I was coming out of a night club, and I had guns put to my kneecaps. I was told that was on my head ... that was a big wakeup call ... a big wakeup call.

I had a lot of shite going on in my head and no one knew about it, never talked to anyone .... I tried to kill myself. Once ma mate stopped me on the way to do it and took the curtain wire off me. Two days later everyone knew because my mate went and told my ma that I'd done it, and my da and all, and they didn't take any notice of it, and didn't take it seriously. Two days later I done the same thing, near enough the same thing. Went to a grave yard and found a tree, um, ... threw a belt up ... um ah ... was found and was told by the doctors and nurses, I was lucky, not to be brain-dead or paralyzed. That was scary like, after I felt too embarrassed and too ashamed of myself and all for doing it.

Felt like I let my family down, felt like I'd let my mates down but now I don't feel that .. that was just the way I was feeling at the time. Everyone has done shit and have their own issues to deal with ... it was just the way I was at the time. Started getting the help that I needed, seeing the psychiatrist for months, councillors, ... never really done anything like. My relationship, my ma and da split up a few years ago because there was always violence and all in the house .. me and my wee brother there was violence, so they thought it best to split up.

Whenever they split up, my relationship with me ma was never the best ... just always constant bickering and arguing and just over stupid things, I just got fed up with it ... just wanted to move out, couldn't wait to get out of the house. Move out be on my own. Get me own house and all ...

...and I had guns put to my kneecaps. I was told that was on my head...that was a big wake up call...a big wake up call...





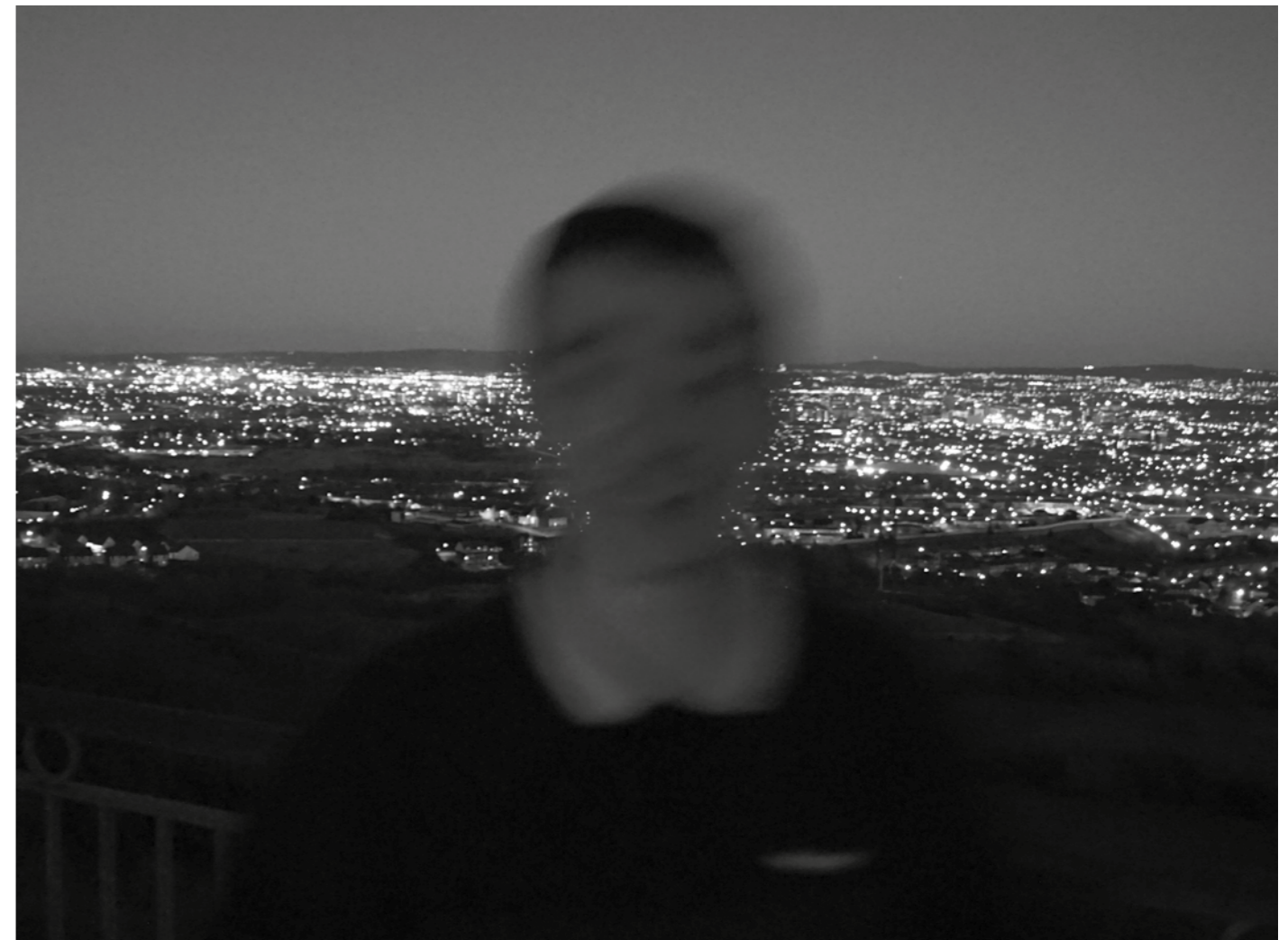
...I was kicked out of the house at half-five in the morning by her and her ex-partner...

June or May this year, I met a woman and got into a relationship with the woman. My family didn't agree with it what so ever ... whenever I met the woman I found I was able to move into her house, that was like an escape, I was able to move out of my ma's ... it was like, happy fucking days. No more shite. Don't get me wrong I didn't want to not talk to my ma and da when I started going with the woman ... the woman was 34, had kids and my ma and my da just didn't agree with the situation whatsoever. Fell out with my whole family, with all my friends and all. My wee brother, he's 18, me and him are like sticky plasters - you never see one without the other and that was without fail. Lost him, didn't see him for months, and gave everything up to go with the woman, absolutely everything. Got engaged, was engaged for a couple of months and then she done ... she went back to her ex. That was a killer, absolute killer, that was one of the worst things to happen me, just for the simple fact that that was what I was willing to give up and that was what I was willing to do for her ... and what I did do for her, for her to go and do that after me falling out with my family and stuff.

I was kicked out of the house at half-five in the morning by her and her ex-partner and some other fella was there. Left at half-five in the morning, was homeless, nowhere to go ... ended up getting lifted. Then my cousin came back from holiday the next day and stayed with her for a couple of weeks and then with the help of Quaker Cottage was able to get into a hostel. I am in the hostel now trying to get myself back on track, stand on my own feet and trying to make my life better. After reading my story

back to myself it has made me realise that there were a lot more things that have happened in my life that have affected me. Until you take the time out to read your story you don't realise how much other things that has happened in your life and the way that it affects you. For example, when I was 10 I was walking to the shop to get milk for my mummy. On the way back, a fully-grown man started shouting abuse to me "go away back to China", I told my Dad and there was murder, fights left right and centre, I even got hit with a crutch and ended up with a scar. A feud had started. But to cut the long story short, we were put under threat of being burnt out. The police came out to the door a week later with another threat, this went on and on. And resulted with me and my wee brothers having to get a taxi to and from school which was only a 5-minute walk away because of the threats and the dangers. It's only when you sit and actually think about everything, you realise how mad that actually is, for something like that to happen. There are so many other incidents just like that, that have happened throughout my life that I could write my own book.

My hopes for the future would be to work with young people and to help bring about some sort of change which is really needed in Belfast today. Firstly, to create more opportunities and a better advanced mental health service. There should be more awareness about mental health, suicide, self-harm – if not being taught in schools, to be talked about.



...My hopes for the future would be to work with young people and to help bring about some sort of change which is really needed in Belfast today...





...I guess it's similar to the way people see Protestants and Catholics here. But in Sudan it's kind of divided by class...

My Story

Sorry, give me a second - It's just I have a headache, like usual. Since I arrived in this country I have had a headache; it's really weird.

**My name is Kamal, I am 14 now. I'm from Sudan.**

I was a really good student in school, I never failed anything, I was like the 10th in the whole of Sudan in some subjects. My parents really cared about school and stuff and they provided me with everything, they didn't want me to feel poor, and I never did. I guess they worried about this because the school I went to was for the other side, like you know - how I told you there are like two types of people, two different tribes in Sudan. My family was from one side and most of the people in my school were from the other part.

Whenever I was little I always felt that I was special in my parents' eyes because I was their first child, and everything was put into me so that whenever I'm older I can do something big with my life. Up until now my parents have had big expectations for me. Whenever my sister was born I felt like I didn't get that much attention, but I guess I didn't care that much because I knew deep inside that it wasn't my parents fault, it was just natural. After a while I got a third brother and my fourth sister and then I started being a father figure to them because I would take care of them, take them out, take them to the park, get their dinner and when my parents went out I would just stay with my brothers and sisters.

I was their role model sitting at home with them, it felt normal. Most of my friends in Sudan and here don't have those responsibilities, but to



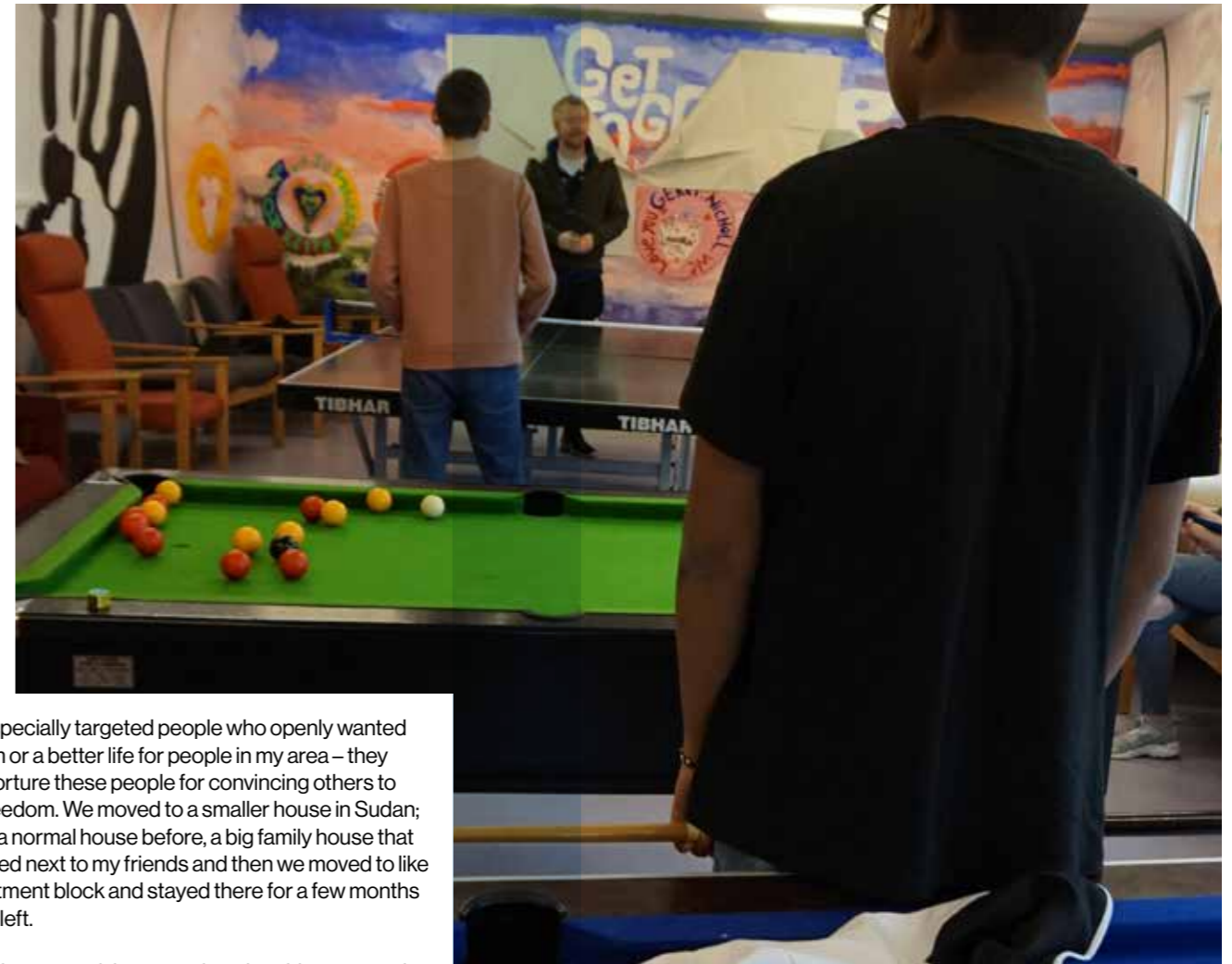
me it just feels normal because my mum always said it was how it was when she was young in her house. Her parents didn't do much. When she told me this, it made me feel like I wasn't doing enough for my family - so I tried doing my best making everyone in the house happy.

We were middle class in Sudan; my dad used to have a good business and we were good, there was always food on the table, we had air conditioning - but some people I knew were like really really poor - most of them are in South Sudan now. They live in really bad conditions.

I had friends from the other side. They were really rich, they were in my class, but they really didn't know that I wasn't from their 'side'. I guess it's similar to the way people see Protestants and Catholics here. But in Sudan it's kind of divided by class. Most of the people who went to my school, their parents worked for the government - and the government are like - bad people - they took all the money and do bad things.

Like for example, if there was a crack on Lisburn Road and people couldn't get around, the government here would use money to fix it but in Sudan they would just take the money for themselves - divide it amongst themselves and do something else with it. The government don't care about the people, they are corrupt.

At the start of 2016 I was told that the area where we lived wasn't safe. The police were starting to attack the people here in my area. The police just started to get randomly racist - like literally randomly - any reason you can imagine. They were racist towards people from our ethnic group. All the police were from the other side. For example, you might be walking down the street and they would just stop you, take you in their car, and keep you in prison for days. They make up reasons for why they took you and then release you after a few days just to scare you. They made you feel like you were always watched.



They especially targeted people who openly wanted freedom or a better life for people in my area - they would torture these people for convincing others to want freedom. We moved to a smaller house in Sudan; we had a normal house before, a big family house that we owned next to my friends and then we moved to like an apartment block and stayed there for a few months until we left.

I remember around the same time that things started to get really bad in my area my uncle got married and then my granddad got really sick. I'm really close to my granddad. In Arabic culture, going to your grandparent's house is like going on holiday. If you have any problems, you go to them to talk about it. In 2016 my granddad started getting bad problems with his heart. He had to get emergency surgery three days after my uncle's wedding. I was really worried when he was in hospital, I couldn't eat or sleep or focus on anything. But as he started to recover I started to feel myself again.

Then summer came; I really enjoyed that summer in Sudan. Then it was September and school was starting but my mum wouldn't let me go to school for some reason. At the time I couldn't understand why. Normally my parents wouldn't even let me have one day off. Now I know the reason that she made me stay off school was because we were coming here and that she didn't want me to become close with my friends at school again and have to cut them off.

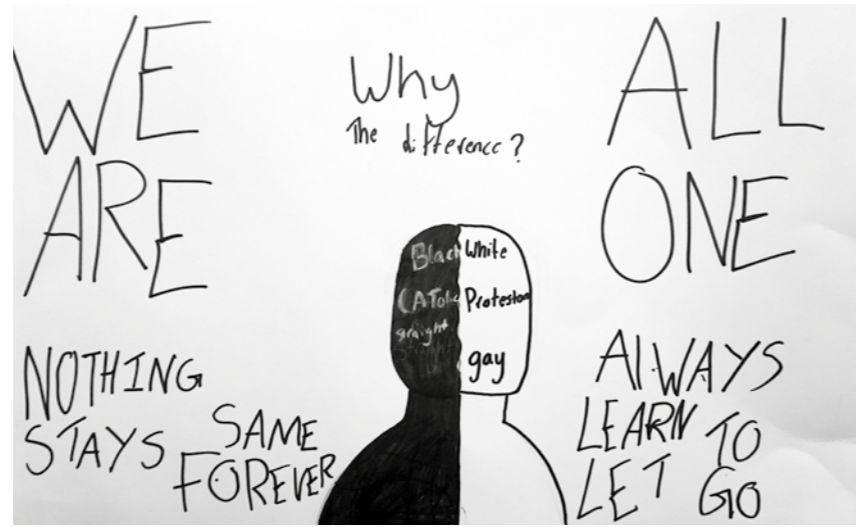
On December 11th 2016, my mum and dad took me into a room on my own and started talking about - about how we were coming here. I didn't understand, I was really shocked - I was just crying. The only thing I can remember was that I was crying. She was telling me that it wasn't safe here anymore. She told me I would have to say goodbye to my dad. My siblings were too young to understand, so my mum didn't tell them the truth at the time. My siblings just thought we were going on holiday.

...She was telling me that it wasn't safe here anymore. She told me I would have to say goodbye to my dad...

Your Choice  
Today Can  
AFFECT Me Tomoz



...You're not allowed to talk about politics in Sudan. My mum was missing for three days..



**...I just started thinking that I can't be scared I have to protect them and be their blanket – I was 12 then...**

I spent the day after with my best friends; we hung out, played football and I then I had to say goodbye to them, it was really tough. I gave them all my stuff to remember me. I couldn't sleep that night. I took a cold shower; I remember standing in the shower for what felt like an hour. I was just thinking and thinking. I was really worried about what was going to happen to me and my family. I got out of the shower, got dressed and got in the car with my family and we drove to the airport. I remember saying good bye to my grandparents – my grandma was just sitting there looking at us. I saw some of my friends in the waiting area when I was boarding the plane. We were all crying.

I later found out why we left. My mum had been randomly attacked by the police and that's why we had to come here. If she didn't, I don't think we would have come here because we didn't realise how bad it was going to get.

My mum used to be a human rights lawyer; she had a degree and all, but after my sister was born she had to stay at home. Then my mum started working in a family-run coffee shop. My mum was working there, and the police thought some of the customers gathered there to talk about politics – but they weren't talking about politics. One day the police came and took my mum and another of the workers with them. My mum came back after a few days – but the other worker that was taken, she was never found again – never. You're not allowed to talk about politics in Sudan. My mum was missing for three days. I have no idea where she was on a trip with her friends – but when she came back I saw, like it was really weird, but I saw her hair line had like moved back and there were scratch marks on her hands and face. I remember asking, "what's wrong mum?" and she was just said that she had fallen in a bush and caught her hair, but it didn't make any sense. Up until now she has never spoken about what happened, but I know she was tortured by them.

I still can't stand that they took my mum. If I was there I would just be raging. My dad had tried to get her back, but him against ten police officers – no chance! We were all asleep when he left to try and find her, but I just had a feeling something was wrong – both my parents were gone. All of that happened a few weeks before we came here.

Getting off the plane, in Belfast, it was night time and it was raining, and it was really cold, and my dad wasn't there. In my culture, the dad is like the protector – wherever we went he was there. Say like I was cold, he was my blanket – he was where I felt at home, I always felt safe around him. But when I came here I was with my mum and I felt like I was my dad, I had to protect my siblings and my mum. From that moment forward I have felt like that was my job here – to protect them. I just started thinking that I can't be scared I have to protect them and be their blanket – I was 12 then.

It was around 5am when we arrived at Belfast airport. We got out of the airport and some guy picked us up and he helped us. We were told to go to the police station. We sat there, I was feeling mad because there was nowhere to sit - there was just cold metal benches and I remember the guy was shouting at my mum and I couldn't get why he was shouting at her. We sat there, all of us, for like 4 hours. They took all our details, mum was really nervous because of our fake passports and because of her experience in Sudan. We didn't have any stuff with us – just the clothes on our back. Everyone else had a coat but I didn't bring one – I didn't realise how cold it was going to be here. We couldn't bring anything – we left everything at home. Literally nothing. I had a bag with headphones, an extra pair of glasses, a book to read and my phone and a phone charger.

After the police station a taxi picked us up. I remember looking around and realising that nothing looked familiar. We got dropped off at a house where a guy was waiting, and he told us that this is where we would stay for the next few weeks. My mum found us some food and then we slept.

After we settled in our first house on Antrim Road, things started to get better. I started to get the hang of people here, but it just didn't feel like home, it didn't feel right to me. Whenever we moved to Ormeau Road and I started school and started to socialise more, Belfast started to feel more like home. I started getting more used to the weather and the people. The thing I found most difficult at the start was the people here; their accent, the way they talked and how they acted.

I had a pretty good life in Sudan. We had to leave everything. When you are an asylum seeker here, you are only given £36 per week to live on. You know, when I first arrived here – the outfit that I was wearing I wore that for like a full week, maybe even in two weeks. I would never have done that in Sudan. It's hard having to budget like that.

I remember my first day at school. I went straight into a class and got involved with a project, but at lunch time I wasn't used to the food and I put butter on my pizza thinking it was like a garlic sauce. A guy in the dinner hall started bullying me and made fun of me about it for around a month. After a while though we became friends – like now we are actually, like, really good friends.

There was another time in school there was a guy who was being really racist to me, he kept on coming up to me and telling me I was a "weak black person" and that I was "nothing." At first when he was saying these things about me I didn't care – I just ignored it, but then he started saying stuff about my sisters and my mum and I just felt mad – he told me to meet him after school and I went to the park and got into a fight.

Then there was the incident on the Falls Road. We had just moved there and me and another friend who is also from Sudan were walking down the road in the evening and ended up fighting with two guys. The guys were on the other side of the street and were shouting "you wee niggers" and throwing rocks at us. He threw a can of Boost and me and told me to "pick it up and give it to me, you slave". I can control myself and I don't get

mad straight away, but it just gets to a point when it's really annoying – it gets too much. I told my friend we should just keep walking but then the guys shouted, "I saw your mum the other day and I hit her with stuff." I just turned around and saw they were running over to us – we ended up fighting. A lady saw us and stopped us.

A lot of things could have made it a lot easier for us to settle here. People who work in the organisations like the housing executive and the police, they need to understand and respect us better. Also, normal people, who live here - I wish they would understand the reasons we came here. People ask weird questions like – "why would you come here?". You see like in my school now, none of the people know I'm a refugee; my friends just think I'm an immigrant. They see that I'm like dressed well and I have a watch and stuff - they think that all refugees are poor. I think they would treat me differently if they knew because they would think that I was coming here to steal their money and their jobs. It's just the way people look at you sometimes – especially my mum because she wears a hijab. I think people need to know that people who come from outside are not coming to destroy you or disadvantage you in any way - we are just coming here for our safety.

Why would I leave my good life in Sudan, my house, my friends, my family, just to come here and stay here outside of my comfort zone in a place that is not my home? Why would I even consider doing that if I'm not in danger?



**...When you are an asylum seeker here, you are only given £36 per week to live on. You know, when I first arrived here – the outfit that I was wearing I wore that for like a full week, maybe even two weeks...**

People need to think from their own perspective, if you were in danger and you needed to go somewhere or hide from somebody, would you like people to treat you badly? If you are in danger, all you think about is you, yourself and your family. That's like a natural human instinct.

Please don't judge people before you know them and their story. See here, because I'm more black than my mum, I don't get much racist abuse because people don't think I look Muslim – but my mum, she wears a hijab and on buses and in black taxis some people just stare at you the whole time – my mum gets scared sometimes. Also, once, I found it funny actually, I was walking down the road with a sports bag and this guy behind me started looking at me and when I pulled out my phone he froze – he thought I had a bomb in my bag – isn't that crazy?

My last hope is that my dad can be reunited with us here.



...diagnosed with depression at 16 and she is seeing a counsellor now. She said she didn't want to be here...

**R: What was your experience like growing up in Belfast.**

My experience has been quite bad, because we lived at a flash point, you know when it was opened before the peace walls were there. People were shouting telling you to get down. We were young kids at the time and you would have heard bullets whizzing past you, it was horrendous. At the time you are up having a nosy seeing what's going on. At the time you don't comprehend it. Until it landed at your door step, made it even worse.

My brother got himself involved, so it ended up he brought a lot of trouble to the door because all the local lads his age were up throwing stones. At the time, the army would have been firing plastic bullets and the police would have been checking the hospitals to catch people. So, he was hit but he didn't go to the hospital at the time, but they ended up getting word anyway. They came out to the house and lifted him. I always remember my brother telling me that the police had lifted a whole lot of them and told him if he didn't say who was involved they were going to tell the others that he did. He didn't but they said he did. I believe him.

We lived in a wee two-bedroom; my mum and dad in the back room and the three of us in the front room and my older brother slept on the sofa. I remember coming home to stay with my sister and everything just hit me, the nerves. I was having nightmares, everything. I hate violence now. I know it sounds funny, but I can tell when there is going to be a fight, just by people's body language, I get up and walk away. I cannot be around it.

I come back about once a year to see my sister. My mummy and daddy never came back, not for a long, long time.

**R: What has it been like living so close to an interface area?**

It was fine living here up until the parades had stopped. Then the rioting had started. They had blocked them from walking up the road. I tried to protect the kids from it. You do still get people trying to start up trouble again but they're such a minority now - the majority of people don't want it.

**R: What would you say the main issues are for young people today?**

Drugs, I see that working in the town. I was on the bus yesterday coming home from work and it pulled up and there was this guy standing there rocking from side to side, with his eyes rolling in the back of his head and I was like, oh my god. You think they are going to fall but they don't fall. It's that Spice everyone's on? It is scary, I see a lot of young people in town. For young people, it is definitely drink and drugs. It's a drinking culture. You know, when you go out to socialise, you go out for a drink.

**R: Since the Good Friday Agreement, more people have died through suicide than those who were killed during the troubles. I wonder if there was a connection?**

I would agree. I don't think it was as much to do with the troubles in our case, it was mental health and drink. See nothing has really changed, we couldn't get help for him then. And for me there is not much help out there now either and my daughter is actually going through it now. She was diagnosed with depression at 16 and she is seeing a counsellor now. She said she didn't want to be here. It's awful having to hear your child say that especially after going through that with their dad. There seems to be a run of them, it's all teenagers or ones in their early twenties. I just think there is so much pressure put on kids these days.



**...I am always encouraging my kids to come and talk to me straight away don't wait until it builds up...**

I am very close with my girls. I have always told my girls they can come and talk to me about any issues and not to suffer in silence, that it's not as bad as they think. There is always hope. Being a parent is the hardest thing in the world, it really really is because you are trying to do your best for them, but you are always questioning, is your hardest good enough?

There is not enough support out there for young people, for example when my daughter went to the doctor to seek help, that was in January, but she wasn't getting an appointment until April and that appointment was only an assessment. She got her proper first appointment in June - 6 months later. And the only thing stopping her was that she hadn't tried. Like if she had tried it once and succeeded, do you know what I mean? I was disgusted. I kept an eye on her. She was lucky she had us to talk to; some young people don't have anyone who they can talk to. I am always encouraging my kids to come and talk to me straight away don't wait until it builds up.

It's inevitable with my anxiety and their dad's history that they will end up with some sort of anxiety or depression. The counsellor has prescribed her anti-anxiety medication. I didn't want her on any medication. They have tried melatonin on her to try and help her sleep, but she's not sleeping. And it's the lack of sleep which is causing anxiety. The counsellor has ensured me that what she is on now is non-addictive. It's not like diazepam or anything like that. I reluctantly agreed - I don't want her addicted to prescription drugs at her age, obviously I would prefer alternatives.

School counselling - once a week - 20 minutes and a big waiting list - a big big waiting list. It's like the depression has to be severe before anything gets done about it. They left her high and dry basically. One time she said she was fine, she didn't want to go anymore - she wanted to give it up, but I wouldn't let her. I knew she needed it.



...I think that the peace walls are awful, that they should be taken down. People need to learn to live with each other...

**R: What are your views on the peace walls?**

I think that the peace walls are awful, that they should be taken down. People need to learn to live with each other. You know, yes it will become a bit scary at first, but I think Belfast is moving on and it's just a minority who are holding us back. I definitely think they should be taken down. Just to be segregated like that. You know, you could walk around and go 'that's where the Protestants live and that's where the Catholics live' because of the peace walls. It's wrong. Look at Twaddell now that all the trouble is over, they don't have a peace wall and that was one of the roughest flash points.

See, with Brexit people were scare mongered so much, see with social media, the news. People only put out what they want you to see and hear. People were scared, they were told 'people coming over here are going to take your jobs'; 'if we leave they will close the borders' and all that. And people have the right to go where they want to go. I didn't vote because of our government's really old fashion values, with abortion, same sex marriage, you know? It is uncalled for. Move on, let us move on, they are holding us back,

they really are. Yes, kids are more likely to come out today because it is a different society but what do they have to look forward to? They should be in government.

**R: What would be your hopes for the future?**

The way things are going, Belfast is coming on great with all the new hotels and everything. Tourists - it's great, it's bringing jobs and money into the economy. You know my kids could end up working in hospitality or whatever. I think it's time to open up the areas now. Yes, there are a few incidents which goes on, but you tend to move over them quicker because the majority of people don't want them. Nobody wants it anymore; we just want to live in peace. I think in the areas there are a lot of mixed relationships, it is opening up. Like going to Quakers has really helped me open up to people from the other side if you like. Because I have never really had the opportunity to meet with people who were different to me, and once I met them and heard their story, I thought mine was bad, but then it made it not so bad and we all got strength and supported one another. There should be more places like Quakers where people have the opportunity to meet and learn from one another.

I was a bit apprehensive about going to Quakers at first, my health visitor referred me at the time. It was the best thing ever that I went to, best thing. I loved it. I didn't want to leave. I cried my eyes out when I left because I met some great people in our group. We were quite a close wee group, and the kids loved it and the fact that Debs is still going is fantastic.

...Like going to Quakers has really helped me open up to people from the other side if you like. Because I have never really had the opportunity to meet with people who were different to me...





### What's Your Story?

We started this project giving each participant the opportunity to explore their life with us. To tell us about their past, their present and their aspirations for the future. We wanted to identify perceived or real change, wither positive or negative, since the Belfast "Good Friday" Agreement was signed in April 1998.

The Belfast Agreement spoke of "commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community" and in particular "The right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity". Yet as the project unfolded and took on its own life, key themes started to emerge of the inequalities that exist. There was the sense of an unspoken acceptance that 'this is how life is', regardless of the existence of a Good Friday Agreement, and the promises it held. Working class communities in Belfast are struggling with huge issues where they feel let down by the 'system' which was supposed to have been put in place to support and benefit them. Repeatedly, issues such as mental health, suicide, disability discrimination, sectarianism, racial discrimination, sexual identity, drug and alcohol dependency, domestic violence, rape, physical and emotional abuse, neglect were weaved throughout the stories.

"The Good Friday Agreement promised us a peaceful, safe world, yet mental health is such a big problem here. My family and I suffer the loss of my sister every day, because those in government failed to keep their promise". Cheryl.

"It's hard to believe that more people have now died through suicide than were killed in the Troubles, but the statistic is very real and so is the suffering taking place here. This cannot be allowed to continue". David Babington, Action Mental Health, February 2018

The Health Inequalities Annual Report published by the Department of Health in March 2018 states that "alcohol and drug related indicators continue to show some of the largest health inequalities monitored in NI, with drug related and alcohol specific mortality in the most deprived areas around five times the rates seen in the least deprived" and that "in 2016, the under 20 teenage birth rate in the most deprived areas was almost six times the rate in the least deprived".

Young people are presented with a "way out". They are told to study hard at school to get qualifications that will take them to college or university, or to get a trade with the assurance of securing a good job at the end of it. They are often told that they can achieve whatever they desire if they work hard, which quite often is not the case due to restraints of social position, the competitive job market, limited resources and restricted opportunities. Many distrust those who are in power as they, like so many before them, have fallen through the gaps in the system leaving them with no qualifications and limited opportunities.

Since the Good Friday Agreement, the number of 'peace walls' has actually increased, barriers that incite fear and hostility, creating more division. 'Peace walls' now run across the city like a flow of rivers down a mountain side, constructed to separate unionist and nationalist communities. Covered with graffiti they stand tall in the sky, topped with barbed wire fences with movement at the gates monitored by CCTV cameras. During times of trouble the gates leading to the "other side" may get closed to prevent rioting or other dangerous behaviours. They are still getting locked at night keeping communities apart, helping to encourage feelings of fear, isolation and hopelessness.

"I would want the peace walls to be taken down. I just don't see why they aren't getting along, Protestants and Catholics, I don't see why not. I don't think it should be a big deal. I don't think there is enough trouble (for peace walls to be there), except whenever there are bonfires, that's it". Sean, 16

Koulla Yiasouma, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People said in 2015, "Segregation and community division continue to be a part of daily life for many children and young people in Northern Ireland and the legacy of the conflict impacts significantly on their lives. Research clearly shows increased levels of child poverty, childhood mental ill-health, educational inequalities and disabilities in the areas which have suffered most as a result of the Northern Ireland conflict."

The social geography of Belfast has been strongly influenced due to the political violence it has suffered over the years. Belfast City Council stated in their 2007 Good Relations Plan that 'more than half of the city's population now lives in wards that are either 90% Protestant or 90% Catholic community background'.

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of people migrating to the country, with more than 2% of the Belfast population now belonging to an ethnic minority. Many are simply looking for an opportunity of employment to support their family or put a roof over their head, whilst others are fleeing from war torn countries and seeking refuge. If asylum seekers are granted refugee status they are likely to be placed in accommodation within working class areas. This can cause tension within these communities as both groups seek homes from the Housing Executive or jobs in the same areas mirrored by increased racism and hate related crimes causing further divide within already segregated communities.

"He threw a can of Boost and me and told me to "pick it up and give it to me, you slave". I can control myself and I don't get mad straight away, but it just gets to a point when it's really annoying – it gets too much". Kamal

"Shortly after, we moved into the house the housing executive gave us to stay in – it was horrible. I couldn't believe that was where we had to stay, it was so dirty and there were too many stairs. I knew my mother wouldn't be able to manage. But the housing officer made us sign the paper; we didn't have any choice". Anahita

Within Belfast's working-class communities, many live on benefits from week to week and rely on the government for support or have jobs with zero-hour contracts. Owning their own home or planning a financially secure future is not an option. They live a precarious lifestyle in which life becomes a constant struggle. With the enforcement of welfare and tax credit cuts, the morale and optimism within these communities seems to be at an all-time low.

Standing (2010) sees these factors as being the development of a new class of people; the 'precariat' that instead of being active citizens who can participate actively in politics, careers and civil society they are indeed the opposite and are denizens. Their lives are characterised by insecurity, debt and humiliation.



Living within the largely dominated unionist or nationalist communities can indeed harden or influence your identity or indeed change your beliefs. Especially for young people who may not get many opportunities to integrate with those from the 'other side of the wall'. Thoughts and ideologies can be influenced by older members of society or from socialising with peers with strong sectarian views. This is most apparent for young men who are looking to find their place within the world; they have a need to feel part of a group or belonging to something which makes them feel valued. Those who may be unemployed or not in training may be feeling vulnerable and easy pickings for Paramilitary groups to target and offer membership.

Living within a society that has so much fear and suspicion has affected how people treat each other, this creates a 'them and us' divide among the people. With immigration and the refugee crisis currently ongoing throughout Europe this has enabled a revival of a 'them and us' culture with different ethnic groups wishing to settle within Belfast.

While it seems like the Good Friday Agreement has brought about peace at a certain level, it has left the city still very much divided. If we want to have an inclusive, open and welcome society we need to work on the damaged relationships and start to repair the harm caused. We must allow dialogue in a safe environment where those who have been harmed can come together and share their stories. Lederach (2010) talks about focusing on the building of relationships and not simply the arrival of agreements, something which I feel is relevant to the peace process of Northern Ireland. He states, "Constructive change is a matter of moving parties toward a relationship of love rather than one of fear. While relationships of love are characterized by openness, mutual respect, and dignity, relationships characterized by fear are defined by blame, self-justification, and violence. Constructive social change seeks to change the dynamics of human interaction that uphold relational dignity and respectful engagement."

In today's fast paced and 'connected' society, it is all too easy for us to forget to focus on the here and the now; to be mindful of the moment and be aware of our family and friends, and family of community members with whom we share our spaces. Technology and persistent instant news flood our minds with the minutiae of a global world but distract us from developing and maintaining true human relationships. We are drawn to the irrelevant details, and often blinded to what really matters in our lives.

While on residentials, our young people petition us to stay up for an extra hour together, only to spend that time exploring a different world through their smartphone or tablet, at the expense of this world and of those people seated around them. Once this habitual lifeline is removed, the change is transformational. Conversations are awoken and through the candid and at times difficult sharing of individual stories like those we have documented here, real human relationships based on understanding and trust begin to forge.

It is the relationships we encourage between all our young people that will shape our future, but if understanding and trust are the basis of these relationships then our young people must be given a voice and must be heard. These are stories of lived experience in our communities since Northern Ireland took a monumental step towards peace, but if we listen to what is being said then it is clear that the journey for all of us, including those in power, is not over.

We believe this project will help to enable young people, their parents, migrants and refugees share their 'story' to help bring about a society which is inclusive to all. Currently many live in a space where they are restricted and don't hear the voice of others from a different culture or indeed their neighbour. Everyone has a story to tell, but few get the chance to tell it, nor do they realise the potential for change, healing and transformation that comes from telling our story and having our story heard. This project has left us deeply moved and in awe of the participants' vulnerability, openness and honesty and has led to the formation of true friendships among people who might never have had the opportunity to meet.

Publishing everyone's stories is the culmination of their hard work, determination and belief that in telling their story and working together they can all find peace and acceptance of the past and now look forward to a brighter, more equal, more hopeful future. One which they can positively influence.

Thank you to each of the eighteen individuals who were brave enough to take part in this project and to allow their personal life experiences bring hope for positive change for them, for their communities and for wider society.

**Rory Doherty**

Project coordinator, Quaker Service.



With regard to suicide, 318 suicides were registered in NI during 2015. Of these, 132 were aged between 15 and 34-years-old.

Betts J and Thompson J (2017) Mental Health in Northern Ireland.

It's estimated that more than one in five young people in Northern Ireland experiences a significant mental health problem by the time they are 18.

Betts J and Thompson J (2017) Mental Health in Northern Ireland.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is apportioned less than 8% of the mental health budget in NI, whereas the UK average of 10% (10% in NI would mean around an extra £5million for CAMHS).

Betts J and Thompson J (2017) Mental Health in Northern Ireland.

Since 2012 there has been a year-on-year increase of prescribed antidepressants or anti-anxiety drugs for under 16s.

NICCY (2017) Child and Adolescent Mental Health in NI

Research has shown that 50% of mental health problems emerge by age 14 and that childhood adversities associated with dysfunction in families, maternal depression, trauma experienced within families and social deprivation are strongly linked to the onset in childhood and continuation into adulthood of mental health problems. This is thought to be because the duration and types of adversities are persistent and enduring.

However, there is evidence that it is possible to reverse this situation through early intervention and therefore prevent mental health problems becoming pervasive in families and becoming transgenerational.

By the ages of eight to 12 stress reactivity is becoming more consolidated and difficult to modify. This becomes even more pronounced by young adulthood leading adolescents and young adults to use substances and self-harm to self-regulate their stress response and also to diagnosable mental illness. Young adults may then become parents leading to transgenerational problems.

However, the team felt that more work needed to be done to ensure that children and young people with mental health needs will be seen by the right person at the right time in the right place.

Betts J and Thompson J (2017) Mental Health in Northern Ireland.

**Research carried out by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland: "Depression amongst Minority groups like the LGBT community, asylum seekers and refugees is rising"**

*"Conflict related trauma, access to perinatal mental health support, and concerns about high rates of self-harm and suicide, are also some of the other issues communities raised with the Community Foundation"*

Community Foundation (2017), Vital Signs

**5. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) – NI**  
**5.1 Introduction to Mental Health Issues in Children and Young People**  
 between the years 2012/13 to 2014/15 the rates of self-harm presentations to emergency departments in NI increased by 30% for 15 to 19 year olds.

PHA (2016), Health and Social Wellbeing Improvement

As many as 1 in 5 young people in NI self-harm and it is thought that this is mainly 'goal-directed behaviour' to try to deal with psychological pain.

Betts J and Thompson J (2017) Mental Health in Northern Ireland.

**6. Evaluating Mental Health Service Provision (NI) in terms of Accessing Services and Barriers to Access**

**6.1 Stigma – A Key Barrier** The World Health Organisation (WHO) stated, "The single most important barrier to overcome in the community is the stigma and associated discrimination towards persons suffering from mental and behavioural disorders."

When comparing gender groups, stigma was ranked lower among studies only involving women, and in mixed gender groups shame and embarrassment and negative social judgement were most frequently mentioned. The discord between a person's self-perception and common stereotypes about mental illness caused people to avoid telling others about their mental illness and masking the symptoms.

WHO, Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope. Ch.4 p3.

- Findings confirmed the value in creating community-based informal 'drop-in' suicide centres in line with young men's preferred ways to socially interact. Being part of a peer group was seen as important, allowing them to discuss issues with others.
- Learning life skills, social skills and taking part in educational programmes provides a range of skills to navigate through contemporary life challenges.

Jordan, J. et al. Providing meaningful care: using the experiences of young suicidal men to inform mental health care services.



## PARTNERS



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## OTHERS

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## SUPPORT

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**Disability Action**  
www.disabilityaction.org  
Tel: 028 9029 7880  
Textphone: 028 9029 7882

**Cedar Foundation**  
www.cedar-foundation.org  
Tel: 028 9061 2424

**Drug and Alcohol Addiction**

**Addiction NI**  
www.addictionni.com  
Tel: 028 9066 4434

**Start 360**  
www.start360.org  
Tel: 028 9043 5810

**LGBT + Support**

**Gender Jam NI (Trans Youth Network)**  
www.genderjam.org.uk  
Tel: 028 9099 6819

**LGBT Switchboard NI**  
www.cara-friend.org.uk  
Tel: 0808 8000 390 (Mon – Fri 1-4pm / Wed 6-9pm)

**Rainbow Project**  
www.rainbow-project.org  
Tel: 028 9031 9030

**Rape & Sexual Abuse**

**The Rowan Sexual Assault Referral Centre**  
www.therowan.net  
Tel: 0800 389 4424

**Women's Aid - open to all women and men affected by domestic and sexual violence**  
www.womensaidni.org  
Tel: 0808 802 1414

**Refugee Support**

**N.I. Strategic Migration Partnership (NISMP)**  
www.migrationni.org  
Tel: 028 9079 8972

**Embrace NI**  
www.embraceni.org  
Tel: 028 9066 3145

**Suicide and Mental Health**

**Childline (Under 18)**  
Tel: 0800 1111

**Lifeline –**  
help with suicide, trauma, self harm, abuse, depression and anxiety.  
www.lifelinehelpline.info  
Tel: 0808 808 8000

**Minding your Head**  
www.mindingyourhead.info

**Samaritans**  
www.samaritans.org  
Tel: 116 123





Please scan the QR code below to watch the 'My Story' film

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