

Thomas is a new found friend of the ECLCM campaign, though he has been a supporter for some time. A friend because we have now met and like the young man, Seamus', described in the blog he is now 'real', not ethereal. The story told in these words is true. It represents so many different children who have been 'supported', or not, in our social care system. Why does Every Child Leaving Care Matter? Because some of their leaving care is successful, some tragic. 'Our children' are not statistics or cases they are children in need of love and protection. Some find these needs met whilst others don't. ECLCM is not simply about leaving care – it is about the journey through care and that is why, in CARINGTEAMS, we try to describe care and the leaving of care as being a process not an event. Please take the time to read this very slowly and then allow yourself time to reflect on this "Does every child living in and leaving care matter"? If you think they do then please do something about it. This need not be anything to do with our campaign there are so many ways in which you can help and you should find the one most acceptable to and possible for you.

The one that got away;

Last week I celebrated the birthday of TCES Group as it entered into its 20th year as a Social Enterprise. TCES Group delivers education, health and care through its schools and high needs services for pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs and co-morbid Autistic Spectrum Condition.

In this our 20th year I have been asked to write some articles about my experiences of the changing times and changing practices within the work we do but strangely (for anyone who knows me) I find myself being drawn to writing about both my and our collective experiences of the amazing, talented, maddening children and young people that have impacted us so much over the last two decades.

Usually my stories cover children and young people who resonate not just for myself but also for some of the other staff in the group as well. However as TCES Group's first employee and despite a marvellous retention of a large number of staff for a decade and more, there are inevitably stories about some of the first ever children and young people for whom there are no other witnesses other than myself. Some of these pupils frequent my mind occasionally as they very much got under my skin. So I ask you to bear with me on this indulgence tour while I take you back to a time when TCES Group was called Transitional Care Ltd and our business was not primarily that of education but rather of providing social care and accommodation to some very complex young people.

In those days this author was a social worker rather than a CEO and was learning the vagaries of running a brand new and very tiny business entirely dependent on each client (as was the social care terminology) to support our social enterprise.

To provide some context Transitional Care Ltd, a social enterprise was set up in 1999 as a social care company working with some of the most difficult pupils anywhere in the country who were not in custody or in secure units. We were an alternative to custody programme working primarily through youth justice boards with young people on the cusp of custody. As I was starting out and proving myself to Local Authorities and the Youth Justice Board at the time I suspect that I was potentially the source of some amusement to some of my Local Authority commissioning colleagues. I had limited credentials as a business so I had to rely on the occasional referral but that catch 22 situation allowed Local Authorities tremendous leeway if not sport in presenting me with their most intractable and unsolvable cases. This was potentially an extreme form of hazing but I was both too desperate and possibly too gullible and idealistic to even notice.

Besides I have always throughout a very long career both in London and New York as a Social Work manager in area child protection teams, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres, secure units, children's homes management, homeless centres, school settings, CAMHS and as a therapeutic community principal, gravitated to the most complex children and young people in the work as these are the cases that have always held my interest and that I was always passionate about supporting.

One of my first ever clients given to me by a colleague who had attended Social Work school with me was a boy who I will call Seamus (not his real name). The high expectations that were placed upon me were 'he's going to go down (prison) so we don't expect much so just keep him out of trouble until his prison sentence'. Armed with these lofty sentiments and a burning sense of injustice that Seamus was so readily written off I set out to prove everyone wrong and from this single case to build up an empire of waifs and strays that everyone had given up on.

Seamus was on paper when I read the file a challenge to put it mildly. He was as big a challenge face to face as well. He was a habitual offender, a heroin addict with severe asthma and all at the young age of 14 years old. He had been expelled from school and was sleeping rough in between moments of reconciliation with his mother.

My remit was to find him accommodation, put a staff team in place and to support him in reducing criminal activity, reducing heroin intake and managing his health which was about his asthma being so severe. All of this alongside support in multiple court cases any one of which could send him off to Feltham Young Offenders Institute. I was also tasked with finding unicorns and generally solving the problems of the universe during whatever spare time I would have.

I think by this stage my earlier comment about being hazed by a Machiavellian team manager in social services may start to make more sense. Still we set out armed with the optimism of the intellect and the art of the possible and met with Seamus. Seamus although 14 years old looked about 10 years old with a gaunt, skinny affect that was instantly recognisable as belonging to an addict. He was extremely charismatic and charming and singularly interested in how much he could manipulate me.

We started with the basics of finding him a new home after a couple of false starts with his mother. I was hopeful that a reconciliation could provide him with a place of safety at home but after meeting his mother I realised there was a co-dependency of unhealthy interest between them. Seamus had at different times stolen everything of value from her home to feed his habit and as his mother smoked marijuana in front of her son regularly her home was not the safe haven I had hoped.

I got a flat locally and kitted it out completely with a formal sleep-in room set up. I was fortunate to have some colleagues from my previous role as the Principal of a therapeutic community and that gave me a ready made extremely experienced staff team. In 1999/2000 there was no leaving and after care service, there was no family support service in social services and anyone could set up a children's home without any registration as long as there were five or less children in it. Regulation was minimal or indeed non-existent.

Now that Seamus had a place to live I needed to move across Maslow's hierarchy of needs to another couple of issues on the very bottom rung; Crime and Drugs.

Seamus was the worst criminal ever, he literally got caught every time he committed a crime. I had two choices; either to teach him how not to get caught in some radical social work model that I was strangely uncomfortable with or the pathway I did choose of having a blunt conversation with him; "You've tried crime, you're not very good at it, why don't we try something else".

This together with a vigilance around his potential absconding led me to the naive belief that we had a clear plan. Little did I know. Seamus led us all a merry dance. He could almost abscond through the crack in a door he was so skinny but boy was he swift of foot. I realised within a week that I would need a cloned staff team of Carl Lewis' (Olympic gold medal winner and possibly a contemporary reference) to just keep up with Seamus when he did a runner. I had an increasingly fitter staff team but still Seamus eluded us. He went back to his mothers and in those pre-mobile phone days I had to drive to his mum's house on the off chance that he was there.

A few weeks in, expectations were revised and our flat became Seamus' place of safety from where he would go out three nights per week for a fix. In the beginning I broke every law and stood at the door and refused to let him out. I didn't care what the consequences of a 'Restriction of Liberty' charge was as I was so concerned re his safety. However I soon realised that if I wanted him in for 4 nights a week at least I could not stop him but I could try through nurture and care to contain him. It worked some times. I was also very suspicious of how Seamus was getting his drug money and I felt that he was putting himself at grave risk by possibly being a rent boy as was the term of the late 90's. All agencies were engaged but Seamus was wholly disinterested in engagement.

There were wonderful moments when Seamus and I did the weekly shop and I know that our attachment was growing when he presented me with an Eminem CD as an unspoken thank you. It was only later that evening that I realised that I was in possession of stolen goods as he had pilfered it from the shop. I knew that the symbolic gift was a very important milestone in our relationship and balancing the need to have a good attachment with him and Sainsbury's profits I chose to not spoil the attachment and feigned naivety.

Things improved for a while and I have the most brilliant memories of Seamus having multiple dinners with three or four of the staff team and inviting me along. Long talks about alternatives to custody and college courses as Seamus was a gifted artist - a gift he used on the high street to do people's portraits for money for drugs. Health was a significant issue and the closer I got to him the more concerned I was that he would forget his inhalers which with the severity of his asthma was extremely dangerous.

Days were spent in court describing to numerous judges why he should not go to youth offenders institutes. However this was becoming a difficult sell as the crimes were increasing in frequency and intensity. Persuading a judge that Seamus would be at high risk in a youth offenders institute from the other prisoners whilst the general public were increasingly at risk from Seamus' desperate robberies was inevitably going to be a bridge too far.

After one particularly harrowing incident where Seamus had hit a man over the head to rob him and was hospitalised for this by the man's unseen friends I finally woke up to the reality that what Seamus needed was a secure unit. I had previously worked in one for some years and I knew that he needed stabilising and a significant period clean to enable him to start again. He was becoming deeply unsafe in the community and decompensating at an increasing and alarming rate. Finding a knife under his pillow was a bridge too far for my staff team and they became increasingly concerned for their safety as Seamus would do almost anything to get to a fix.

I wrote and faxed multiple times to the Leaving Care team who managed his oversight but with limited response. It became clear to me that my little company was the symbolic sticking plaster on the gaping wound and what we were providing was a cheaper service at a much reduced weekly fee to that of a Secure Unit. We were also however the reason why the LA was able to avoid meeting Seamus' substantive needs so I did something that was one of the most difficult things I have ever

done. I took Seamus to Social Services, hand delivered a letter to them (my tenth) and said goodbye to him.

Seamus cried, screamed, cursed and then threatened me in a salvo of abuse and recrimination. He pushed every button; "you said you cared", "you said you never give up on any child" and "you are the only one who gets me" - I think that in his distress he went through the 5 stages of grieving in front of my eyes. And how he shouted - King Lear had nothing on him and the storm that he created. I held it together until Social Care took him from me amid promises of the next secure unit bed and I left when they took him inside their offices. I sat in the car and I cried bitter tears for him because I knew that no one would care for him like I did.

The professional side of me rationalised that Seamus was going to be safe in a secure unit where he would get the treatment he needed and which he couldn't escape from. I tried hard to take some time away from the emotion of it all and especially to let him settle into the secure unit.

Then at 10am on a Wednesday morning a week later I got a call to say that Seamus was dead. He had died of an asthma attack while taking heroin. He died on the streets of London, not in a secure unit. There had never been a secure unit application made but instead Seamus was moved back with his mother the night I left him at Social Care. He had hung around for a few days and then went back on the streets looking for his drugs and the money to buy them.

The colleague I went to university with had called me. She told me when the funeral was but said that no one from social care were allowed to attend as attending would be an admission of guilt or negligence and it was also a health and safety issue. I simply said to her that if she was a Social Worker in the correct meaning of the word then she would disregard that Orwellian nonsense and stand beside me to say goodbye to Seamus to show that he mattered.

No one attended from social services.

I attended my first ever cremation in the 15 years that I had been in England at that time. I witnessed a mother who stole the show. All the music played tugged the heart strings but none of the music was Seamus' music and in truth none of the ceremony was Seamus' ceremony. Seamus' mother screamed and cried and showed us all that she loved him and she did. She ranted about social services and how she was going to make them pay and I had a quiet cry for Seamus.

After the ceremony I stepped outside the church and felt an impending sense of doom. There was a honour guard of black coated men on each side leading straight down to Seamus' mother. I remembered the social worker talking about health and safety and I thought how ironic it would be if Seamus got his revenge for my abandonment of him by my getting a good going over. But then in true Seamus style I braved it out and as I did I thought of Seamus. He would have done the same. We hugged and I wished her well and went off to lick my wounds.

Many times in the 19 years since I have thought of Seamus and I wonder if the thousands of children that I worked with after Seamus is my apology to him for letting him down.

These days I take Seamus with me in my Eminem Spotify account and like an ageing rapper I remember the good times and I imagine what that boy would be doing now with all those gifts and talents and I have a wistful smile for the one that got away.