

## #5 – Chris

Empathy Museum presents A Mile in My Shoes.

**Anon voice:** You're listening to Our Justice, a series of true stories and conversations, co-produced by three young people with experience of the Scottish Justice System. In this episode, you hear from Chris.

**Chris:**

So it's called *Us to You*.

*[Chris reads the following with the rhythm of a poem. Synth chords play intermittently in the background.]*

It's easy for you to talk about our lives if you've only ever seen it in your family's front room on a TV.

You can turn our lives off with a remote control, but we don't have that privilege.

We're not myths. We're not stories. We're not statistics. We're not unempathetic. We're not loveless. We're not lost. We're not idiots. We're not powerless. We're not voiceless.

We're more than how we are portrayed. We're more than just a file. We're more than the government's statistics on how well we're doing in life. I am not a number.

More than our trauma. We are more than a success story. We are more than our parents.

We are more than a crime. We're more than a product of the government and organisations.

We are more than our situations. We are more than what our teachers think. We are more than a punishment.

*[A different voice says]* If you're naughty, I will put you in care.

**Chris:** We're more than our care experience. You need to do better. Amplify what we are saying, but don't talk over our voices.

*[Synth chords fade out. Chris's voice returns in a chatty conversational tone]*

That was the absolute ruckus that set a wildfire in the Scottish government.

So I'm Chris, I'm 21. I'm a care leaver from Scotland. I'm from Livingston originally.

Livingston's just a really nice place to be, a proper community-spirited sort of area.

Everyone's here to help each other. Like, when I've been going to school here, when I was younger and stuff, it's just a generally nice place to sort of grow up I would say.

School was probably about a five minute walk away from my home back then. At the sort of winter time, you'd get the pine cones coming through, the crisp, nice smell of the woodlands. And throughout the summer, you would just get the smells of all the different flowers that would be growing there. You'd also get the smell of the burger van that used to sit down the road. So that would always make you nice and hungry in the morning. I would always go down for a cheeky wee burger before I started school.

I grew up in care. I had residential care, I had foster care, kinship care, I had some elements of secure care. All the different types of care really have made me who I am, I would say. I have stayed in... predominantly it's been west - living in Edinburgh, Perth and Falkirk and Dundee and Inverness - had some care experience up there. So I've stayed quite across the board.

Imagine you're rubbish, just getting flung out for the bin-loader guys. Like, that's how I used to move house. I would just come home from school or just get pulled out school and my stuff would be in black bags. I think the most notice I ever got was three hours that I was

moving.

My 16th birthday, my residential home gave me a 28-day notice to leave. That was a happy birthday present for me. I ended up in the homeless system from 2016 until 2020, a system that was broken. I had to move local authority areas, had to spend days in places with people who were on drugs and alcohol, where you couldn't sleep for weeks. And I was trying to work inbetween it all, and study and try and make my life better. I had to literally fight for a flat after my stuff was stolen out of supported accommodation. They're the things that shouldn't happen. But right now in this day and age, they are happening and that's because the right support isn't there.

We're people who in the end are having to probably work three times as hard as people who have got a stable home, to try and find some stability in our lives. I'm that used to moving about that I'll stay in the same house for about a year, then maybe move again because it doesn't feel comfortable staying in one place, even though it's all lovely area, lovely people. I didn't find stability until about a year ago during the pandemic, when I was forced to stay in the house and I was forced to be there for longer than a year. That's the only time I found stability is during a time when everyone else is really uncertain about something. I feel that it's normal because I'm used to getting locked down. I'm used to having a have decisions made for me. Like that's always happened throughout my life.

2002: that was the very first meeting I ever had with anyone to do with the justice system. 2007 was probably the first charge I got - I threw a carrot and it hit a teacher. There was no malicious intent in it. I just threw a carrot at somebody because they threw it at me, and I missed them. I got charge for it because I hit the teacher. And that's because I was care-experienced, so they have to do that.

Pineapple stick - there's a good story about that: McDonald's I hit somebody with a pineapple stick, probably not the right thing to do to a 10-year-old, but yeah, I was charged with that as well for assault, and it was only one of my friends, I'm still friends with now and we still talk about it to this day - how I hit him with a pineapple stick and he hit me with pineapple stick, but I was the only one charged in that situation. You'd think at that young age, they maybe do a bit of support with you, but their policy was just to get us charged and just to get us arrested for it.

So it's that pattern of teachers or residential workers who are just following a stupid policy or a procedure that you wouldn't have in your own family house. If your kid was to hit you with a pineapple stick in your own house, if you wasn't care-experienced, you'd tell them to shut up and don't do it again.

I've had quite a lot of involvement from then. I've had a lot of charges - from really stupid stuff, to probably a few criminal damages in there cause I did destroy stuff when I was younger. More or less weekly, I was charged with something new, right the way up to when I was about 15 year. I think the stupidest - and this is the most stupidest charge I've ever got - was I sprayed a Frube. It's like a yogurt that's in like a tube and you squeeze it out, basically, into your mouth. I sprayed that, like, we were all doing it to each other, sprayed that at one of my friends - got charged for it. And that was quite serious charge. I was charged with grievous bodily harm. They were trying to take to take me to court for it, but my social worker stepped in and was like, no, you're not going to court for a Frube.

When you're in care, or when you're under a compulsory supervision order in Scotland, the charges go to something that's called "the children's reporter", which is the panels. And it's their recommendation whether or not to bring you in, or to convict you, or to send you off to CPS. It's their decision as long as you're in care in Scotland.

So a lot my charges got dealt with, with the children's reporter. The children's reporter stopped it from going any further, which means I've got a clean record. I was moving about

alot in the care system and I wasn't settled. Didn't know who I could talk to. Didn't know who I could trust. Didn't know how to express my feelings in a safe way.

I think that what's really important to help teach a child is how to act and how to be the best person they can be, where I never had a role model like that in my life. People with families will have their mum and dad to show them that. It's about the challenging situations we're living in. And some of us might react to that by not behaving properly, by being little brats. Trying to accept your care experience is probably one of the hardest things you can do. And it's hard to describe the pain you go through.

The best ever interaction I've had with the police was with a Sergeant when I was staying in Edinburgh, back at my family home, for a while before I went back in to care. I had a really good time at my mum's before the relationship broke down between me and my family. And then I turned to my old ways of being a brat. My mum had to phone the police on me quite alot. I was unsettled again, because I was getting moved about by social work and nobody was really listening to me. My mum phoned the police one day and this Sergeant came out. He never came in heavy-handed. He came in, petted the dog, shouted my name, I was like, what you wanting?

I was quite abusive to him to start with. Came down stairs, and he took me to the car and I was like, right, let's go to the station and let's get this processed then. And he went, no, we're not doing that. He took me down to the beach. We just sat there. And that was it. he Just had a chat with me, spoke about why I was doing it. What my life was like. He was somebody that no matter what was happening in his life, he would make time for me. And I never had that before. So it was such a weird feeling. It was like, he would never charge me. A couple of occasions, he wasn't in at all, and it was new coppers who were following everything by the book. Now, what I've noticed is if the copper doesn't follow the book and treats you like a human, they get a long way with you. Unlike the coppers who are just coming out, who are just trying to treat you like the book. And that's when my life started to change.

2011: someone from a charity called Who Cares Scotland came at my residential home one day and went: I'm setting up this group called Y-PIC Edinburgh: the Young People in Care Council. That's where people with care experience, they come along and sit alongside Edinburgh City Council to make changes for the care system. I was lucky to be selected to be a part of that group and so always that group will hold very, very fond memories in my heart. I learned a lot of campaigning, a lot advocacy, I spoke at a lot events. I train social work students at Edinburgh university. I went in and gave them my raw experience of being a care-experienced person. I then spoke at larger school, events at networking events, at events with a Scottish government, events with different care-experienced people.

I joined a group called Youth Justice maybe last August? And that's a group for people who are care-experienced who have justice experience. The whole purpose of the group is to create training, to create participation for the justice sector. I don't really trust the police, that's just through my own experiences, but I'm working with the police for me to help change my narrative. I work with the police individually, as well as working with them in group settings to help train them. We've actually had the police come to us and the Scottish government come to us and go: will you please look at this issue, this justice strategy, will you help us consult on it? So I ran six or seven different consultation workshops to get young people's views around Scotland in different care settings and stuff, to feed into the new Youth Justice Strategy. My name's on the Youth Justice Strategy cause I was the person that helped write and produce the report alongside the Scottish government, and alongside ours. And I think that's probably a proud moment for me as well to go: I'm helping shape the next five years of justice. My name's on that report.

I'm really lucky in the sense that the group of friends I've got, they support me for being care-experienced. They support me for who I am. They come events to try and listen to who we are, what I'm trying to say as well as my partner. So I met my partner about a year ago now.

We've just been taking whatever time we need to get to know each other.

All I wanted was to be validated for a person. And that's what she makes me feel is validated as a person. I'm no longer like that, that parking meter ticket that you throw away.

Get to know us before you judge us. And when you get to know us, you'll realise that we're just the same as you. Instead of looking at us as bad people, you just look at us as another human who just needs some support. Give us a bit of help and be that consistent person in our life. That's all we need.

**Anon voice:** *Thank you for listening to Our Justice. This is a Boldface production in partnership with Community Justice Scotland, and Empathy Museum.*