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Themes – care experience, the care systems in our communities, Keeping the Promise and the transformative power of education.

International Women's Day, national Barbie Day (not sure about that one) and Mother's Day all rolled back-to-back in March.

As I reflect on the women in my life, I am always drawn back to one. Nearly 20 years ago my Mum, passed away, age 56. My Mum had it exceptionally tough, a significant house fire led to a combination of life events which would ultimately shape myself and my brothers lives and future.



These events led to a broken marriage and with two young children to care for on her own, my Mum found herself and her young family homeless. However, our bond was strong, she was kind, gentle, loving, and full of fun and joy and I felt safe wherever she was.

My Mum was struggling with her own demons; addiction issues, no family support living in cramped, damp housing combined with poverty and deprivation, it's a dangerous mix. When women and families find themselves in these places' others see an opportunity and that's when children are at risk.

We witnessed and experienced some horrific, life changing and shaping events over the years; rape, sexual exploitation, and systematic domestic abuse at the hands of a sociopath who happened to be a woman and my Mums partner. My Mum told me one Monday morning that the police were outside, that she was going to prison and she wasn't sure when she would be back. We had the "Monday Book" which she had signed. We were around 12 and 14 respectively. We went to school as normal, looked after ourselves and became expert at budgeting with the Monday book money.



When your safe space, your Mum is no longer available, you climb into your shell, plug your fingers into your ears and draw all your strength. The shell is a

confusing mix of safety but also isolating with hard edges – a space where you listen to your own echo amidst the cacophony of abuse battering off the outside, it seeps into your bones and makes you weary. Getting to school the next day - dishevelled and weary, tired and untidy, the education offered to you, simply can't find its way into the space it needs – no matter how skilled and nurturing the staff and how well designed the educational intervention is, there is simply no room as the shelves of your mind are already stacked full with loosely tied up parcels of trauma – shifting these parcels to make space for learning becomes risky and we often try to communicate this through our behaviour.



Relationships, friendships, school and my community became my scaffolding, my care system and shaped me profoundly into the person I am. I was cared for by two wonderful families in the place I knew and called home in my community. This is what the Promise Scotland is urging us to do, to support people in the places and spaces they know and understand as their own.



Like many care experienced people I left school at 16 with little qualifications, I enjoyed school, rarely if ever missed a day and had an innate love of learning but there was just no physical or psychological space to create and execute "an education plan".

The transformative power of education shouldn't end with formal schooling, but for many it does and that's a crying shame. In fact, the majority of the care experienced young people I worked with in my role as advocate over 10 years struggled to keep on top of their education despite being wholly capable, it simply was not a priority like it was for many of their non-care experienced peers.

Equally, I am not sure our education workforce is afforded the time or the learning and development opportunities they need to manage children like me. Educators are taught to teach; they are pedagogues and I wonder how much time is afforded during their training into understanding how to work with children like me, who through no fault of their own are like square pegs trying to fit into round holes. This is absolutely not a criticism but a lens with which I view my experiences and of those young people I advocated for in the care system for almost 14 years.



For the majority of care experienced people our education journeys are not linear, and we commonly return to education at a later stage in life, for me 28 and 38 respectively in higher education where I completed 2 full time degrees alongside full-time work. It took me a combined total of 12 years post school to get the qualifications I wanted, that has lifelong impact on your economic situation and your life opportunities.

Have the educational outcomes changed since I left school some 37 years ago? No, they haven't in any significant way. Large gaps remain between us and our non-care experienced peers. Therefore, Scotland's tertiary education system is an educational lifeline. Colleges and Access course across Scotland are crucial in their own right, but also as a stepping stone into university for care experienced people. Post school education has the power to transform our lives.



Colleges and Universities have been working hard in upholding the rights of care experience learners and have identified various ways to help care experienced people find the support and stability they need, but there is further work to be done to remove the obstacles and the systemic barriers which impact on and hinder students' progress.



The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and by working collaboratively both within and across further and higher education bodies we can achieve change. This concept is not new to our further and higher education bodies, and they have achieved much through the corporate parenting duties as is laid out in the 2014 Children and Young People (Scotland) Act and this has prepared the ground well for the Promise Scotland to land. Support for care experienced learners requires collective action and that is what the Promise encourages us to do.

We know that our places of learning work when they work for everyone. We also know that the policy, practice, and culture change created and driven by the voice of the care experienced learners doesn't only affect them, it also benefits the wider student group.



So back to where I started.

If I had just a minute more of my Mums time here is what I would say.

I love you, possibly to the moon and back.

I don't blame you.

I wish you had the support you so desperately need and deserve.

Thank you for teaching me to laugh and love.

I got there.