



The Light Beyond the Shadows

STORIES AND IMAGES OF RESILIENCE AND RECOVERY
FROM AQUARIUS' YOUNG PEOPLE





Acknowledgements

The content of this book was brought together by a team of amazing staff and young people who went above and beyond to ensure the voices of the young people we support are heard.

A huge thank you to Richard, Head of Aquarius, for always leading by example and ensuring that the people we support are at the heart of everything we do.

We would also like to thank ikew design for bringing these stories to life and The National Lottery Heritage Fund for seeing our vision and funding this project.

Thank you to the staff who have provided support and a safe space for young people on their journeys, creating an environment where healing and change could take place. To those staff members who have been vulnerable in sharing their own experiences and stories, proving that our pasts do not define us.

Most importantly, thank you to the young people who have contributed their words, stories, art and ideas - who have shared their honesty and courage, even in the face of painful memories. Their words hold the power to inspire others and give hope to people walking a similar path.

Each story is a reflection of their strength and a testament that hope and recovery are possible.

Introduction

One thing we've learned over 50 years of working with people in addiction is that recovery is not linear. It is a journey full of highs, lows, laughter, tears, progress and setbacks. Much like the individuals themselves – every journey is unique. This book is about looking beyond the shadows and discovering glimpses of light, hope and courage.

The Light Beyond the Shadows is a collection of voices from young people Aquarius has supported throughout the years – people from different and diverse backgrounds, people dealing with their own alcohol or substance misuse or impacted by someone close to them.

These stories explore the power of art, music and poetry as vehicles to cope with powerful emotions and make sense of a world which can be full of challenges.

We have also included contributions from staff members who have their own stories to tell and who act as beacons of inspiration for those we support.

What unites all these voices is their resilience. At times, these stories can be difficult to read, and we did not want to shy away from the realities of their experiences. Please be mindful of your own feelings and wellbeing as you go through this book.

We hope this book encourages empathy, celebrates recovery and allows you to feel less alone in your own journey.



Contents

Welcome

Origins: Aquarius and
Young People's Services

Dancing with Dreams ...

Whispers of Tomorrow ...

Rise From the Ashes ...

Why We Do What We Do ...

Reclaiming the Light ...



So, why are we named Aquarius?

Back in the mid-70s, there was a musical in London, and the main song from it was *The Dancing of the Age of Aquarius*. It had such a positive and uplifting feeling about it that it stuck, and nobody has wanted to change it since!

R.B.

I hope you will enjoy reading *The Light Beyond the Shadows*. This follows on from an original *Book of Hope* that told the stories of people who had used our support services for adults – the adversities they had faced, the difficulties from alcohol, drugs, and gambling and how they had overcome these to live a life they value.

This new book of hope provides stories, poems, raps, artwork, and quotes from young people, their families, and staff about how young people have made changes in their alcohol and drug use to provide a firmer foundation into adulthood – ensuring the wellbeing and fulfilment that everyone deserves. It also provides the views of young people affected by parents and family members' alcohol and drug use, and how, through resilience and support, they have still managed to flourish and build a life of hope, choices, and opportunity.

I am the Head of Service for Aquarius and have worked for the organisation for 27 years now, starting as a frontline worker back in 1997, and more recently taking on the leadership role for Aquarius for the last five years.

At Aquarius, we know that everyone matters. We believe everyone can achieve change and build a life of wellbeing and value. We believe people deserve respect, and we work with the people who use our services in collaboration to ensure they receive the right support, in the right place, at the right time. We know the barriers that people face to getting the support they need, including prejudice and discrimination. We are an organisation that embraces culture and diversity in the way we deliver services as we know that an individual's culture is part of their identity and their wellbeing. We are continuously motivated by the ability of the people we support to find the strengths and resources to change their lives, which is why Hope is a core value for Aquarius.

I hope you enjoy this book of hope. I think it shows the wonderful resilience of our young people and that the start of their lives doesn't have to define them for the rest of their lives. I hope it will inspire you. A life of wellbeing and value is there for everyone.

Richard McVey
Head of Services

Welcome

Origins: Aquarius and Young People's Services

Aquarius started in the mid-1970s as a research project at Birmingham University. It was funded by the Cadbury Trust to assess the rehabilitation of alcoholics in the community. In 1977, Aquarius became a registered charity with three residential services in Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Northampton.

We have been growing ever since, expanding across the Midlands and beyond. Moving from not just supporting adults with alcohol dependency to supporting adults, young people, and their families in overcoming the harms caused by alcohol, drugs, and gambling.

How we engage and support young people has changed dramatically over the years. As funding changes and society evolves, the challenges young people face have become more complex and numerous. The issues young people navigate today are vastly different from those they encountered when we first began.

“Young people have been through a series of extraordinary challenges in the last few years, and this has had a significant and concerning impact on their mental and emotional health, and their vision for their lives.” The Kings Trust, Natwest Youth Index 2024

With constant developments in the digital world and the pressures of social media, young people's voices can easily be lost within a sea of negativity and judgement. It is vital for young people to have a voice and to be listened to, and our services need to respond to these growing challenges.

Currently, we provide support to young people aged 5-25 and their families, either affected by their own or a loved one's alcohol or substance misuse. We offer person-centred, holistic support, allowing individuals to realise that their pasts do not define them, and they can look to the future knowing that change is possible.

Young People's Services

Aquarius has been delivering alcohol and drug services in Bedfordshire since 2016, supporting young people with their own substance misuse or those affected by parental misuse. This involves working collaboratively with wider members of the family.

The Bedfordshire team also provides group education and awareness sessions in schools and youth groups, as well as multi-agency training to professionals. In 2024, we received additional funding to work directly with Bedfordshire YOS to ensure all young people had equal access to drug and alcohol treatment.

In 2023, we ran an eight-week MPACT programme, which aimed to improve the wellbeing of children and their families affected by substance misuse.

Aquarius has been delivering alcohol and drug services across Northamptonshire since 2016, supporting children and young people to make positive choices around drug and alcohol use.

We also deliver specialist early intervention providing education and awareness sessions across Northamptonshire.

Since July 2024, we have been leading a pioneering vaping prevention programme, which provides education and support around the risks, healthier alternatives, and tips to support behavioural change for children, young people, professionals, parents, and carers.

In 2019, we delivered our first brief interventions service for young people gambling in Solihull. We developed a media campaign raising awareness of gambling and worked with young people who gambled, as well as supporting their families.

In 2010, we strengthened our focus on collaboration with the young people who use our services with the introduction of dedicated participation workers in our teams.

Birmingham

We have been delivering young people's brief interventions and outreach since 2009 across Birmingham, which was then expanded in 2014 to include young people's alcohol and drug services.

We piloted the Choices Programme in 2010 and have supported young people affected by a family members substance misuse ever since.

We have been delivering family services in Birmingham since 2006 as part of our adult services, which were then incorporated throughout our young people's service.

In 2015, we developed the Kinship Care service, supporting grandparents and other family members who take the care and responsibilities of a child when their parents aren't able to due to their substance misuse.

In 2023, our young people's service expanded to include Transitions, supporting young people aged 18-25.

In 2015, we received additional funding to develop The Grow Project. As part of this project, young people can learn gardening skills, grow their own food, learn to cook healthy meals, develop life skills, and make new friends in a safe and supportive space.

In 2017 we opened Evolve at Adam and Eve, our first social enterprise café supporting young people who have experienced barriers to employment. Since then, we have worked in partnership with the 2022 Commonwealth Games and, most recently, with Living Well Consortium to open a group of wellbeing coffee shops across Birmingham.

In 2024, Evolve became the young people's Recovery Hub, offering lots of support, activities and opportunities to grow and develop young people's skills and confidence.

Since 2017, Aquarius CARES have supported looked-after children and young people who are affected by a parent's substance use or mental health. In 2024 this expanded to include family members as a whole family model, helping to develop resilience and coping strategies and build positive relationships.

Aquarius Homes: In 2024, we purchased two houses in the Midlands to support young people who have experience of the care system and/or issues with alcohol and substance misuse, either themselves or affected by a family member. These homes provide young people with not only a shelter, but a place where they can feel safe, supported, and valued as they work toward a brighter future.

We continue to work in partnership with many different services to help support young people wherever they need it.

2010

Sandwell and Wolverhampton

The first Aquarius service to support parents affected by young people using substances was established in Sandwell in 2009.

A harm reduction drug service was also developed, supporting 18-25 year-olds using substances.

Outreach services within supported accommodation and young people's hostels were set up, and between 2009-2013, we delivered prison in-reach to young offenders.

In 2010, all Aquarius staff were trained in the 5-step family approach, a unique method for supporting young people and their families.

We began delivering our first young people's treatment service in Wolverhampton, W360, as part of the Recovery Near You partnership in 2013. We developed the first Transitions treatment model and collaborated with public health to create a transitions criterion, targeting young people aged 18-25.

In 2014, we developed a 5-step approach for young people and a group programme for children affected by substance misuse, aimed at building resilience, confidence, and empowering young people to have a voice.

2015

2020

2025

Derby

The Derby Family Drug and Alcohol Safeguarding Service has been commissioned in Derby since 2012, initially supporting parents with substance use issues.

In 2015, the family service expanded to offer the Choices Programme to young people aged between 10-18 who were impacted by parental substance misuse. In 2022, this was further expanded to include young people from the age of 5.

In 2022, we received additional funding to develop and deliver bespoke parenting courses to expectant parents at risk of using substances, with the aim of improving safety for children born into families where substance use is present

We continue to develop our Choices Programme in 2025, providing substance misuse awareness sessions for education professionals to increase their knowledge and ability to identify young people in schools who would benefit from support. In addition, we are delivering awareness sessions to pupils to promote the importance of talking and to highlight that support is available.

Dancing with Dreams

A selection of stories, poetry, and artwork from our youngest group.

These young people, under 18 years of age, are often dealing with the strains and stresses of navigating their earliest years under the chaos of a loved one's alcohol or substance misuse.

These are the voices of young people who are still trying to create their own identities in a world of instability. We work with young people to empower them to find their voices, form healthy relationships and know that their stories are heard.

Be Heard

In the quiet whispers of the night,
Hope flickers softly, a guiding light.
Among the shadows where doubts may creep,
A voice emerges, strong and deep.

Each word a ripple, breaking the still,
Echoing dreams that time can't kill.
In every heart, a story waits,
Yearning for someone to open the gates.

So let your voice rise and let it be clear,
For being heard we conquer our fears.
With hope as our anchor we shall sail through the storm,
Together we rise, united and warm.

(aged 13)

Blue Skies

I got listened to today,
So I can finally say "At last" or "Hooray"
It made my grey skies blue,
Just because of you.

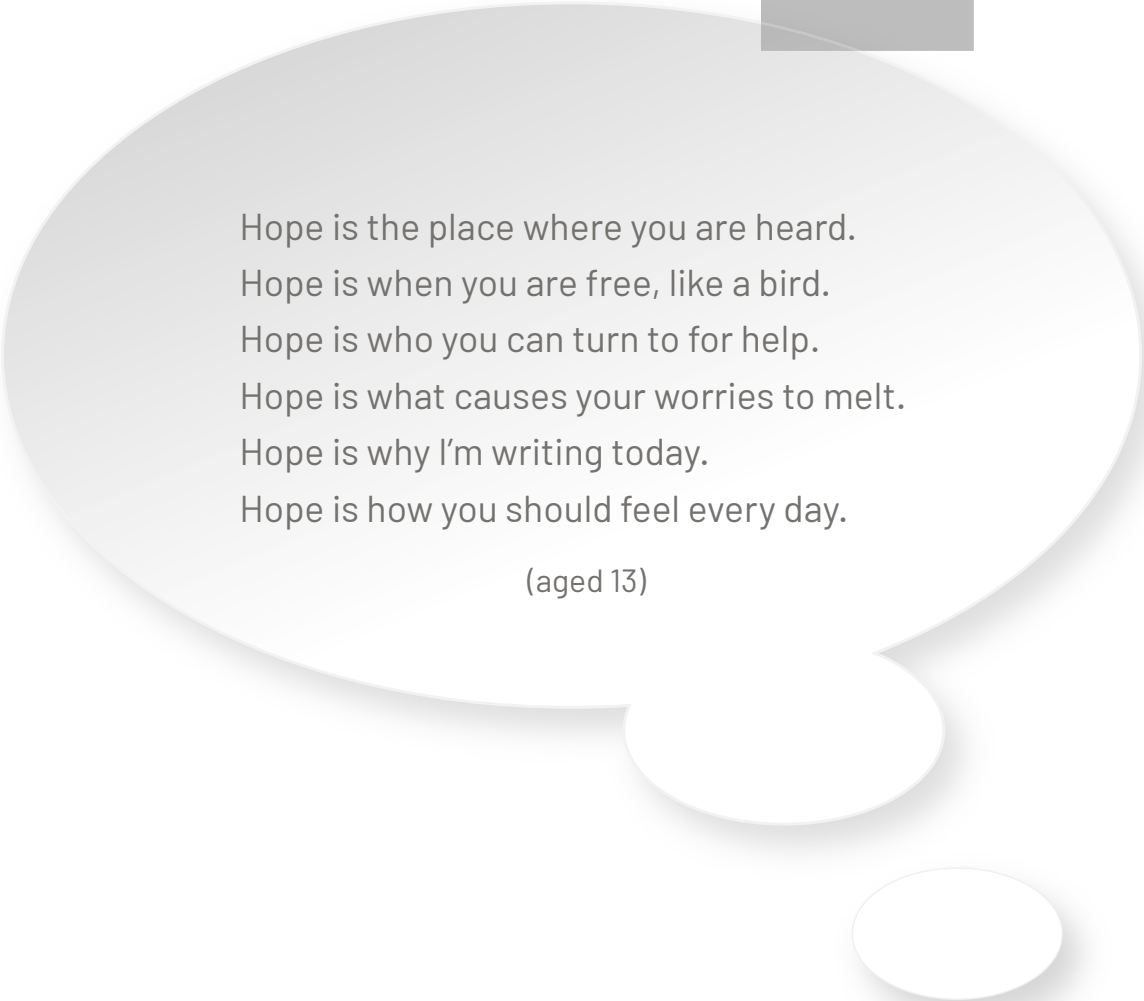
I finally felt a friend,
And I hope this feeling doesn't end,
It really is a treat.

As soon as you feel the delight,
It gets rid of your fright,
I hope everyone can feel it too.

I was listened to,
Now I can say things like "weehee" or "thank you"
I don't see grey skies,
I see blue.

(aged 8)

Hope



Hope is the place where you are heard.
Hope is when you are free, like a bird.
Hope is who you can turn to for help.
Hope is what causes your worries to melt.
Hope is why I'm writing today.
Hope is how you should feel every day.

(aged 13)

To be listened to, it means your ideas are valued.

To finally feel like you have a friend.

So show some respect to others too.

(aged 10)

Listened To

Listened to is great

It is a treat

Seeing the hope is a power

Time has been slowed, like a sloth

Ending this poem, you will see the point

Never be ignored

Every word needs to be taken in

Digested like food, but in your mind

Taken in and understood

Our feelings expressed

(aged 8)



"This drawing was part of an ending session which was done over 2 weeks.

This was so that [the young person] could get used to the idea that things end, and it needn't be traumatic."

Hear Me

I wonder how it would feel if someone asked me,
Took their time to really hear me,
I wonder if their ear could truly heal me,
I'll never know until someone hears me.

I sit in bed sometimes and sob and cry,
I wail so loud, hope someone may walk by,
My throat surrenders, my volume dies,
Because no one ever asks me why.

Why I can't control my breathing,
Why – for love – my heart is grieving,
Why I might act out sometimes
Because you've brushed me off a thousand times.

I wonder how it would feel if someone asked me,
Took their time to really hear me,
I wonder if their ear could truly heal me,
I'll never know until someone hears me.

(Kacey, youth support worker)

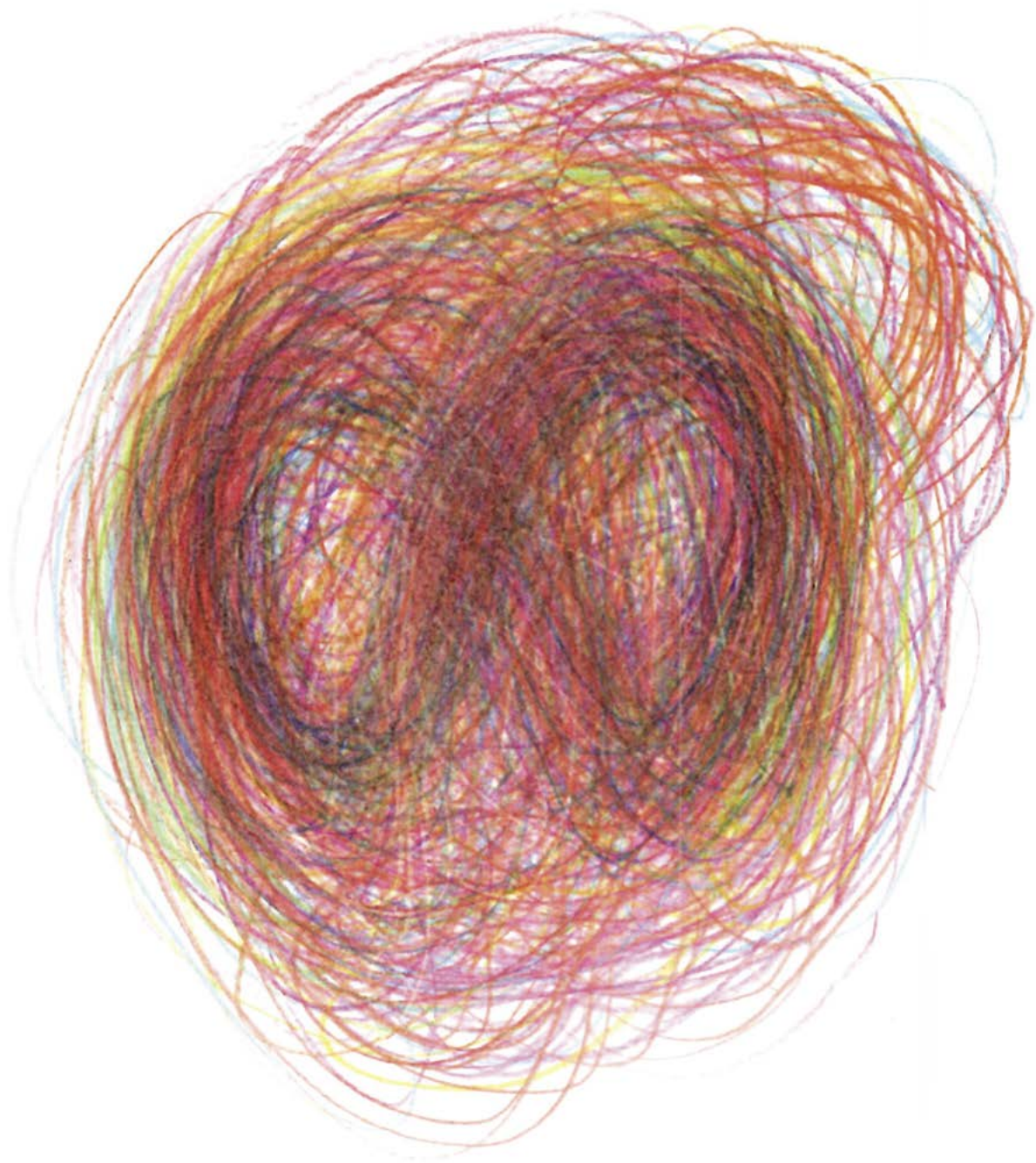
*“Art washes away from the soul
the dust of everyday life.”*

– Pablo Picasso

We use art to create a safe space for young people to express their emotions and feelings without being limited by words.

Through the creation of artwork and its various mediums, young people are able to externalise their inner thoughts and make sense of what they cannot otherwise express.

“[the young person] let the crayons guide her”





"The exercise we did was to look at where she fit into the family. The biggest takeaway from this exercise was that there were too many agencies involved. This had been playing on her mind, and she was able to verbalise what she had created with the figures"

Tori (16) "What I would tell my 6 year old self"

6yr Old.

Be nice to Ellie,
theres another
coming!

Pack it in

Be a role model
for your sisters.

Stop it!

find good friends

never touch alcohol
until your 18!

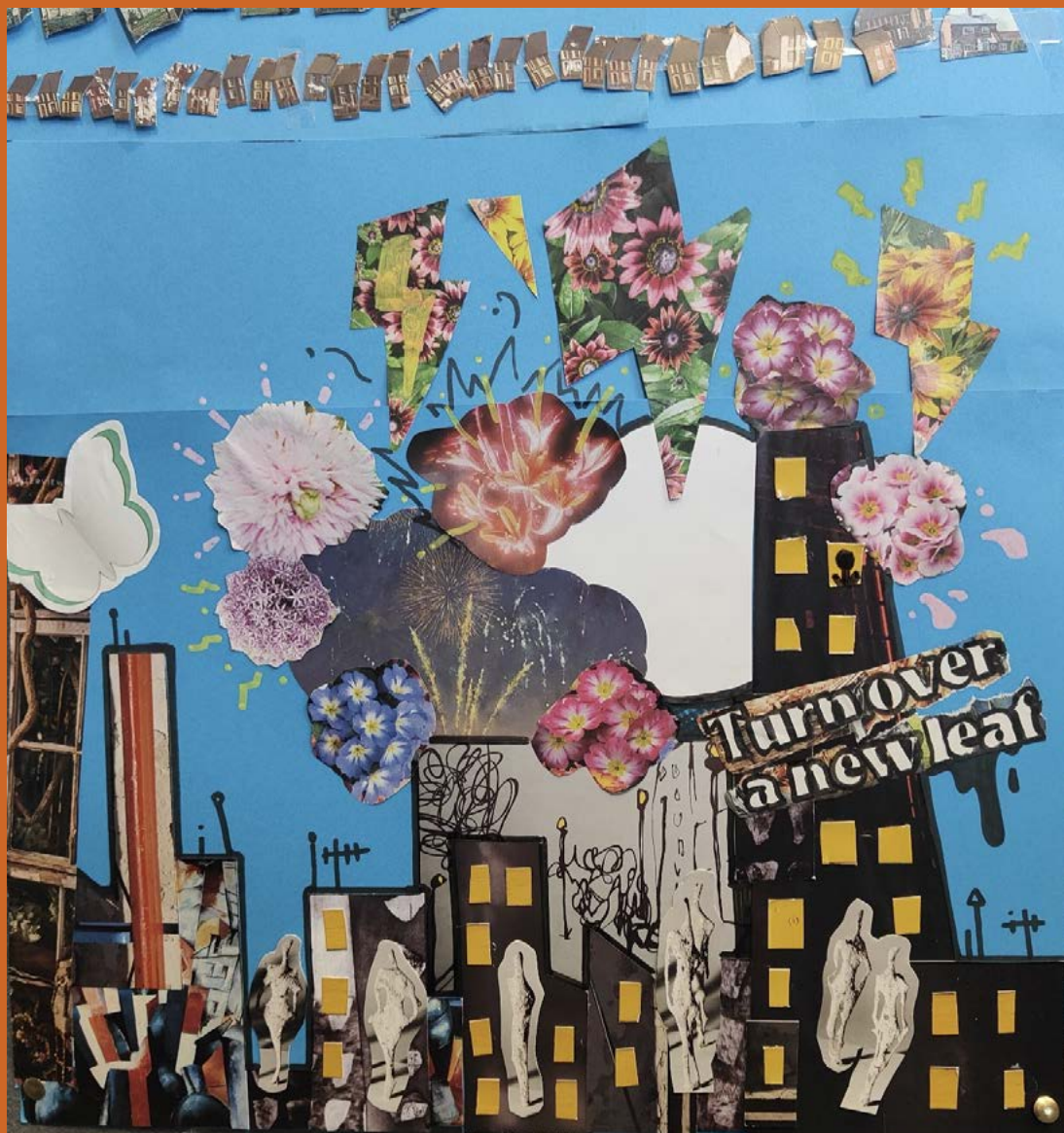
Keep trying!

don't let judgement stop
you from engaging
in school

don't go down
wrong paths, you can
turn around!

Explain how you
feel, its not embarrassing





"Making collages to express how we feel about our local communities, our place in there and how they influenced our recovery."



Whispers of Tomorrow

This chapter focuses on the voices of family members and loved ones who have witnessed and supported someone through their addiction.

At Aquarius, we recognise the impact an individual's alcohol or substance misuse can have on those around them and the need to support everyone on this journey.

These are the stories of sons, daughters, parents, and loved ones who have struggled to make sense of something they cannot control and the strength they have found through having someone to talk to and explore their emotions.



"Each addiction carries passengers"



I went to Aquarius at probably the lowest point of my life. This couldn't be happening, surely? This kind of thing happened to other people, not me or my family. I then had to face the fact that my son was in desperate need of help. Who could help? How could I be helped?

My head was spinning. What should I do? A good friend at the church I attend gave me the 'Recovery Near You' telephone number. From the moment I spoke to Vee, I felt understood and hopeful my son as well as myself could be helped. After a couple of phone appointments, Vee invited me to meet her at the recovery hub. As soon as I met her, I felt supported and empowered by her advice. We must not allow ourselves to be consumed by our loved one's addiction or we lose control of our lives too.

There are numerous referrals to the recovery hub every week. Each one of these referrals is a person with an addiction and a whole family that needs help too. Each addiction carries passengers and us family members and friends are the passengers. Together we are stronger and give each other the hope we need to support our loved ones in their battle with addiction.

Janet

Never Give Up Hope

It hasn't gotten better yet but I hope it will; this is my story.

My Dad has been an alcoholic for at least 5 years now, but it wasn't always like this.

When I was a kid, my dad would get me everything I wanted, he was caring and loving but I had no idea he was an alcoholic. It all changed when I was 9.

In 2020 in the summer holidays my parents had a fight. I didn't know what for, but my mom took us to pack our bags because we were going away. They had had a fight because my dad was drinking in the car. He hit my mom, so she called the police. Shortly after we had left, we saw the police car and my dad going in it. I was so confused. What had just happened? I was so worried because it was the first time I had seen my dad like that. Then as soon as the police left our house, me my mom and my brother went back in our house. I asked my mom what had happened, but she never responded. That night was by far one of the worst moments in my life ever.

The next day I asked my mom again what had happened, she told me everything. I felt bad. Why would my dad do that? I was so confused. I asked my mom if she could not keep him in jail, so she called the police and they let him out the same day. After that day, NOTHING was the same.

Fast forward 3 years NOTHING has changed. I still have hope, I will never give up hope.

My dad came to our café and said he wanted to stay there but because he was drunk, we couldn't let him, so we kicked him out, but he wasn't going to stop trying to get in.

He was throwing rocks at the kitchen window while me and my mom were inside. He managed to break the window twice. I was so terrified. My Dad! My dad did this. I was in shock. I couldn't believe he would do something like this. My mom called the police and they tased him. The police tased my dad. I felt bad for him. Why? I don't know. I didn't want to feel bad for him but in my eyes, I thought he could change. I thought wrong.

My mom had to go to court the next day. I wanted to go too but she said it was only for her. After that day I never wanted to see him again after what he did. After almost injuring me; his own daughter.

Almost a year later it STILL has not gotten better but I hope it will.

My mom kicked my dad out the house because he was drinking too much. He now lives on the streets and sometimes I wonder if he's okay. But other times I just want him dead.

I would say it's gotten a bit better but as I got older, I realised a lot.

Wolverhampton 360 has helped me a lot though. Mentally, I feel like I've finally got someone to talk to without getting judged; without feeling like a burden.

I still have hope though.

That's my story.

(aged 13)



"I wonder what it would be like to mean more to my father than alcohol"



*I needed you to miss me, but you stopped trying too.
I waited in the spaces where you used to stand,
And I stayed where I'd stand with you,
Hoping that your voice would call me back.
You let the silence fill the air between us,
And 6 years old is too young to wonder why you stopped caring.*

*I searched for the tracks of you in empty rooms,
Lost packages and smoke, and maybe a hug.
You moved on, leaving me to hold the pieces of the things that kept you together,
And I wasn't one of them.*

*I needed you to miss me, to reach across the distance you made,
But you loved your creations too much,
Before I even realised to say goodbye,
Now, I'm learning how to stop waiting,
Even though a part of me still hopes that you're nearby.*

Lilly

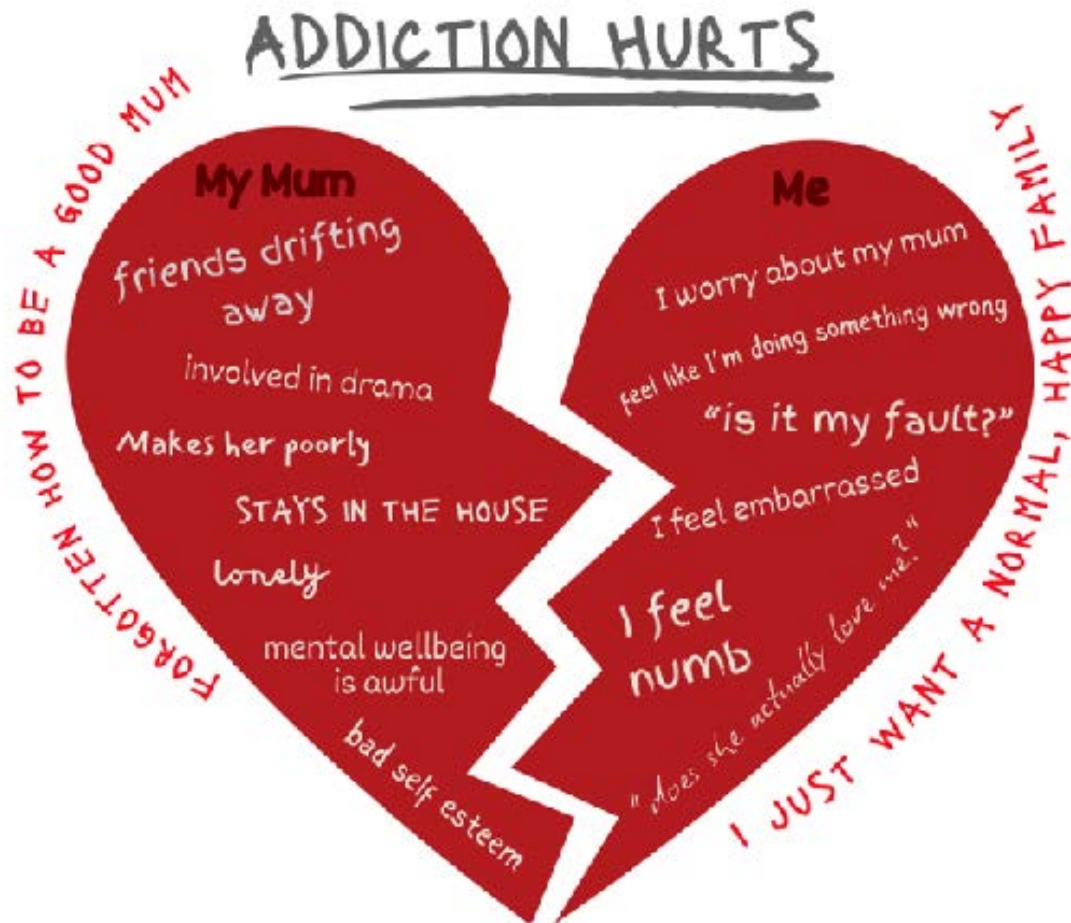
A Letter to . . .

I hate that you made my mum someone she isn't.
You make her rude, selfish, mean, forgetful, clumsy, unobservant, short tempered,
and horrible and by affecting her you are destroying a part of me!
She makes me feel terrible about myself. You hurt all of the people she loves.
I spend my time trying to help her and constantly being degraded
and punished for it.
When she sobers up, she can't remember anything...
she won't believe me when I tell her.
You have put so much pressure on me from such a
young age, that pressure has caused my mindset
and perspective to change for the worse.
You have ruined so many occasions,
including my birthday and two Christmases.
My mum does not deserve this!
And nor do the people around her!

Anonymous



. . . Addiction



An exercise with Aine, a young person exploring how addiction hurts the parent and how it hurts the child. Throughout the sessions, Aine has felt that it was her job to get her mum to stop drinking. This exercise was designed to help her understand that it is okay to love a parent but hate the addiction. The goal was to help her see that it isn't her responsibility to get her mum to stop and to view the addiction in a more objective way, separating the person from the addiction.

There is a ghost in my skin.
It floats in the rooms filled with water,
While that small itch in my mind anchors deep, deep below
The place where voices reach and hold.

When a night grows long,
I watch my shadow stretch across our little pavement.
I watch the little chips and cracks seal and then break.
I want them to notice it breaking.
I want them to notice the pauses between my words,
My silence in my breath.
I do not wish to scare;
I just want a hug that will stay forever.

Sometimes, I dream of disappearing softly.
I will not leave any echo of my voice or any colour in my eyes.
I cannot watch my sorrow anymore.
I hear the watches ticking;
They ask me to hold on, just a little while longer.
And I shall count every second.

Lilly

Corey's Story

The support from Aquarius has meant a lot to me over the past few months. I was facing a lot of challenging times through doing my GCSEs and then starting college and it really helped having somebody to listen to me about the worries and struggles that I was having. I don't have a very good relationship with my parents, and they are not very supportive, so having an adult who can do these things has been very important.

My Mum has struggled with alcohol use throughout my life and I have often blamed myself due to the stress that she faces with dealing with my physical health conditions and many appointments that come with this. I have developed an understanding of addiction and recognise that my Mum is not well and this is her way of coping with her own difficulties. I am not able to have conversations with her about my own feelings around her drinking. I have often felt angry and lashed out over my frustrations with my Mum but now realise it is better for me to take myself away from the situation and I go for walks or to a friend's house or call my older siblings, until the situation at home has calmed down.

I have a voice and my feelings matter and it really helps to have somebody to listen and it is really true that sharing a problem helps. I have really started to open up about my feelings instead of keeping them bottled up inside and I definitely feel better with my mental health. My worker has also supported me to make a referral for some help with my mental health which is something I wouldn't have felt able to ask my parents for. My Dad is very old school and believes that boys should not talk about their mental health.


I have now been able to open up to my friends without feeling embarrassed about my Mum and they do not judge me or my family. I would recommend that anybody who is struggling should speak out, it really helps and definitely makes a difference to your life.

People who have grown up affected by a family members substance or alcohol misuse often choose to use their experiences to support others and become a role model for hope and change. Here's a selection of quotes and stories from staff members and their journeys...

"I had a difficult childhood at times, and I had struggled with addiction and mental health issues myself, so once I was in recovery, I wanted to work with other people who had also had addiction and mental health issues in their lives."

"I grew up as an affected family member. My grandpa was alcohol dependent throughout my childhood and teenage years. Since it was completely normal to me, I just loved and accepted him for who he was. But when I got older, I realised the affect it had on my grandma, my dad, and his siblings."

"At the age of 15, my brother began smoking cannabis, then progressed to heroin and crack cocaine. This had a significant effect on me and my family. He almost died from an overdose three times, and I was so confused by what he was choosing to do. It made me want to learn more about how to support people with addictions."



"I want to support young people who are going through a similar childhood to mine, as I know how scary, confusing, and isolating it can be being an affected other, and the impact it has on your self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Early intervention is key - I feel it can prevent further issues later on down the line for that young people, from mental health struggles to substance misuse. It is important that young people have a safe space to talk, especially with someone who deeply understands first-hand and empathises. Seeing them, as well as the focal client being seen. Family are too often forgotten in the midst of addiction and recovery."

"I was an affected young person myself, and I want to make sure children have a voice, and make sure they are being listened to, and getting the support they need. I want to show them they aren't alone, and that their experiences don't define them."

"You are not alone. There are people who can be trusted and will walk alongside of you - if you let them."

Pam's Story

I was an affected other growing up.

My dad was an alcoholic, so it wasn't a nice lived experience, I witnessed domestic violence and all sorts. My dad passed away while I was young, so my mom was a single parent with 4 kids and as the eldest, I took on a lot of responsibilities. I didn't do great in school from all the school absences. Quite quickly it became clear I needed to find a job to help mom out.

As most young people, I wanted to be a number of things when I grew up, like a nurse or a flight attendant, but it was actually at an open day at college where I saw an advertisement to work nights at a care home and the lady at the stall recommended I get a qualification in health and social care. It was only a 2-year commitment, and I could do it part time, so I decided to take her advice. From there I discovered my passion for therapeutic counselling and did a 100-hour placement with Base 25 offering counselling in schools in order to obtain that qualification. Through that placement, I became aware of an opportunity to work with young people affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse. I started volunteering on Saturdays just to give something back and went from doing sessional volunteer work to being offered a permanent paid opportunity as the affected others service manager. This meant I managed all the groups, referrals and different programmes on offer. Helen eventually got in touch from Recovery Near You to let me know she was intending on starting a bespoke young people's drug and alcohol service called Wolverhampton 360 working with young people under 18 using drugs and/or alcohol and anyone over 5 impacted by a loved one's drug and alcohol use.

It is such a valuable service we provide, that is often taken for granted. Young people disclose things to us that they wouldn't say to others.

I loved the team as we were very close knit with a lot of trust amongst us. My favourite thing about working with young people was letting them have a voice and giving them time. We never rushed them because they don't always have a choice; instead, we empowered them by letting them know they didn't have to talk to us if they didn't want to and asking them what they wanted. It was always rewarding when you met a young person who was initially resistant and then watch them open up to you and give you the permission to protect them. Sometimes, they'd reveal something that proved that your initial gut instinct was right and that would always leave you with a sense of achievement.

It would be good to see the progress now of those young people I helped then. I guess you never really know the true impact you have. At the time you're just doing your job but it's important to get that feedback directly from the young person and follow up how they found the work you completed with them so we can keep improving as a service.

If there is anything I would want to say to any young person reading this book and looking for a bit of hope, it would be: Don't give up on your dreams. We are all capable of chasing our dreams and catching them - because we're good enough.



Ed's Story

So, why are you reading this book? Perhaps there have been some difficulties in your life, maybe you have felt down, lonely, and isolated, or life doesn't seem to be the way you had hoped. Maybe problems at home and school led to you becoming reliant on substances or alcohol to mask the rejection of your unmet emotional needs or hurt due to not being heard.

Pressure from your peers and a lack of positive role models can lead to craving a sense of belonging which can lead to greater risks. However, losing yourself within this chaos would be the greatest risk of all. Learning to love yourself is the most important thing you can do.

I still remember my teacher from 40 years ago who tried to help me. At the time, I wasn't interested, but looking back, it was so good to be seen and heard and to have someone who actually cared about me.


I've experienced plenty of trauma and lived experiences, and an accident in a previous job left me with disabilities. I've found myself in some dark places in my past, but I found eventual stability and security. I grew an awareness and desire to change.

I trained in counselling and learnt how to refocus my negative experiences in a way to help others and started to believe in people's abilities to change and reach their full potential.

After 20 years of working in this field and supporting people and their families with alcohol and substance misuse, I firmly believe that anyone can shine with the right support. The passion and genuine care we have for young people and their families in our community is what motivates me every day.

Today, my role has changed, and I no longer do front line support, but I am hopeful that I can pass on my skills, knowledge and experiences to the next generation of practitioners and support workers. We can continue to inspire and motivate young people to have hope, whatever situation you may find yourself in.

Together, with the right support, change is possible.



BE HOPEFUL
LOOK
OUT FOR
THE FUTURE

IT WILL GET
BETTER

Rise from the Ashes

Our late teens and early 20s truly are a period of self-reflection and discovery. For the young people we support, they are often leaving behind periods of trauma and difficulties, trying to find out who they are outside of their own or a loved one's addiction.

These are their stories - stepping into adulthood, learning to grow through their pain, and making their mark on the world.

“When I first came to recovery, I was drinking daily and also using cocaine a number of times a week. I could feel my life spiralling. Things were very chaotic. I knew things had to change. I started working with my keyworker and got to work. It was time to change!

One of the interventions we talked about was replacing my drinking time with something productive. I chose running. This was a passion of mine before the drink, so it seemed like the natural path to take. Fast forward ten weeks and I have now competed in a half marathon and a full marathon, and I have two more to run in the near future.

I have to thank Recovery Near You for giving me the tools to succeed in my battle with substances.”

Matt



Are You Ok?

uncomfortable

no support

I started using substances age 13. The tragic loss of losing my father aged 6 had a huge impact on me and I had always felt uncomfortable in my own skin. I wanted to change the way I felt, and substances did that for me.

At school I used cannabis, acid, aerosols and speed, Teachers were suspicious and would often ask me if I was using drugs, but this was the '80s so the approach was 'just say no'. There was no support just a 'telling off' and a school suspension, no one asked me if 'I was ok'!

At the age of 17 I had already started injecting heroin, I wasn't in college, I was out of my family home as my family had had enough of my lying and stealing, I was hanging around with much older peers. To get clean needles I would go to a local chemist, I was never given any advice around safer injecting or asked if I needed any help. Just given the needles and sent on my way. One time they even gave me a sharps bin full of used needles!

At the age of 18 my life was a complete mess, so I went along to an adult drug service, mostly because I wanted to get prescribed methadone. The other clients were much older than me, they would introduce me to new dealers etc and before I knew it, I was sucked into a whole new world no 18 year old should experience.

The next 10 years were a blur of criminality, domestic violence, social services, overdoses, hostels, on and off methadone and in and out of drug services. But I always felt like I was never 'seen' or 'heard', I was invisible.

complete mess

invisible

Are you really Ok?

Until one day, I went back to my local adult drug service....again.... A lady sat in front of me and listened to me tell her why I just needed to go back on methadone.... again..... I had a black eye from my partner at the time and she asked me "are you really ok?"

We can do more than just give methadone, we are here to help". I can't remember what I said next, but I can remember it stopped me in my tracks. She continued to listen to me and suggested different things I could try or consider. For the first time in many years, I felt seen and heard.

I was offered a way out of the life I had been living, the worker gave me hope. I was offered rehab and I grabbed it with both hands. My worker was called Mandy, she walked beside me to prepare me for rehab, she would take me to NA meetings, she would call to remind me "get up, acupuncture is on today".

I fell pregnant just before I went into rehab, which delayed the process slightly. Mandy never judged me or showed her frustration, just support and kindness. After rehab Mandy helped me decorate my first proper home and made sure I had all I needed to maintain my recovery before she closed me to services for the last time.

At the point of writing this I have been clean 20 years, my clean time birthday is the 31st of March 2004. Every year on my clean time birthday I text Mandy and thank her for her support. Every year she texts back and tells me: "it was all you."

I work in drug and alcohol services because of my life experiences, and I always try and offer the support I really needed as a lost 13 year old.

My life experiences do not define me, but they have helped shape me into the person I am today.

A senior member of staff

seen and heard
support and kindness

Grow Through It

Evolve is Aquarius' not-for-profit café and events space providing opportunities for young people to learn new skills and build confidence in the workplace. We work with young people who have experienced barriers to employment and provide holistic support to help them realise their potential. Shonah, now a supervisor at the project, began her journey in 2018 as a trainee barista. Here is her story:

"Before starting at Evolve, I honestly didn't have much purpose in life. I've suffered from multiple mental health problems since a very young age and that always seemed to be my identity.

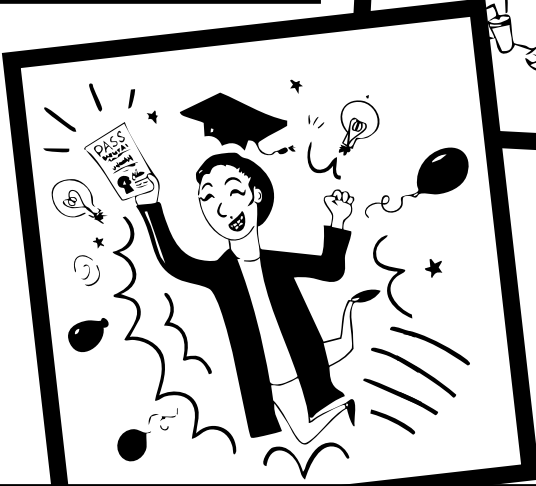
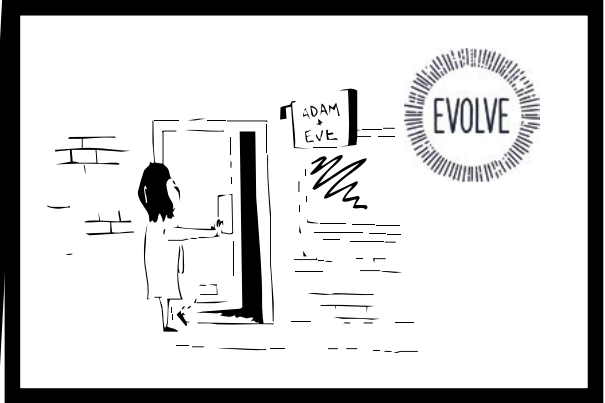
Looking back, I can see how much I've changed over the years. Evolve made me grow into a better version of myself. From day one, I was given support and kindness (no matter how much I pushed back!).

The fact I was given a chance of stability from a team of people I barely knew was so foreign to me. I was coming from places that had passed me around for nearly a decade, prescribing numerous medications and never really making any progress. Who knew all I needed were people to believe in me, right?!

From earning qualifications, building self-confidence and literally shaping me into the person I am now...

I will always be grateful to Evolve."





rap RECOVERY

creative

music

SONG WRITING

emotions

COMFORT

poet

songs

artist

aining
rtistic

U



The Beat of Redemption: My Story as DJ Notchie

My name's Scotty, but most people know me as DJ Notchie. Looking back at where I started, it's kind of wild how far I've come. Life didn't exactly give me the best hand from the beginning. When I was just a baby, I went through some stuff I don't really like talking about. My dad was abusive, and he ended up getting sent to prison for it. After that, it was just me, my mom, my sister, my brother, and my grandad trying to make things work. But growing up in that environment did something to me, you know? I was angry, acting out all the time, and honestly, I didn't know how to handle it.

By the time I was 11, my mom couldn't cope with me anymore, and I got put into residential care. That was the start of a long ride through the system – one place after another. I never really had a stable home, just bouncing around. School? Let's just say I was in and out of pupil referral units most of the time. I never got my GCSEs and couldn't see any way of getting a decent job.

When I turned 18, they put me into supported living. I was on my own for the first time, and it wasn't long before I fell into the wrong scene. Selling drugs, taking drugs – it all just seemed like the easiest way to get by. It wasn't though. Eventually, I got caught and ended up in prison for two and a half years. And yeah, I know how that sounds. But funny enough, that's where my life took a turn.

While I was locked up, I found something I didn't expect – music. I always loved listening to tunes, but in prison, I got a chance to really get into beat-making. There was this music workshop, and I threw myself into it. I'd sit there for hours, making beats, losing myself in the sounds. For the first time, I found something that calmed me down. I didn't feel angry when I was making music. It was like an escape from everything else going on around me.

When I got out, I knew I didn't want to go back to the streets or prison. I wanted to do something with music. That's when I met my mentor, DJ XB. He hooked me up with a local radio station in Birmingham, (which was his station) where I started volunteering. That's how DJ Notchie really started. Being in that station, working on music, learning how to DJ – it felt right. For the first time, I had a direction, something to work for.

Now, I'm 23, and things are finally looking up. I'm more focused, more positive. Don't get me wrong, my past is still a part of me. But instead of letting it drag me down, I use it to push myself forward. Music changed my life, and I'm not letting go of that. The future? I'm excited for it, man. I'm just getting started.



Music and song writing can play a powerful role in someone's recovery in allowing them to express their emotions. We often use rap, songs and poetry to tell our stories in a creative and artistic way. The emotional connection and responses we have to music can act as a tool for healing and a comfort in our darkest hours...

Music Changed My Life

By DJ Notchie

PRISON'S WHERE I
FLIPPED THE SCRIPT,
TURNED THE PAGE,
FOUND A NEW PATH, YEAH,
I BROKE OUT THE CAGE

Music changed my life, it saved me from the fight
Gave me peace when I was broken, brought me back to light
In the darkest times, it's what kept me sane
When the world was heavy, beats ran through my veins
Music changed my life, it's how I found my way
Turned the pain into rhythm, now I'm here to stay
When everything was chaos, it set me free
Music's the only thing that ever relaxed me

I came from a place where love was hard to see,
Dad was locked up for hurting me,
Left with a family that was tryna survive,
But I was young, full of anger, tryna feel alive.
Kicked outta school, thrown into care,
Moving home to home, man, nobody cared.
Eleven years old, didn't know who I was,
Lost in the systems, all because of my flaws.
No GCSEs, no hope in sight,
Only had the streets, tryna make things right.
Drugs in my hand, tryna chase that dough,
But that life don't last man, it's all for show.
Prison walls came down, locked for two years,
But inside those bars, I faced my fears.
Found a beat, found peace in the sound,
And now music's where I finally feel grounded.

Chorus

Prison's where I flipped the script, turned the page,
Found a new path, yeah, I broke out the cage.
Got out with a dream, and a mind full of beats,
Didn't want the streets, I was done with the heat.
A mentor came, showed me the way,
Put me in a radio station, where I learned to play.
Started volunteering, learning every day,
DJ Notchie was born, I was here to stay.
Now I'm spinning records, making tracks on the side,
Taking all my pain, and letting it ride.
Yeah, my past still haunts me, but I won't break,
Music's my escape, it's the change I'll take.
I'm focussed, positive, aiming for the sky,
Got dreams bigger than I ever thought I'd try.
The future's bright now, the beat keeps me alive,
Music's my guide, and I'll thrive, I'll survive.

Chorus

Yeah, music set me free... DJ Notchie on the rise. The past is behind me, only forward in my sights.



Lost In the Dark

Rap by Kai-Jordan

Ever felt lost in the dark yeah
there's no light

Ever slept on the park floor
in the cold night

Nobody on your phone not
a single person in sight

Dangerous thoughts running
laps in your mind

The voices in your head got you
planning your goodbyes

Tryna stay strong but all
you do is stay high,

Stuck in the moment of asking
God why,

Why was it me why I should
I cry?

Ever felt like God's not on your side?
But your girl's here now you're like Bonnie and Clyde
And you swear if she's hurt then you'll go and ride
Got the heart of a lion so you protect the pride
Growing up I was always on my ones
Single mom just tryna raise her sons
Had to start hustling grew up in the slums
No food in the house just picking at the crumbs
In and out of school I started acting tough
Realised soon that my mom had enough
She sent me away to show me her love
But I needed her so now it's fucked up
Stuck in London feeling so alone
Didn't know where I was it was all unknown
Stuck in silence I weren't allowed my phone
The hospitals and cells became my second home
Feeling so trapped, had nowhere to turn
Had to take those risks so that I could earn
I made some mistakes but then I had to learn
I can't live in the past, it had to be burnt
I was doing all this shit that I can't back
Drugs everyday man I swear I lost track
Had guys on my phone, tell me take that bag county
lines, I was under attack
I was begging for help, I needed an escape
Didn't want to end up rotting in a grave,
Didn't want to end up locked in a cage
The drugs a part of me engraved in my brain
Now I'm in the park smoking a zoot
I wish my friends would've told me the truth
That it weren't just bud, now my breathing's gone mute
Eyes shut, world quiet, I knew that I was screwed

Chorus

I started off with Marvin then I got Craig
Feeling so low they told me it's okay
Recovery is hard and they showed me the way
Made me realise I can struggle some days
Not every day is easy, sometimes it's hard
They said I can't let people break down my guard
They'll all target me cuz of my battle scars
They won't bring me down cuz I reach for the stars

8 months drugs free, I'm chasing the dream
Wouldn't have made it without this team
These are the guys that kept me clean
So, when I'm on top they'll be on the same scene
They all saved my life when I was just a kid
I forgive my mom for doing what she did
All of the guys man I swear it's not a myth
Without you lot, I swear I would've quit,
And mom I swear that I'm different now
And Aquarius I swear I won't let you down
I'm a make a difference around this town
Starboy Kayz I'ma own that crown
Sometimes it gets hard, but I stay strong
Tryna find my purpose, and where I belong
It's been a hard process the roads been long
So, I tell my story, in all of my songs.

J1's World

Song by Kai-Jordan

15th July yeah, we heard that you died
Couldn't believe it had tears in our eyes
Thought it was a prank someone had lied
You grew your wings, and you flew away with pride

Heartbroken yeah we're on the ground
When we found out the world lost its sound
Tears falling down felt like we'd just drowned
Now there's thoughts in our head voices going round and round

J1 bro if you're hearing this now
We all miss you and we're gonna do you proud
You were our boy straight from the south
And if we ever needed you, you were always there to help

He said I'll die when it suits me bro you were too young
Wouldn't wish this on my enemy
The trap life is something you didn't need
You could've been anything if you were just freed

Said you wanted to be a nurse
So right now, you shouldn't be lying in that hearse
Can't believe that I'm spitting this verse
But bro this world just feels like a curse





Please come back this don't feel right
But I guess right now you can light up the night
I know you must've put up a good fight
But God took your hand and said it was alright

J1 bro I swear that we'll get justice
You were always there to guide us like a compass
You were a good kid sometimes caused a ruckus
You were always there to heal our numbness

Now that you're gone man we don't know what to do
Please come back your Mom really needs you
The sky's gone grey but you can make it blue
J1 bro better make the sky a pretty view

You were a good kid who never hurt a soul
So, thank you God for letting him go home
We'll be screaming justice for J until it's known
I still call you thinking you're on that phone

Can't believe that you're gone so soon
I remember being with you writing songs in my room
Can't believe that I'm writing this tune
You said one day you wanna see the moon

I guess now bro you can rest up high
You can be every single star in the night sky
Make that sky light up bright
But for now, little bro I guess it's goodbye...

Tiny and perfect our little Oshay
Forever in our hearts is where he will stay
I wish I could watch you grow, could be like my little bro
Hope it's good up there and you're enjoying the snow
Wishing in the winter we could play in the snow or summertime
Learning to ride bikes in the Grove
Whilst your mom's in the kitchen she's working the stove
Whilst I'm rapping this got a little lump in my throat

Chorus

Little Oshay, I need you even though never got to meet you
Me and you could have been tag team 2
I know your mom needs you more though
She was so excited to watch you grow

See you grow and become a man
Some things I don't understand
Would have been missing part to the clan
Losing you was never part of the plan
Now I'm on tracks like a tram

Expressing feelings like no other man
Realising what I can I got love for all my fam
Wish I could have pushed you in the pram
Learning to post pics to the gram
The world is our oyster, but we would have took over the land
Took you to the beach and play in the sand
Jump about in the waves on a beautiful day
Seeing you laugh and play
You will always be my little Oshay and I mean in my heart is where you will stay
Now keep Nanny Joan warm and go have fun and play
Keep them safe, embrace the sun up there cos down here it's grey.



A close-up of a silver mesh microphone in the foreground, slightly out of focus. The background is a vibrant graffiti wall. The upper portion of the wall is covered in a dense collage of small, colorful stickers and posters, including portraits of various people and abstract designs. Below this, a large, detailed graffiti mural of a person's head is visible. The person has dark hair styled in a bun, a nose ring, and a slight smile. The overall scene suggests a creative or musical environment.

Oshay

rap by brad

Bradley Rap

Idols and Me

You say you know me by my name Brad
But do you know me deep inside and why I'm sad
Cause I got stories on why and my past
But still gotta stay alive and put in the graft
Acting stupid and acting daft
Is one way I make people laugh
I had no belief in myself till I met Aquarius staff
On a Thursday afternoon they would try get me up off my ass
But 90% of the time I felt like saying "nah, I'll pass"
As my heart was hurting as I stay on the grass.

Saturday afternoons cheering on the blues
Win, draw or lose cheer on the boys in blue
They wasn't stupid they knew what to do
From Alex McLeish to Chris Davies, I believed in you
Keep right on and be forever true
The faith in our team is held together like glue
With Jay and Alfie, one has to win the golden boot
If I could, I'd love to fit in one of your shoes.

In our life we all need inspiration
It all starts in early education
Learning about idols with gold around their waists
From Mohammed Ali to smokin' Joe Frazee'
Their battle in '71 was a great bout
"Fight of the Century" was the shout
As in life you gotta take the knockdowns
As sometimes it feels we're surrounded by clowns
Life is like a boxing match, gotta go through many rounds.

Letter to Mommy

By Brad

I didn't ever wanna write this so young
head and heart banging like a drum
9 years living by my side
couldn't have asked for a better mom
bought me up in the second city in Ks
it was kinda shitty growing up
building a home from bricks and love
hope I'm making you proud from a bird's eye view above.
Losing u that September I never knew the pain
growing up I guess kinda got use to that mother son love
always by my side, never ever judged
everything about you I always loved now it's harder without you
Trying to keep my focus but I don't know how to
guess when I was younger, we stuck together like glue
now I follow Blues, just like you.

Couple of things I wish I said
couple of things need to get off my chest
them 9 years we had were the best
You were always on my side
always had time, always wanted to invest
always putting in the most, never less
scream it from the rooftops
Momsy you were best, guess I was truly blessed
still talk about you like you're still here
You taught me love with no fear
I feel all on my own
wish heaven could have a phone
or stairs for visiting hours at most
I miss the feeling of being close
I wish I could send u letters in the post
or even write a note
I can't wait to tell my kids about Nanny Joan
still I wish I could hear your voice
at the end of the phone

A blurred figure of a person wearing a grey hooded jacket and dark pants is walking from left to right in the foreground. In the background, a billboard is mounted on a wall. The billboard has a pink background with the words "Sticks and S" in large white letters at the top, and "BY BRAD" in red letters below it. The billboard is held up by a metal bracket at the top left.

Sticks and S

BY BRAD

And sticks and stones may break my bones
But names will never hurt me
You can scold me, but you won't burn me
Cause I know myself that I'm worthy
Cause the strength I've got it came from above,
It came from the woman who birthed me

Stones



**But I know some people
aren't strong as me
And the bullies never
show mercy**

Make sure you speak up,
make sure you can make it
Known loads of people going through this
You're not alone, so there's loads of helplines
So, pick up the phone you got all the support
And it's close to home if you're still in school
Speak to a teacher cause it's draining you
And the bully is the leacher
I'll shout it loudly, don't mean to be preacher
Don't even need to speak and I can hear the pain
I get it, you're home at night
and just become a sleeper
Wishing this wasn't the life – me neither
It's so messed up, so dirty, wish it could be cleaner
It's a cold cold world like a freezer
You just gotta fight it and not let it beat ya
Get back up and carry on
That's the meaning of this song
And I'm Pluckzy and I'm gone

**A selection of
artwork from
Megan**

An artwork titled 'RED SKY AT NIGHT' featuring a dark, stormy sky with a crescent moon and a faint rainbow. The sky transitions from black at the top to a deep red and orange at the bottom, with white, billowing clouds. The title is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters at the bottom.

**RED SKY
AT NIGHT**

An artwork titled 'PURPLE RAIN' depicting a waterfall cascading down a rocky ledge. The scene is dominated by shades of purple and blue, with a dark, silhouetted tree on the left and large, dark rocks in the foreground. The title is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters at the top.

**PURPLE
RAIN**

Exploring themes of escape, identity and



REDDRESS



Megan said "doing art, whether that be painting, drawing, or writing, gives me a sense of purpose. It calms me watching the canvas go from blank white, gradually to a beautiful picture. I prefer scenery paintings because it reminds me that no matter how much I feel down and how much I can hate the world sometimes, it's still a beautiful place and a blessing we were given to live on."



Red Sky at Night - "This usually means fair weather heading towards you. See this as opportunity, happiness, and good days ahead. There's always a light at the end."

Purple Rain - "That feeling of "wanderlust"; travelling to escape dark feelings, leaving you with soft relaxation."

Red Dress - "So many girls go through body dysmorphia, seeing pretty, skinny girls in tight red dresses in magazines and on tv because there's no one there telling them how beautiful they are as themselves."



The Light After the Storm - "A reminder that even after the worst storms, the light will shine again."

Bloom - "To come into beauty and health and to flourish."

At Peace - "Free from anxiety and distress and a state of friendliness."

and hopefulness.



Red Sky at Night

"You are not alone, and there
will be a light at the end, even if
you can't see it now.

Please reach out, have hope,
and be you! You are not alone.

Everyone struggles, and
everyone handles it in different
ways, and that's okay!"

Megan

Journey to Recovery

Don't wanna look too closely at my life
cause I might hate what I see
I've been asking myself
why I end up choosing using
over being clean?
Maybe 'cause I can't stand
the feeling of being me.
It'll all catch up with me
eventually
But oh well,
in the meantime, I'mma let it be

Rolling up another zoot
head in the clouds, man,
I don't even get high anymore
Dunno what I'm tokin' this for
I'm numb and disconnected from reality
Paranoid and riddled with anxiety
Damn, bro,
I just wanna be released
From this disease

The amount of weed I've smoked is obscene
When I was a teen
Used to think that was the dream
Now I'm 23
And lemme tell y'all it ain't
what it's made out to be
Addiction ain't cool
It always ends in tragedy
And now I truly see
All I wanna be is free

Addiction tore me down
And broke my crown
My mind became a battlefield
Shrapnel scattered all around
I wore a mask of fake confidence
Tryna hide the guilt and shame
Accusations and blame
From every promise I broke
Cause I prioritised spliffs and lines of coke

I've made some mistakes
Cringey situations that I'm hesitant to face
Got caught up in the rat race
I figured that sometimes gotta put pride aside
And do what it takes to survive

Damn, here we go again
My mind's in outer space
Gotta get outta this hellish place
Drowning in blame and shame
Depression pouring like rain
Clouds over my head all the time
Smile, fake it, make out I'm fine
Am I just swapping one addiction for another?
Yet, gotta believe that I can truly recover
Got so caught up in the grind
That I became blind
Was swimming in denial
But it was no river
Couldn't see what was right in front of my eyes
Of course, the devil wears a disguise
How could I be so blind?

Surrender to win
That's how it begins
Give in, wave the white flag

No looking back
You won't drag me back there
Gotta stay on track
I'll surrender to recovery
Faith and trust will set me free

Finally found my spiritual home
And I'll learn how to break the chains
Take hold of life's reins
And reclaim my throne

I'm done with abusing and using
Whenever I get in the ring with addiction
It's a fixed match, I'm always losing
I can't fight this affliction
So now I'm choosing
To let something new in
Got a higher power on my side
Of course I can win

This disease dies in the light
So I'll purge my soul of darkness
Until there's nowhere left for you to hide
My denial is fractured, and I realise
In this devil's dance,
Only one of us can survive
It's my self-destruction
which allows you to thrive

So I'm saying goodbye
'Cause I don't wanna die

And I'm done trading
my dreams for drugs
And poisoning myself
with your toxic love



by Reece

Lost and found I'm screaming on the inside but not making a sound.

It's "mental health" society shout, take a pill, cut a wrist, and hear the voices that make you doubt.

The top of a balcony, the train tracks below, etched with stories about people with empty souls,
who couldn't make it out of the big black hole.

Where there is nothing, there is gain, Prozac and sertraline don't help with this pain.

Society sits quiet as they rack up the statistics, not rare, because it seems like no one does care.

The boy in the bathroom balling out "fuck somebody help!" as he holds the blade steady to his wrist
that relieves the pain ever such a bit.

The girl next to the toilet trying to make herself sick, trying to throw up the meal she just fixed.

It's the person who sits at the back of the class,

crying tears smooth as glass.

It's the child who can't sit still, but society calls them naughty
and medicates them with a Ritalin pill.

It's the neighbour who has dishes piled up high
all the way up to the sky.

It's the troubled teen who abuses drugs and
alcohol using them as ear plugs.

One in four people have some sort of mental health condition, but yet we refuse to listen.

Unless it's BPD, which apparently makes me crazy, while depression is apparently just lazy.

Think about what you type and what you write.

Who is on the other side screen?

Wow society really can be mean.

Raven



Poem by Kai-Jordan

The word grief means intense sorrow, caused by a loss or someone's death.
So how do you live when you feel like you have nothing left?
Your heart feels like it has been pulled out your chest,
You blame yourself and start feeling depressed.

Grief is a shadow the creeps in the night,
It suffocates your soul, and holds you so tight,
It lingers in the air, sometimes you can't see,
You're waiting for it to blow over so you can be free,

But in time, the heart learns to carry the load,
To walk through the pain and find a clear road
However grief changes, but it can never erase,
The love of a loved one who is now safe.

"NGAGE were a huge



Stories and art from NGAGE,
our Northampton young people's service...



e part of my recovery"

I started working with Aquarius when I started using benzos and opiates. NGAGE offered me more support than any other service has; they reached above and beyond to help with getting me clean. I worked with NGAGE, who supported me through the whole process by getting me involved in different activities, talking to me when I needed it, and more. They took me through many different techniques, coping mechanisms, and ways to manage my emotions. They also helped me integrate back into society. Overall, NGAGE were a huge part of my recovery, did more than I'd ever expect, and I can say with confidence that I wouldn't be here today without them.

Anonymous

When you first hear the term 'drugs worker,' 'counsellor,' or 'social worker,' I think it's safe to say all of us young people think and say the same thing. We don't want to wait around for some government-assigned worker to tell us what we already know - that we need to behave better, go to school, and, as a lovely favour, we get put on a waiting list for the next four years of our life, to get us the help we need now.

Personally, I got referred to Aquarius because of drug misuse, amongst a few other small things. I must've been around 15, possibly 16. I remember the day I met my worker, expecting to hate her. She introduced herself to me, and I think I actually rolled my eyes. The first few times meeting her, I would lie, because all I wanted was for these meetings to be over so I could go back to ruining my life.

The thing is, when you have such bad things going on in your life, you don't want to accept any kind of help. You want the bad things to get worse until you're ruined completely. I don't exactly understand it all, but my worker always did.

After a short period of time, I realised that she was different to any of the other workers I've ever had. She seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say. When I needed things done, she always got them done. In general, she was just a really nice person - easy to talk to, and she

just seemed real. It didn't feel like she was just here to get paid. I finally felt understood and appreciated. I would get more excited to see her every time, and I wanted to stay sober just to make her proud. But even when I couldn't handle sobriety, she was still proud. She knew I was trying, and it was genuinely so encouraging. I never thought I'd feel comfortable opening up to some random worker, but I'm glad I did.

Obviously, this isn't every worker, but while being with NGAGE I met many other lovely people. Each worker has such a distinct personality, and I think they know just how to make you feel welcome. To me, NGAGE is more than just a service - it's more like a family. These are people that have spent years and years working together, and young people included.

I attend a lot of Evolve sessions, and as one of the oldest, I always try my best to make new people feel just as welcomed as I was. I feel like Evolve is a good way to give back to NGAGE after everything they've done for me, as it gives me an opportunity to help other young people. Truthfully, I hope to work in a similar kind of place, as I see these workers as role models.

Anonymous

I have been working with Aquarius for nearly three months now. At first, I was really nervous about speaking about my addiction and attending the groups, but I'm really glad I did.

I am now one month clean, and even though I'm not doing the greatest, my worker is someone I can speak to and who has helped me in my journey. She is someone I can not only speak to about my addiction but about anything, and she always listens and tries to come up with a solution. The groups I attend are not the easiest, but it's helping me by making myself come out into the community. I have also found my love for art and creativity through the groups. I never knew art would be my thing, but now I really enjoy it, and it helps me express myself and my emotions.

I'm really thankful for all of the people from the NGAGE who have helped me, supported me, and are still supporting me.

Anonymous



Questions & Answers with Fiona, NGAGE Administrator

What do you most enjoy about your role?

Working behind the front lines, I get to offer all sorts of support to our team and want to help them in any way I can.

I love helping people and supporting parents and young people when they phone up.

Can you tell us about a time when an individual has inspired you?

This is very difficult because services like this are filled with inspirational people. What motivates and inspires me most is the enthusiasm everyone has to support people to change.

Are there any significant differences in the challenges facing young people today compared to when you started your career?

Everything has changed. We didn't have mobile phones, internet or social media. Today, young people have instant access to everything where they are potential exposed to bullying and negativity.



How drugs are used and distributed has changed. They are much stronger now with lots of synthetic substances going around. It's great that the police are now looking at diversion instead of punishment. There are things today like county lines that were not around when I started, these effect young people in a massively negative way and young people need more support and access to treatment, rather than be criminalised.

It is much harder for young people today.

What message would you give to a young person who is struggling today?

Seek support. Talk to someone. Don't keep it bottled up. If you are concerned that parents etc may find out, you can still come and speak to us as a confidential and non-judgemental service.

Why is NGAGE an important service?

Today there is a greater need for services like NGAGE. Young people are exposed more and more to the culture of alcohol and substance misuse. Young people may not always feel comfortable talking to their parents or teachers, but we are here as trusted adults who will help you.

What does the future of NGAGE look like to you?

I'd like to see it continuing to grow. We need to continue to support young people up to the age of 25. Now a young person turns 18 and is suddenly an adult drug user – they still need to be able to access support in a young person's service. We must continue to be person centred in everything we do; from meeting young people in community settings, at schools, homes, parks etc and offering both group and 1:1 support. We must remain flexible.

What is the most important thing for people to understand when working with young people and their families?

That we are all human. We are individual and we have different needs, backgrounds and histories.

"I have worked in this field for many years and covered various positions. The rewarding part of the job is seeing children, young people, and adults transform their lives - using the power they thought they never had. As a practitioner, I feel that deeply.

I have helped those who have wanted to make those changes find their inner steel or willpower and supported them along the way to sustain that change. It is hard to make changes because, as you change and reflect on your life, people may still choose to see the old you. But when you look in the mirror, you will see the new version of you looking back and be able to recognise the changes you have made. You have to accept that some people may never recognise this new version of you.

Progress is not always fast, but as long as you keep moving forward, one step at a time, you will reach your destination. If you are ever struggling with addiction, remember:
Every day is a new day. A day to make that change."

Everton, Senior Practitioner

"Working with a young person a couple of years ago, I met a young man who had been to prison four times by the age of nineteen and he used to tell me that this was his life now. I worked with him for six months trying to change this way of thinking. Eventually, we agreed on trying some training. We looked around, but it was difficult due to the person being neurodiverse and needing something that would catch his attention. We tried many courses, and we were not getting very far, but I could see that it wasn't for the want of trying. The young person had an interest in machinery. Whilst on a one-to-one session I received an email looking for people to train in the rail industry, with various jobs available upon conclusion of the training. The young person took part in the training. This time, he was different to the other times - he would talk about nothing else. The training lasted six weeks and was monumental for him, as he had never had something hold his interest for so long. The young person passed his qualification and was offered an engineering role working on HS2. I was so proud of him and the journey he has been on."

"I work with young people aged 18 to 25, and personally, I feel this is such an impressionable age. I have lived experience and feel this is the age I would have benefited from targeted support we offer now."

"The views of children and young people often get ignored by adults, so we need to listen, hear, understand and represent those voices and their concerns, whilst helping them on whichever path they choose."

"Too many professionals label kids as being dramatic or badly behaved rather than expressing a professional curiosity into why they may be responding in that way."

"I love helping children and fighting for their voices to be heard."

"I love talking to the young people and feeling like I give them an hour's break from life's stress to have fun and a laugh while weaving in tips on how they can stay safe - so they understand they matter and someone cares."

"I love being able to support young people and learning about different, creative, and flexible ways to help them get to where they want to be."

"Our children are our future, and they need to know that they have a space to be heard and valued."

"I was an affected young person myself, and I want to make sure children have a voice, that they are being listened to, and that they are getting the support they need. I want to show them they aren't on their own and that it doesn't define them. I'm also passionate about preventing and making sure that young people have the education around substances, as schools aren't providing an adequate education around substance misuse."

"I feel like young people are still trying to make sense of the world regardless - so if you add on the struggles and confusions of navigating new experiences with the added stresses of drug and alcohol use, I believe it is the time they need someone who can understand and support them the most. Regardless of whether we can fix the problem or change their circumstances, they will always go through life with the memory that someone was there for them, and it may inspire them to talk more and ask for help with any future problems they may have."

"I recently had a young person say to me 'I wish my mum would listen to me like you do.' Even though this was a simple sentence, it made me realise that I am making a difference to people's lives."

Steph's Story

There was no 'Safeguarding' when I was at school. You either had to put up with abuse or go in a children's home. I put up with abuse. I am now 56 years old. It wasn't until 2007 that I learned that I should have been taken into care. I was a housing support worker at the time.

I was supporting my first ever care leaver, who had just come out of care. When I asked her why she was in care, she said 'neglect'. I asked what that meant and she said, 'my mum didn't feed me'. This was a stark comparison to my experiences of being beaten and abused on a regular basis. It was a horrific realisation that I should have been taken into care. I genuinely don't know what my life would have been like had this happened.

I used to think that my mum was an exceptional woman to try to keep the family together. What I didn't realise was that she couldn't leave. I told my mum when I was really young what my dad was doing, and she dismissed it. It wasn't until I was an adult and accessing therapy that I realised the impact of her not believing me. I often say that my trauma was not just caused by what my dad did, it was caused by what my mum didn't do!

My abuse, with no support, really affected me at school. I had no real friends, and I didn't know how to relate to people. I was horrifically bullied. My mum used to work late nights, so struggled to get me and my sister to school. Today, this would have been picked up.

I grew up thinking that this was normal and that everyone struggled. I had a lovely teacher who I think cottoned on to what was going on, but the mere thought of someone knowing was absolutely horrifying. I was petrified that people knew about my dad so I kept the whole thing a secret.

When I started work, I thought that Safeguarding was all about abuse, especially sexual abuse. Now I know it is much wider than that. My life now...I have two children, two grandchildren, and a wonderful husband.

So, books like this and safeguarding strategies are essential in supporting and protecting young people. If you are struggling and need support, talk to someone – a teacher, a friend, a parent. There is so much help out there now that was lacking for me as a child.

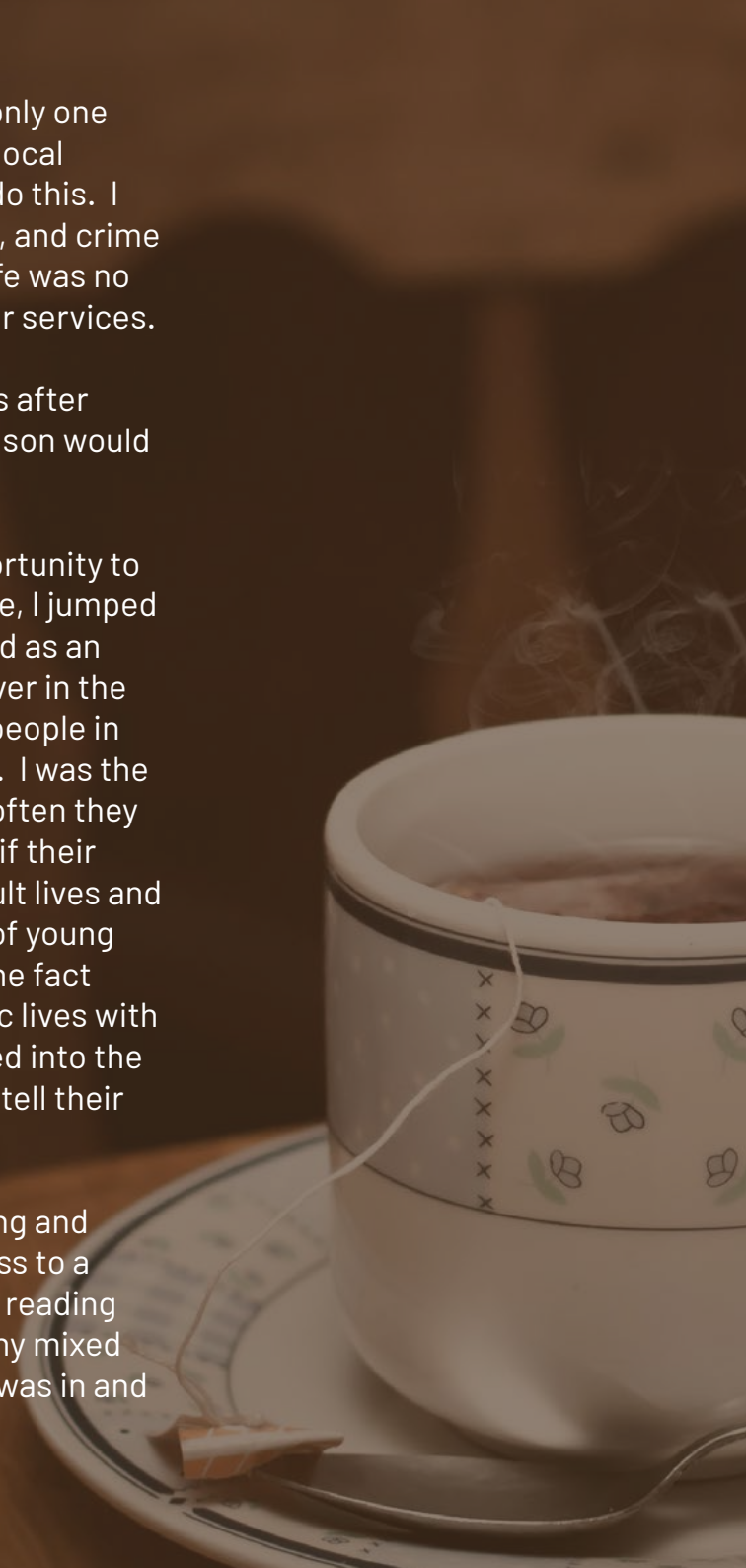
My biggest message to anyone needing support is that what you are going through may have an impact, but it doesn't define you. There will be hard times, everyone has them. Get strategies, get help, get healing. With the right support, you can go on to live a productive life – I certainly do!

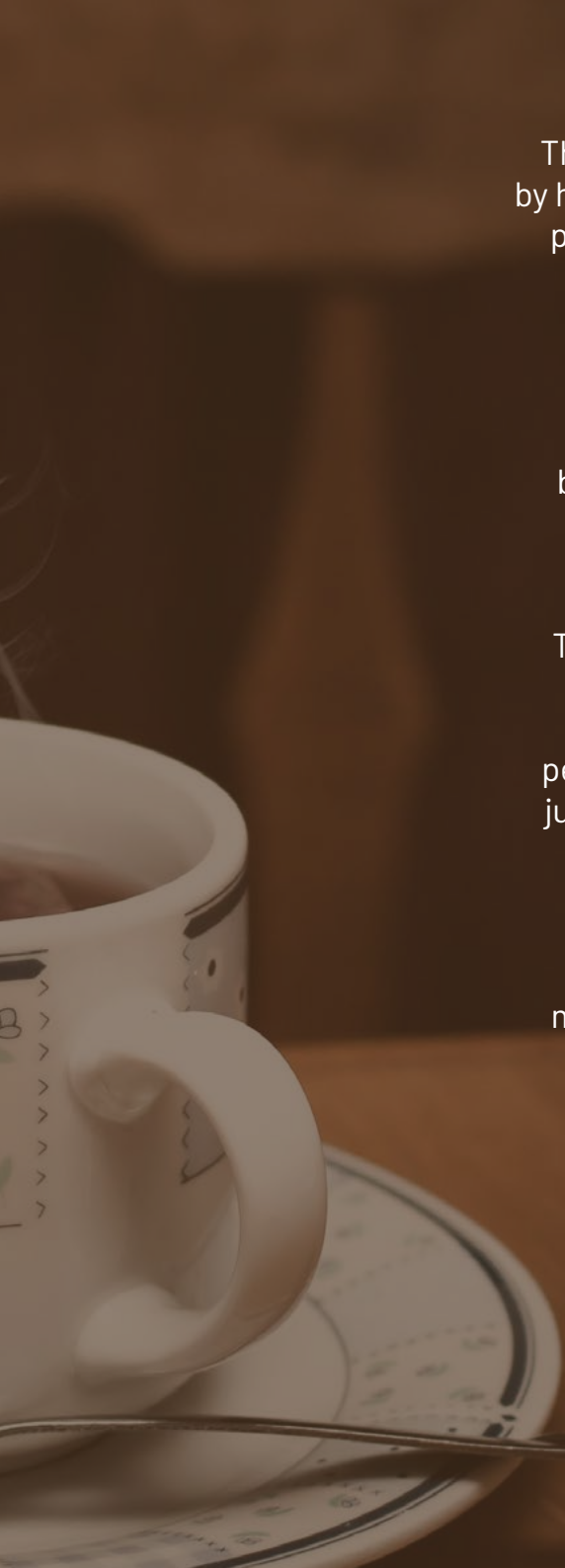
At 20 years old, I graduated university knowing only one thing – that I wanted to make a difference in my local community. But I wasn't quite sure how I would do this. I lived in an area where deprivation saw no colour, and crime and drugs were normalised. In all honesty, my life was no different to that of the young people who use our services.

I became a single mum unexpectedly a few years after leaving university, but I was determined that my son would to be proud of me and the life I made for him.

So, when he was 5 months old and I saw an opportunity to work in a young people's drug and alcohol service, I jumped on it. And it changed my life completely. I started as an administrative assistant providing maternity cover in the treatment team. In those days, all of our young people in treatment were seen in the service after school. I was the first point of contact for the young people, and often they would just pop in for a cup of tea and chat, even if their worker was not around. A lot of them had difficult lives and incredible complexities – and we had a number of young people in treatment using heroin. But despite the fact that, in the outside world, they had these chaotic lives with every risk factor under the sun, when they walked into the service, they were just young people wanting to tell their story and hoping someone could help.

As the administrator, I used to do a lot of the filing and transcribing of letters for doctors, so I had access to a lot of information about our service users. After reading casefiles and assessments, I used to feel so many mixed emotions – like our 16-year-old heroin user who was in and out of prison, but very few people knew





that she had been groomed into sex work from the age of 14. The guy she thought was caring for her, after being abandoned by her own parents, was actually exploiting her and was the first person to inject her. But what shocked me was her resilience, and I still chuckle at the fact that she had stolen a box of chocolates just to give me as a little thank you for all the tea I'd made her.

Before the maternity cover ended, I had the opportunity to become an outreach worker, and although juggling this with a baby was difficult, all the training I received definitely made me a better mother.

The key to engaging young people is a combination of respect and no judgement. Respect means listening and valuing the young person's voice and seeing the world from their perspective. But also respecting their capacity for change. No judgement meant leaving all the labels on the other side of the door and just allowing people to be.

I think it's what most people want in life. It's been 21 years, and I'm still in the service where I used to make tea for our young people. But now I'm a service manager and I miss making tea for them! I miss the little miracles that happened every so often when a young person made a different choice or was able to recognise their strengths and left the session a bit more hopeful.

I am so grateful for all the young people who have allowed me to be part of their lives, and I know that I wouldn't be the person, or mother, I am without them.

Anonymous



**"You are capable and deserving
of all of the great things
that this universe holds."**

Reclaiming the Light

'The Light Beyond the Shadows' is a collection of images, stories, poetry, and art from young people Aquarius have supported. This book is about giving a voice to those who are too often unheard and unseen.

Every story told within these pages is a journey – one that is still ongoing and will no doubt face challenges and difficult days ahead. However, no challenge is too great when met with courage, support, and hope.

Each story is a reminder of the importance of services like Aquarius and that recovery is not only possible, but it is also filled with moments of great joy and personal discovery.

We hope you find comfort in this book and continue to search for the light beyond the shadows.

