



**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 have 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*

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