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The Blog

From Growing Up In Care To Becoming A Social Worker – With The Right Support The Future For Care Leavers Can Be Bright

At the age of five, I was taken into care. At that moment, I was labelled a looked-after child and the state became my parent.

Today, there are around 38,000 care leavers in England under the age of 22, and sadly they often have much poorer outcomes than other people their age.

Shockingly, just 6% of young people with experience of the care system go to university, compared to almost 50% of the general population. What's more, 40% of care leavers aged 19-21 are not in employment, education or training, compared with 13% of all young people.

I know just how challenging it can be from my own experiences. At the age of five, I was taken into care. At that moment, I was labelled a looked-after child and the state became my parent. From then on, I had a very transient upbringing, living in a number of different homes and going to a variety of schools. Stability didn't exist in my life.

When I was 16, I was given a flat and left to my own devices. There was no Children (Leaving Care) Act in place at the time, so 16 was the age that social workers were told to stop looking after me. This created a whole variety of problems; I had no idea how to look after myself and had left school at 14 without any qualifications. I was becoming one of the statistics we're so used to reading about care leavers.

I don't look back on my experience of care very fondly, but what I do remember most positively of all is one particular social worker who saw something in me. She really cared about me and gave me aspirations to think I could achieve anything. At one point, she mentioned I should go to university and become a social worker, but I never properly considered it. As a looked-after child, it's not something you think you'd be allowed to do.

At 30 years old, a major milestone, I was thinking about my next career move and remembered the conversation I'd had with my social worker 15 years before. I realised I wanted to make a difference and decided to act on the advice of my social worker. I went back to college to get my English and Maths qualifications, did an access course, and obtained a BA (Hons) degree in social work.

Without that social worker planting the seed, I never would have thought I could beat the odds and find success in something I'm so passionate about. That conversation I

had with that social worker at 15 changed the trajectory of my life. She made me believe in myself.

As a care leaver, you're often told you're not good enough and you can feel a huge amount of shame about your past. This can lead to issues with mental health and poorer outcomes in later life. That's why it's so important that the narrative around children who grow up in care and the conversations we have with these young people need to change. Children are never to blame. They shouldn't be punished for what they've been through by society, the media or the state. If it wasn't for one great social worker, I would never have had the determination to get where I am today.

Today, I work as a consultant social worker in St Helens, the same local authority that looked after me. I want to play a part in implementing change and giving back to the local authority that took me in as a child and cared for me. I'm now training the next generation of social workers on the Frontline programme, teaching them about the importance of the language we use when speaking to children and how we should build the aspirations of all children and their families.

The future for care leavers can be bright but we all have a responsibility to empower them to realise that they can overcome the odds. If I can succeed, anyone can.