



Thank you for taking the time to complete the feature questions below.



Please, tell us about yourself, where were you born and raised? What was life like growing up in childhood?

I was born in Burnley, the youngest of six in a single parent Catholic family. Like most people, my childhood was a mixture of good and bad. Some parts – roaming around the park, playing on the back street, visiting my grandparents, reading, reading, and reading – were lovely. Other bits – chaos, poverty, always being short of money and more importantly, attention - they were not so good. Some dreadful stuff – abuse, violence - happened in my childhood which still has a lasting impact on me. My childhood was kind of confusing.

What is the earliest childhood memory you can remember?

I was riding my trike in the backyard; my mother was hanging out washing. I decided my bike needed petrol. I told my mother I was going to the garage and she agreed. Off I went in my pyjamas – onto the dual carriageway that ran near our house. I think I was around 2. I was rescued by a rush hour driver.

What education course did you follow or where did life take you after this?

I did exceedingly well in my studies. I was always a keen learner and reader and as life got harder, I focussed more and more on my academic work as a way of filling my mind. I got great A-level results and went to Liverpool to study politics. As my mental health began to deteriorate in earnest; I worked harder and harder. By my third year, I was expecting a first. Instead, I was admitted onto a psychiatric ward.

Would you like to share how you got involved in Mental Health?

After years of struggling on my own with depression, anxiety, self-harm and an eating disorder, I spoke to a friend. He got me to speak to his friend ... and so on. I ended up with an appointment to see the university psychiatrist who proclaimed that I had “Third Year Nerves”. Shortly after that I took a big overdose and was admitted on to the psychiatric ward. It was the first in a long string of admissions extending over the following six years. After passing through several diagnoses I was eventually informed that I had “Borderline Personality Disorder”; a diagnosis which I can honestly say has never done the slightest bit of good for me.



What is your consultancy all about?



I spent six years in and out of hospitals; and several more years in contact with other services. I encountered some great practice – staff who worked with compassion, openness and humanity. But more commonly I came up against hostility, coldness and a complete failure to understand or engage meaningfully with self-harm – which sometimes led to appalling abuses of human rights. I realised that my experiences weren't unusual. What could I do? I could either accept the appalling treatment on offer. Or I could do something about it. I did something about it. I got heavily involved in the survivor movement; and I set up a support group for women who self-harm. I developed a deep interest in mental health, and a profound commitment to challenging the sort of treatment that I experienced, and which many people still experience today. I went back to education and completed a Master's. Through that route I moved into lecturing and teaching; and eventually set up my own company. These days I work on a freelance basis as a trainer and consultant, supporting services that support people who self-harm. I'm still fuelled by the same mixture of anger, enthusiasm and hope.

What has been some of the personal highlights of your time as a consultant?

Evidence of change. Often it's about the immediate feedback that I get from staff. Few people work in this area in order to do harm. Mostly I hear about staff who has been dropped into areas of work that scare and confuse them, without adequate information or support. No wonder they struggle. I can offer that information; and see how attitudes are transformed immediately. It's like watching a light come on. That's wonderful. Other highlights - moments of deep connection with other people who share my values. Meeting David Webb and reading his wonderful work on suicide and spirituality. Working with a group of amazing survivors in Liverpool; using creative writing to tell their stories to each other and to a public audience. Reading poetry to the staff and patients of Rampton. Increasingly believing in myself and my ability to make a difference.



What projects are you currently working on?

Projects for 2014 include: working with Together on a research project focussing on Peer Support in Medium Secure Units. Until 2015 I'll be working with Sam Warner to deliver advanced self-harm training to NHS staff throughout Lancashire; and from February I'll be delivering a series of workshops to staff and students in the University of Central Lancashire, focussing on the overlap between creative expression and mental health.

Do you have any 'coping strategies' that you use?

Having spent many years hurting myself in order to get by, I no longer need to self-harm in the same ways. I still struggle – who doesn't? If I really, really want to self-harm, I allow myself to consider it as an option; and to think realistically through the outcomes and consequences. On the whole, other coping strategies work better for me. Sometimes I turn to work as a way of distracting myself; or more usefully, as a means of recreating a sense of order and control in my life. When times are hard I'm much more likely to speak to friends and to call out for help and comfort. I see a therapist. I write poetry. I go to the gym and I climb; both ways of experiencing my body as something positive, elevating my mood and filling my mind. I watch crap telly and read thrillers. I do whatever works.



What does the future hold for you?

I imagine it'll be a mixture of good stuff and challenges. Many amazing things have happened in my life – my daughter, living somewhere I love, doing work I love, surrounded by the friendship and love of good people. I know that plenty more good stuff lies ahead. More exciting, creative, challenging work. More rock climbing and walking in beautiful places. I know that difficult stuff will continue to happen; and I know from past experience that somehow, I'll get through it.

Favourite Quotes?

From two poems:

*"look to the living, love them
And hold on"
- Douglas Dunn*

*Instructions for living a life.
"Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it."
- Mary Oliver*

Website - <http://www.clareshaw.co.uk/>

Facebook - [@clareshawconsultancy](https://m.facebook.com/clareshawconsultancy?ref=hl) (<https://m.facebook.com/clareshawconsultancy?ref=hl>)