

## **Every Child Leaving Care Matters**

It's Friday 14<sup>th</sup> August. I have had some good news, perhaps surprisingly good but let me start with a phone call I received on Sunday last (9<sup>th</sup> August).

I received an unexpected but welcome call from an old friend, let's call him Simon – because that's what his parents did. I've known Simon for almost twenty-five years. He was a bit of a left-field appointment that I and others made spending some of the money that my LA were given thanks to the Quality Protects initiative. He looked a bit like superman – toned and very fit but most of all he very clearly cared about children and was a 'doer'. We wanted someone to help include and integrate children in care and on the cusp of care into mainstream activities and boy did he do it. But that's another story.

Simon had called to ask for advice and or support in what seemed like a pretty hopeless situation. Despite having left the LA many years ago he had typically, as have I maintained contact with many of the children he worked with and it was one of those children – now an adult with children of his own who Simon was calling about. For the purpose of this blog we will call him Joe. The reason being that's his name and he is more than happy for me to use it and whatever you are reading now he will have read and 'approved' first.

Joe was an extremely talented young man showing prowess in several sports and representing himself well in some pretty good teams. He also managed to get a job working for the same LA that had been his 'parent' – shame more don't ensure that their children have the chance of a job in their 'family business'. Joe had his issues, he still has in many ways and despite being a good father, life has not always been easy and his mental health has, at times been very fragile to the point of crisis.

Joe was in a children's home in those early days and was eventually fostered by someone who was a residential worker in the same children's home. She, the foster carer and Simon have always been there for Joe – even in the bad times. Simon's call was to tell me that another bad time – perhaps the worst of all had brought us to the reason for his call early last Sunday. Joe had messed up, committed an offence and was facing a certain custodial sentence. He had not harmed anyone, nor had he taken anyone's property but his solicitor had told him that when sentenced he would be looking at a fairly long prison sentence. Such was the offence there was not even any point (so I'm told) for the Probation Service to provide a report – can that really be true? It seems so. Simon had straightened a few things out for Joe over the years but didn't know how to try to fix this one – hence the call to me. Frankly having heard the story I was by no means certain either.

Joe is a good man, pretty much everyone who meets him loves him – he's always had that impact – though I only knew Joe for a fairly short period as I left the LA not very long after he had come into care – though I knew his family over a period of a few years.

What to do?

Well although a report was not required what harm could there be in writing one anyway? If someone is destined for prison then the judge should know more about

the person than simply their name and offence – Joe was pleading ‘Guilty’ – well he would wouldn’t he? He did it after all.

So, it fell to me to draft something but I had help. I spoke to the person who succeeded me as Service Manager for Children in the LA and she remembered Joe well and was happy to add her name and ‘two-penneth’ to the report as was the woman who had been responsible for the residential homes in the LA after I had left – she too was eager to help. So, with Simon, I started writing. This was not to excuse Joe for what he had done – he was guilty as charged. We took an approach that I partly picked up (sorry didn’t get permission) from Andi Brierly who I know a bit and who wrote “Your Honour. Can I tell you my story”? Andi had a tough start in life and you can read quite what that means in his book, which I recommend. He now works for the Youth Offending Service in Leeds, enough said. I didn’t write just about Joe’s story but about Care Leavers in general. Some of the challenges they face after care, the fact that there really are things called Adverse Childhood Experiences and what these are. We wrote about Joe having children of his own, we added a few statistics about children in care who go on to have mental health and other chronic difficulties, we talked about the risk of history repeating itself as, sadly, it sometimes does. We talked about how care then, and often now, does nothing therapeutically to address some of those ACE’s (what an unfortunate acronym this is). We simply wanted to ‘talk’ to the judge and say that here were four old (well I’ll excuse Simon and make it three) staggers who still believed in this young man and were standing with him ready to help if he, the judge, could offer a disposal that was as lenient as possible (based on what Joe’s solicitor had told us we were hoping at best for a shorter sentence). We explained that we are his corporate parent and we are still there for him. The solicitor kindly agreed to file our letter though kindly suggested that it was a bit of a hopeless case.

This being ‘Covid time’ the case was dealt with ‘virtually’ so we could not be there but Joe knew that we were there. He emailed me to thank me for the letter – which of course he knew about and his former foster mum also emailed me to say ‘thanks’ and that whatever happened the letter had given Joe hope and the knowledge that he was cared about by people long gone from his day to day life.

The sentencing was today.

I got a text from Simon at 1347 “Wow speak later well done”.

Whilst he called me a little later it was the call from Joe mid-afternoon that thrilled me most. He was ‘free’ and calling to thank me (and, of course to pass on thanks to my colleagues). His solicitor was amazed, apparently; the judge was taken aback, apparently. He made comment that he had never, ever had a letter like this presented to him before but more importantly that he had never considered all of the information that had been laid before him in that letter when previously sentencing adults who had once been in care. Now we and I suspect the judge aren’t saying that committing offences is OK – it is unequivocally not and we said as much in our letter. But sometimes there are reasons buried in history that go at least some way to explaining how this can happen. I remember in 1993 John Major, Prime Minister’,

saying that in relation to crime that we should "...condemn a little more and understand a little less"

*(Extract from The Independent' Feb 21<sup>st</sup>, 1993)*

*"JOHN MAJOR joined the mounting debate on law and order yesterday by backing a raft of planned legislation - and making clear that measures to punish crimes committed while on bail were a top priority.*

*'Society needs to condemn a little more and understand a little less,' he said.*

*The Prime Minister's remarks, in an interview with the Mail on Sunday, came as Labour prepared to launch a 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' policy that will keep the issue high on the political agenda.*

*Tony Blair, shadow Home Secretary, will this week support detention of persistent young offenders as well as a new social programme to prevent children from turning into criminals".*

Strong words indeed but the problem is that neither party delivered what Mr Blair was proposing and so we still don't try hard enough to understand and even when we do we do not have any sensible programme that works or is even tried to use that understanding to 'therapeutically heal', not dismiss the impact of ACE's.

Joe sees today a his very own small miracle and he intends to use his multiple skills (and the opportunity an understanding judge has surprisingly afforded him) to work with others who are struggling with their mental health and or are in or after care. Most of all he feels that a small group of adults who were part of his life many years ago still are and that he is cared for and valued.

I will end with Joe's exact words in a message he sent to those who did what they could and should do to help.

*".....what was written and the lovely things said about me reminded me not only that I am a good person, but I have support and love from other good people determined for me to reach my potential, this has re sparked my own drive to be the best version of myself also, And use my skills, life experience, and passion to do good, to help others in my position. being touched by the support i have had and seeing how much it has helped me has installed a drive in me to be that support for others who may not have it".*

As he supports others he will do so in the knowledge that he 'has back-up' – **Every Child Leaving Care Matters.**