

#6 – Chris & Gary

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: Welcome as you know, Gary, I'm Chris, I'm a care leaver from Scotland. I wanted to invite you onto this episode just because you're Gary, you're just such a chill guy. And you've been about the community of care experienced people for maybe a couple of decades? A very long time now. So just to start off, can you just introduce yourself to this audience?

Gary: Sure Chris, my name is Gary Brown and I am the National Leadership Network Development Coordinator for Young People with Care Experience, which is a legacy project with Life Changes Trust.

Chris: What does it mean to be care experienced? What is the definition of that from, say, your eyes as a professional?

Gary: There's often a lot of discussion around the definition of care experience. I suppose, the way I've always looked at it is: young people who've got experience of foster care, secure care, residential care, who're care leavers, being looked after at home is another one, asylum-seeking young people... In my mind, young people who are being looked after by the local authority in that context as well would be care-experienced.

Chris: For me, it means somewhere that's away from my natural home. So somewhere where I'm not living with my biological parents, it's somewhere where, as you were saying, the local authority is taking on that responsibility to really look after me, bring me up, and sort of keep me as safe as possible. Even if I didn't always agree with the ways of doing it. I've experienced looked after at home, residential foster, kinship, and secure. So I've had a broad range of experiences here. We're just gonna tag team up really quickly here. So I'll just let you start off. Is, can you give us a definition of residential care?

Gary: My first experience was working in a team of staff who supported young people who were living in houses where 24 hours a day, if need be, there's staff there. I was a social care officer and getting to know young people, young people would tell me a bit about their life. It obviously made a mark on me because it's where my career's gone and it's where I've got a huge passion.

Chris: For me: foster. So definition of foster for me is where you're taken from your family into another family. It's a place where you're meant to feel safe and secure. It doesn't always work out for people, but for the majority of people it does work out. Gary can you tell us a bit about kinship care?

Gary: My knowledge and understanding of kinship care is if for whatever reason you

can't live with your mum and dad, that you can maybe live with a granny or a grandad or an aunt or an uncle. What's maybe seen as a stereotypical parental role would be taken on by another family member.

Chris: The next definition we've gotta talk about is the secure care. And for me, that's a place where you go if you've got a lot of charges and you're a risk to yourself and you're risk to the community, but it's a place to get the right support in place before you really start to interact with people on the outside. I've added this one in here. Can you give us a bit about adoption and the definition around that?

Gary: There's people, young people who are in care, who sort of legally become part of another family, in that sort of very permanent way. Effectively the people who are adopting the child or baby or whoever the young person becomes part of that family.

Chris: Yeah. You've been a corporate parenting lead for quite a bit now. Can you give me a definition of what a corporate parent actually is, and maybe their roles and responsibilities?

Gary: People who are care experienced, who maybe don't have as many opportunities and experiences, or potential opportunities and experiences as other people, then corporate parents can maybe be involved in helping things to happen. Corporate parents have that responsibility to make sure that young people with care experience are getting as much of a chance in education, health, housing, all that kind of thing. You've got a complex system like housing, for example, with a lot of people working in that who maybe don't know anything about care experience. So you've gotta think maybe you maybe have corporate parenting leads in a housing organisation.

There's a mass education to be done so that all services and all staff in all services, organisations and agencies and things like that understand the world of care experience and be able to support people in a sort, a meaningful and productive way. I don't think that's always the case. So I think the, the corporate parenting world's really complex and maybe misunderstood sometimes as well.

Chris: So the last definition before we move on here is around panels. So really for me, a panel is a place where decisions get made about you, and they're not really good places to be. Just imagine three people one side of the table, and then yourself in the middle, the other side of the table with like your social worker, your teacher, maybe even a safeguard, or maybe even other professionals like your psychologist or your mental health worker, all around that table, making decisions about you while not listening to you on what you're wanting. So for me, panels have really been a negative experience in a number of ways. From your experience of being a professional, which that buzz word that we don't like, what are panels and really what do they do?

Gary: My background's all about youth work and community work. And that just, it goes against, I suppose, everything I believe in, I mean, a young person being talked about and sitting there quietly, I just, I don't understand that way of working, that way

of thinking. It's like a total them-and-us situation. It's quite cruel. It's unfair. There's got to be other ways to do things.

Chris: So what do you think the other ways are?

Gary: Asking the young person what they want, like always coming back, what do you want? How can this be comfortable for you? You know, you can express your views in lots of ways. It can be in person, it could be written down, it could be recording something on your own and giving it to people. Have a relationship with a young person first, and have a meaningful relationship with them, so that they can actually feel like they can trust you to say, this is what I want.

So, you know, it's not just the case asking somebody what you want. It's all the time that goes in before that, which to me that's what it's about. And they can be supported as well. So they could even, you know, have an advocate or something like that, or have a youth worker with them who may be able to speak on their behalf. You know, there's just so many ways to do things, but young people at the centre all the time - has to be.

Chris: I think that's something we always discuss is young people like it's us at the centre.

Gary: Uh-huh. I mean, I don't understand how anybody is doing the job that I do... (If they're not care experienced, which I'm not, and that might be an important thing to say in this discussion) So I'm not care-experienced, so then I think my opinion on so much doesn't matter. What my job is, and hopefully what I'm quite good at, is encouraging people to be able to feel comfortable and safe and secure and happy to give their point of view.

My job should be about standing back and young people taking the lead, cuz where I've come from, and this is the youth work sector, the way you know you're doing your job well is if you're standing leaning against the wall and there's a group of young people or an individual young person doing a presentation or standing up doing something brilliant, or being involved in something for the first time, or whatever, whatever... If they're doing all this stuff and you're just standing back watching, it's like breaking down the concept of power and making sure young people know they have so much of it. What I would love to see happen is that in the care experience community there's maybe more youth work staff involved in things. I think that would be a great thing.

Chris: I agree with you - I think it would be a great thing to see maybe staff being more involved in the sense of taking that step back, but also being very actively involved with it if the young person needs it. So like, like that's the whole way of working and it should be. And I think what's been really interesting over the last sort of few years is the fact we've had the independent Care Review but a lot of that stuff and a lot of the ideas have come to light again. Even though we were seen as care-experience people before the review, we were never really truly heard or listened to. The review came about and I feel like that's maybe started a lot of people thinking about, well, how am I working? How can I work in the best way? And I think what's

really important now is the fact of the promises here as well. The promise isn't going anywhere at anytime soon. And I think that people have been in that initial recognising what they've done wrong, and I think now it is about the implementation of, well, I've done this wrong, this is what I'm gonna try better. We're seeing that right now across all the sectors.

Gary: Yeah.

Chris: Like we're seeing managers now go, right, I want to now get relationships with young people. Can I be a part of the group? Instead of saying, I'm going to be a part of it.

Gary: Definitely. The Care Review was about listening to people who have the experience aye. I mean, that's what it was about. Done on a national stage so that everybody could see it. And you know, it's been a great thing. And I know it's easy to see things like co- production and da, da, da, but it's about people doing things together.

Chris: I agree with you. I'm just gonna move on to the next part, which is just around criminal justice. Just gonna talk about my criminal justice experience, cause I've had quite a varied experience of it, but this one time will always stick out in my mind and will always be there. Because of the care system being so unsettled, I was moving from place to place and my clothes, all my things were in black bags. I didn't ever find out in advance that I was moving. It was literally: I left school, my social worker was there, I was moving. Because of all of that, I had a lot of criminal justice experience, a lot of charges. To give you an example, I was charged with quite a serious crime, about GBH. And that was because I threw a yoghurt pot at one of the senior members of staff. I threw yogurt pot at them and they phoned the police.

The police arrived maybe 10 minutes later, and the police weren't wanting to charge me with anything, they weren't wanting to take me up the station and go through all the process because as we can all tell, it was quite a stupid, a very stupid charge here. But the residential care officer was adamant I was getting charged with it, was adamant that I had to be charged with it. And then I was arrested cause I had to be arrested, charged, taken up to the police station, and they had to phone in the emergency social work team. My social worker was involved, had to bring somebody up from the unit... All the process for a process for a process for a process at that time.. I spent maybe six hours in the police interview room, had to sit there, waiting to be interviewed and charged. On hearing that, Gary, what would you think the role of the corporate parents should have been in that situation?

Gary: There's a thing around the police having a corporate parent responsibility in that. There's a thing about the member of staff who wanted you to be charged for that - why did he want that to happen? Why was that allowed to happen? Was there any comeback on like, what happened to the person who did that to you? So there's the whole thing. The fact that was all allowed to happen is unbelievable. It's not. It's believable, but it's wrong in so many ways. It just... That amazes me. It's just, that's a horrible, horrible thing to hear.

Chris: Yeah, I guess professionals, if they're coming in this line of work, I guess they just need to understand that this isn't just a job. Like you're looking after living, breathing, human being to who maybe don't always need that extra bit of support, but they're just trying to create a family home from themselves.

For me, my experience of residential homes, it's like only, I think only one has ever felt like a family home. And that was when we were included in the simplest of decisions of what do you want for your tea? Like what size of TV do you want? I think we're losing the key members of staff who are trying to make the residential homes like homes instead of having them as I guess the things you see in the media.

And that actually brings me nicely onto to the next part. For me like what you see in the media, around residential homes and what have you seen more and more often these days, is articles of people campaigning, like the local community going, we don't want this home, these are challenged kids, the crime rate is gonna go up. There's a lot of stereotypes and a lot of assumptions made about us before they people sort of get to know us. And for me that's probably through media portrayal...

Gary: Mm-hmm...

Chris: What we see in the media is care-experienced people being negative. So we're always in the jail. We're always on drugs. We've got mental health problems. We're this, we're that. For me, it's influenced through the producers who I guess are wanting the sob stories, who I guess are wanting the, sort of, oh, this will make an impact... Without realising that there's real humans behind that who aren't always like that.

Gary: Yeah.

Chris: From, from your perspective as a professional, how do you think local communities are influenced in regards to like residential home?

Gary: So many films, there's a young person who has issues in the film and stuff like that. Often they'll mention, oh, they were looked after by somebody else and they weren't in a traditional family home and stuff. Like you see that constantly. So that goes on all the time. There's a whole kinda laziness as well with the general public and maybe the media to not find out the reality of people's lives. What I'm really happy to see happen is that organisations like 'Each and Every Child' whose purpose is the whole reframing agenda in the care experience community, to me nothing more important than that. Cuz they are going to the media and saying: please think about the way you learned things. Please think about the stories you tell. Please think about why you're telling the stories and all that stuff. So that's been a long time coming and I think good stuff will come from that, but you've still got a massive... there's a lot of education need to happen in schools, et cetera, et cetera, about not just seeing people as care-experienced, but just about looking at people as people...

Chris: All I can say is Gary thank you, thank you for that.

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

