

St Giles

Turning a past into a future



Peer Power

Here is Peer Power

In summer 2022, some of our staff and Peer Advisors collaborated with professional photographer Jeff Hubbard to create a series of images which described their journey with St Giles.

Alongside the images, some of the people featured have written down their stories.

They come from all areas of the UK and many different situations and circumstances. What they all have in common is lived experience of overcoming adversity which they now use – alongside their skills and professional training – to help others.



Foreword



Over the many years I have been a Patron of St Giles, I have met some of the bravest people I have ever known.

Many have come from situations that most of us will hopefully never have to encounter. However, they are living proof that positive change is possible, and that people can overcome what can often seem insurmountable odds to transform their own lives and those of others.

I am delighted that this project, has created an opportunity to see and hear from these remarkable people. Those featured tell, in their own words, their stories and experiences.

What they have achieved fills us with hope. I have no doubt you will find them as inspirational as I do.

Jenny Agutter OBE

Patron, St Giles

Adrian



I came into contact with St Giles through the Shaw Trust. After speaking to Hannah (Coventry Peer Hub Co-ordinator) I haven't looked back. St Giles have continually supported me and helped me achieved my NVQ Level 3 Advice and Guidance qualification. Not only this – they have given me the strength and encouragement to talk about my past and I now have a much more positive outlook on my future. I have now started working as a full time Caseworker in A&E at Russells Hall Hospital in Dudley and I am doing something I would never have imagined three years ago. Thank you St Giles!

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Bola

I was introduced to St Giles during the second lockdown. My assessment was done and a lot of things my children and I needed at that time were provided. I was later introduced to the Advice and Guidance course and provided with the materials I needed to complete it during the lockdown.

After completing my course, I was looking for job because I am a mother of two young children who are fully dependent on me, so I needed a flexible job that allowed me time with my children, especially my little one who was under three years old.

I joined the team at St Giles as a volunteer for two days a week. At the beginning it seemed really difficult for me to cope with. But when I started working with some fantastic staff at St Giles they really helped me to understand things and develop my interest in the work.

Working with Olu to experience her work with clients has really been a most pleasurable experience for me, and I want to use this experience to support other people, so am looking forward to joining the team, and working with them as a Peer Advisor.



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Claire



My background of growing up with quite a privileged lifestyle wasn't without its challenges in life. I have a rare blood disease that wasn't diagnosed until I was growing up as a child. Due to family circumstances, I eventually ended up living with my Mum permanently and moving onto a new life with her.

As time progressed onwards I became employed and got married. More challenges came along as I ended up being in an abusive, manipulative and controlling marriage. This created a lot of damage with relationships that I had on my side of the family. In the end I had to make a life changing decision of going through a divorce and losing my long-term job through redundancy.

Eventually I had a severe nervous breakdown which started off my mental health problems with anxiety, stress and depression. I never thought within my wildest dreams I could start the journey of rebuilding my life again as my whole world had been turned upside down. Eventually I moved into private rental accommodation as the ex-marital home had to be sold and when I could no longer afford to live there, I contacted the housing authorities who sent a housing officer to help and support me through my troubles.

During this time period I had run out of money and my housing officer had to arrange for me to use the Foodbank. She kindly brought me a box of food with her each time she came to see me. Eventually I got my benefits all sorted out and moved into a one bedroom ground floor flat.

The day after I moved in, I decided to take the biggest leap of faith and try and reconnect with my Mum after 13 years of no contact. She got back in contact with me and very slowly over the years to this day we have rebuilt our relationship. This takes hard work and commitment from both sides. She even supported me making decision to go down the bankruptcy route due to financial difficulties from my past life which needed to be dealt with.

During the pandemic it was another life changing and challenging experience. Being socially isolated from my family and friends was so hard and feelings of loneliness never seemed to go away.

I made use of my time by being accepted onto the Peer Advisor Programme with the St Giles Trust and now I am working towards gaining a qualification in Information, Advice and Guidance at Level 3 NVQ . I now use my knowledge and life experiences to help support other people during their own life journeys. It's so rewarding, inspirational and positive to offer support to people who really need it.

The biggest lessons in life I have learned is never bury your head in the sand, talk about it and get the help and support when you need it.



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Danielle

I'm Danielle from Cardiff and I'm a Senior Caseworker with St Giles. I wasn't always an employee, my journey started with St Giles as a person referred to them by probation.

I was once in and out of prison, shoplifting charges and breaches of the many orders the court put on me, and I ignored. Except for the last time I left prison in 2017.

I had a huge crack/cocaine habit, and that was the only thing that entered my mind. It controlled my thoughts, my feelings, my environment, it took over me, until there was no trace of me left.

I shoplifted day after day, shop after shop, I became a slave to my addiction.

I had a chaotic, physically and emotionally abusive childhood, and a chaotic and abusive early adulthood due to drugs. A cycle I thought I couldn't break.

That is until I came out of prison in 2017. It took a few months but I had had enough. One day I was going into town to shoplift to get money and I thought to myself I can't do it no more. I rang my mum and she told me to stay with her. So I jumped off the bus in town and went to my mums. And I stayed there for a year.

I started engaging more with my probation officer and she referred me to a project with homelessness charity The Wallich and then the Peer Advisor Programme with St Giles. She helped me see how valuable my life experience is with helping others. Whilst doing the Peer Advisor Programme I was working as a Peer Mentor with the Wallich. The Peer Advisor Programme helped me become the Caseworker I am today.

St Giles gave me the confidence and skills to believe I had a future. They gave me opportunities that not many other companies would offer someone with my background, and they made me realise that I can accomplish something with my life.

Because of the help and support I received, I'm 4 years off drugs, I have a full time job doing something I have a passion for and I'm in my second year of uni studying Forensic Psychology. I have a good life, something I never thought I'd have.

I now see my lived experience as a strength, something that actually gives me an edge. Not only can I do what everyone else can do, but I have lived it, felt it and conquered it which gives me a step ahead. I'm hoping that with educating myself and working hard, I can help shape policy and create more opportunities out there for people with a past.

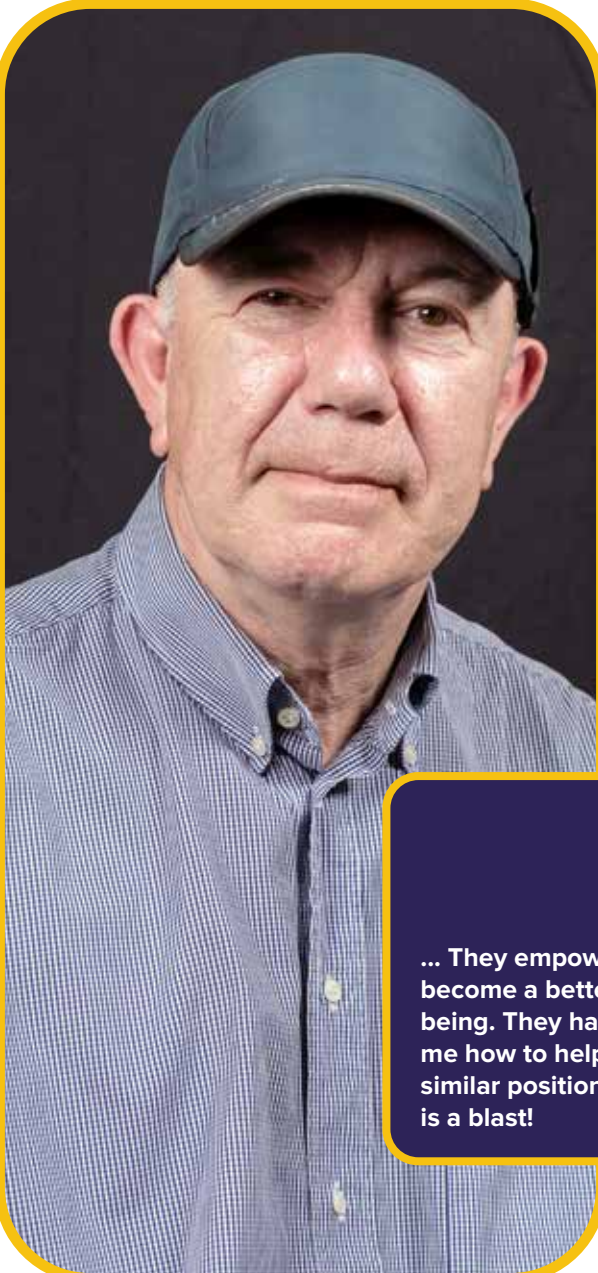
My grandad used to say to me, "Use what took you down to take you back up" and it took me a long time to realise what he meant. But now I do. And that's thanks to St Giles for giving me the skills and knowledge I needed to turn my life around.

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Gareth



I am a volunteer with St Giles and, one day, I intend to become a paid member of staff. I arrived at St Giles in 2019 and had been doing nothing for the past 15-20 years other than drinking, fighting and feeling sorry for myself. It was a pretty awful existence and I decided to clean up my act. I spent two weeks in hospital doing a detox and started my road to recovery. I am happily now not alcohol dependent and trying to give back to my community after loathing and rejecting them for so long.

I enrolled on the St Giles Peer Advisor course alongside an eclectic group of other peers. These weeks were full of fun and I learned so much (also about myself). It was eye-opening and real breath of fresh air for the cynical me. Part of the course saw me seconded to the Footsteps to Recovery project of whom I was once a client. This time I was a volunteer and it was great helping clients out on their journeys. All of them were alcohol or drug dependent.

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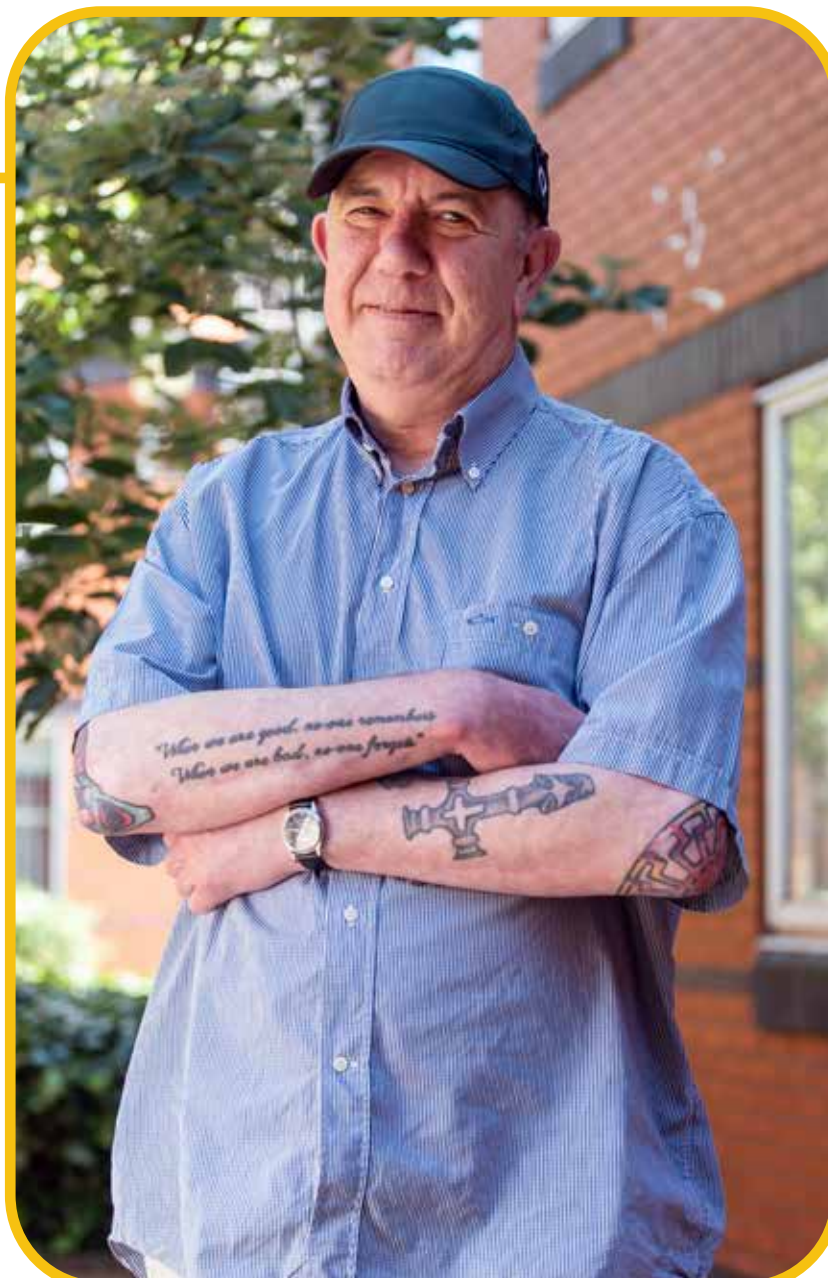
I was then offered the opportunity to volunteer on the St Giles Serious Organised Crime (SOC) team. The Team Leader took me under his wing and introduced me to the team. I was very nervous and quite speechless at first but over the weeks I slowly came out of my shell. I remember being asked questions about my work and my mentor used to tell me there was no right or wrong answer.

I was being encouraged to think for myself and answer what I thought. I found this refreshing having never been taught that way before. I felt a number of emotions working with the young clients – shock, bewilderment, love and empathy. I also met their parents and siblings which was personally rewarding. I have never done anything in my life that encompasses so many emotions and I like the fact there are no quick fixes to the client's problems.

If someone needs help from St Giles they themselves have to put some work in too. Not everyone does, but the majority do and I never see the negative as it may be that someone is just not ready to change at the moment for various reasons.

I consider myself to be in a very privileged position. I am doing good work. St Giles have helped me a path to a better life. They empowered me to become a better human being. They have shown me how to help others in similar positions. It really is a blast!

Well, that is just a brief bit about me.



Jackie







Jess

After 8 years in custody St Giles Trust arrived, little did I know they would change my life! I found someone who saw me for me and all the positive things I could bring – I wasn't judged, labelled or treated as an inferior. I was valued for the first time in what felt like forever. I completed qualification after qualification as these guys believed in me, which in turn led me to believe in myself.

I was 22 when I entered custody and what little confidence I had was stripped away. I plodded along, getting through each day the best I could, with no real purpose or goal. Although I wasn't treated badly, I certainly wasn't valued and my skills were probably exploited by the system rather than being used in a way that could benefit me. St Giles acknowledged what I could potentially achieve and I started to believe in myself a bit more. To have an organisation who not only saw past my situation and were non-judgemental, but actively encouraged me to achieve things that the prison wouldn't usually allow was so overwhelming and I started to flourish in an otherwise oppressive environment.

St Giles provided me with purposeful qualifications that held the promise of future employment upon release and also gave me a satisfying and productive work role whilst still incarcerated, which saw my self-worth slowly but surely increase. My days started to fly by and before I knew it, 6 years later, I was coming up for release.

Two months remaining and the most amazing thing happened – the perfect job opportunity became available with St Giles. You honestly couldn't write it! I did not know about this opportunity as I was stuck in lockdown unable to access St Giles. But true to their word of employing me when a suitable opportunity arose, St Giles contacted me in custody and here I now am having successfully been employed with the most fantastic organisation for 8 months. The story doesn't end there though.

My fabulous manager (Steve Clarke-whoop whoop!) who has supported me for all of these years has recently been encouraging and guiding me about my plans to progress. He has been open and honest. I can now say that I have very recently been successful in gaining another role, which is a massive progressive move in my career with St Giles Trust.

To say that I have been given a chance where others wouldn't dare, is the biggest understatement. This organisation has supported me and seen me for all that I bring, which has not only helped me develop personally (with my growth in confidence and self-worth) and allowed me to successfully reintegrate back into society but given me a sense of achievement that is felt by my family and friends. I am able to support myself and so thankful that I did not have to be released to rely on my loved ones for financial support – in fact, it's my turn to treat them! Thank you St Giles for giving me a chance, believing in me and positively impacting my life in more ways than I could express! I am honoured to be part of this team.



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Kaz

I had a life of trauma and abuse and became addicted to cocaine and alcohol and led a chaotic lifestyle due to this, I was a self harmer, struggled with my mental health and felt alone in the world, this was once the only life I knew and I was just surviving and not living. Before I came into contact with St Giles in 2019, I was homeless staying in a hostel, recovering from a 16 year cocaine addiction, I was self harming and had attempted suicide on numerous occasions, I was also trying to come to terms with all the trauma and abuse I suffered through my life past and present and was trying to sort my chaotic lifestyle out.

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I was in a dark place and didn't know what my future looked like, I was a lost soul in a dark hole I couldn't get out of and I was just surviving not living and I was very close to relapsing.

St Giles came to another hostel and I went and spoke to the Peer Coordinator Kristina, she told me about the learning to advise and NVQ qualification, I was a bit anxious at first but once I was told about St Giles and what they did, I knew this is what I would like to do and I knew St Giles was the place for me and for the first time in my life someone was willing to give me a chance which I'd never had before.

I started training as a Peer in August 2019 and I remember being very quiet and anxious and nervous as I didn't know what to expect but I felt motivated and as time went on I felt my self esteem and confidence building and I dug deep and put my all into it. I was being given a chance and it felt incredible! I volunteered with a homeless organisation for my placement and learned new skills and knowledge. Because of Covid restrictions I completed my NVQ in April 2021 and I felt amazing as this was my first proper achievement in life. I then became a paid employee at St Giles in August 2021.

I have had and continue to have, an incredible journey with St Giles, I'm not "surviving" anymore, I'm living the best life I can. I'm in my second job role, my goal is to progress in St Giles and I'm currently being mentored to help me with this, I can't imagine working anywhere else.

If it wasn't for St Giles I'd still be a lost soul without any hope or future and I'd either be dead or back on drugs, I've come from a lost traumatised soul to a survivor living her best life and St Giles will always have a place in my heart as after all St Giles saved me and helped me use my past to propel me into my future.





Laura

My journey with St Giles Trust started in 2019 when I was in custody at HMP Drake Hall, my cliché way of thinking was 'let's try and get the most out of this really awful situation' so I aimed at getting as much education and positive experiences I could. I applied for a course called 'Information, Advice and Guidance' and a lady from St Giles came and saw me, she made me feel like a person, rather than a prison number. She didn't judge or look down at me. I was asked if I wanted to partake in a event which she was organising where school children came into the prison to look at what prison was like, to talk to residents and to our families on the impacts prison has on them.

I then moved onto open prison and my journey began to reintegrate back into society. Weeks prior to leaving prison the trainer assessor at St Giles within HMP Drake Hall told me about a job opportunity as a Caseworker embedded within an A&E department, a position I wouldn't of normally considered due to my criminal record.

I filled in my application form, was interviewed and was offered the job. I started in September 2020 as an A&E Caseworker. I carried on with the ethos of pushing and striving for my best and pursuing every opportunity. When the team started a new project working with young females involved in or at risk of exploitation - a project extremely close to my heart due to my lived experience - I successfully applied to work as a Senior Caseworker on it.

As the team expanded, my manager got a new role and I was asked if I wanted to take on the position of Acting Team Manager. I jumped at the chance. I worked with the team to establish the project and expand my knowledge. Six months later was successful in gaining the position permanently.

I work with females who are in the position I was in all those years ago. If I had had a St Giles Caseworker I may not of ended up in custody myself, with a record which will stay with me forever. I can talk to the young people with true lived experience and can upskill professionals.

I am truly grateful for my second chance in life, turning my past into a future.



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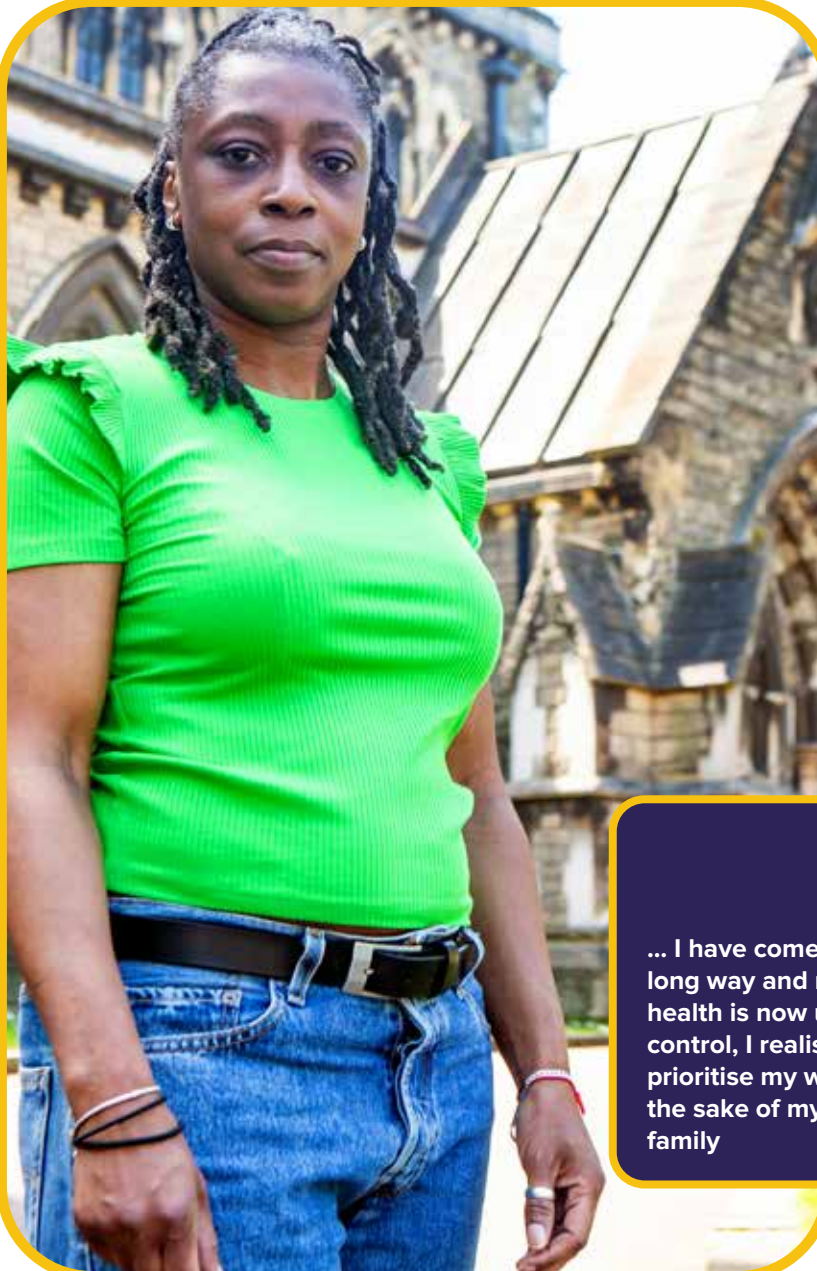
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Leon





Monica



I came across St Giles when I was researching organisations offering volunteering to help me get back into work. The thing that stood out for me was St Giles worked with a lot of employees with lived experiences which was a fit for me, as I wanted to feel like I was understood in my place of work, not the woman that had a lot of issues in her past.

I worked as a volunteer for Children and Families in 2019. I appreciated the opportunity but unfortunately this did not work out, as the level of input was not for me. However, I believe everything happens for a reason, because I was recommended to study the Information

Advice and Guidance Course (IAG) at Holloway Road, on the Peer Circles Project. I passed the IAG course, which really boosted my confidence. Since I have progressed from a Trainee into a Caseworker I am grateful for the support from my colleagues and managers for this opportunity.

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... I have come such a long way and my mental health is now under control, I realise I must prioritise my wellbeing for the sake of myself and my family

I have first-hand experience of encountering and managing issues such as sofa surfing, mental health struggles, the criminal justice system, a domestically violent relationship, and being raised in care, so I can relate to clients with the same lived experiences. Mental health for me was the most complex situation I ever had dealt with; this was a very dark time. I was once in denial of my health condition. I gained weight and my self-esteem was at its lowest. I was not aware that during this time I should have been working on maintaining my mental health balance to avoid relapses and becoming unwell.

I knew I wanted out of this situation, but had been told I would have to wait a period of time before my medication would be reduced. I contacted an advocacy service for my views to be heard and it took around three years to implement a medication reduction. .

I feel I am able to relate to the many clients I see and – within boundaries - share my stories as I have been there too. I have learnt personal recovery is a journey which is completely different for everyone. A process through which various factors from medication to diet and structured activities as well as varying support networks are evaluated to form what I consider to be a “care package”. Some may recover quickly and unfortunately for others it may take more time but what is most important is that we are visible and able to maintain a functioning lifestyle. St Giles and Peer Circles help with this Journey.





Stacey

My story starts many years back, but I'm not going to delve that far into the past. Just briefly say that I was mixed up into drugs and alcohol and spent time in prison. I will start on the positive side of things when my life changed for the better.

After many years of being in and out of work, doing mainly pubs and catering, Covid hit, which was basically my life saver. I got caught pregnant, and I really needed to change my life for the better and look for a future for both myself and my son. Although I had already stopped partaking in recreational drug use, and drank very little, and any hard drugs were a thing of the past. I knew my son was the most important little thing in the world, and he only had me to protect him.

During my pregnancy, I had a lot of battles to overcome. Both myself and his dad have severe mental health problems, so not only did I have my own bipolar to overcome, I had to make sure he was ok and he was quite poorly at the time. I asked for help with his worker, but it was some time before he got help, and each time I rang she just put referral after referral in, to social services, and they told me to continue safeguarding my son. So that's exactly what I did. I stopped ringing his CPN worker. It made me realise that it's no wonder people go so long without help, and if I was a young girl who thought for a second that my child may be at risk of being taken, I wouldn't ask for help either. The system is flawed, and that's why I love working for St Giles, as having life experience really helps people relax, so you can get straight to helping.

My son's dad at this point had stopped taking his meds, and my son was here, so to safeguard my child, I had to have proof of that, so every time he came round, I just rang the police. He was never physically violent, but he was making my life hell, and at this point had escaped from the mental health ward and threatening to take my son away from me. This is where DASU

(domestic abuse service) come into things, and I scored high on their MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) questions, so again, had to carry on calling the police. He was then admitted back to hospital after his friend set him up with the police, and he was caught, so my life dramatically changed again, and this time I wanted to move forward and DASU put me in touch with communities first.

Julia is the most supportive worker I had ever met; she listened to everything and knew straight away that she had the right agency for me. That being the St Giles trust

I met with Lisa Owens after a few phone calls. After meeting Lisa and Annie, I knew I wanted to be a part of St Giles, and I knew that I wanted to do my NVQ. Lisa secured me a placement, and between her and Julia, they sorted childcare out for me, getting funding and making sure that was a priority.

I started with the Merseyside project, who all do a fantastic job. But I have since moved over to the peer hub, as I wanted to support people doing what I was doing in that moment. I am hoping to get a full-time job with them, however there are so many options available in the St Giles Trust, that I know I will be with them for many years, and that their whole outlook is a cut above the rest. They take lived experience and use it to their advantage. Everyone I have been involved with has a story to tell, and they are remarkable. They really do turn your past into a future.

Anyone looking into working with this outstanding trust, just do it, you won't regret a single second of it. I love being involved with them, it works around my home life, and I get to help people in similar situations I've had throughout childhood and early adult life.



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Tracey

I would like to share with you my experiences and feelings about being in prison and how my life has changed for the better because of it.

I had stolen from my employer to fund a gambling addiction; I was sentenced to 4 years for fraud and thought my life had come to an end and that there was nothing left for me. I felt so low and worthless. How wrong was I?

After coming to terms with what had happened to me, there was no choice but to make the most of what prison life can offer. You can either choose a good way or bad way. I chose the good way. I was a 'mother figure' to some of the girls who, for whatever reason, seemed to confide in me. I also became a Connections Worker as helping others was what I found to be my calling. My ideas for support for my peers were welcomed by the prison staff and some of them were realised. This made my self-esteem rise and my feeling of worthlessness fall. I thoroughly enjoyed this which then led to me working at The Outside Links once I got my ROTL's.

This was really the start of my 'outside' journey.

Seeing the different kinds of people who walked through the door each day was eye opening. Some were in an absolute state of desperation and needed our help. Seeing the looks on their faces and their whole demeanour change for the better once we were able to help them made this job so worthwhile. Every day gave different challenges but the feeling of self-worth was also overwhelming for me.

Having the trust from the prison to be able walk back after work was so refreshing and gave me a taste of freedom along with visiting my family on home ROTL's.

After serving 2 years inside, I was released. What now?

My marriage had failed, which I struggled with, and had to live with my parents. I found myself falling into a depression and had basically swapped my prison cell for another, my bedroom cell.

I did not know how the world would receive me. It was a bit like when you walk outside your prison cell on your first day and not knowing what to expect. I was scared. In prison, I knew what was expected of me, I had no clue now.

Thankfully I had the grit and determination to realise that no-one could change this but me.

I found work, with an agency, as I felt I could not (or did not want to) divulge my criminal record to many employers and be rejected because of it. This led to me getting a contract with one of the agency's clients. Perfect! I was able to save and finally, after 6 months was able to rent my own house. Life plodded on for a while. I visited the Outside Links whenever I could to volunteer as I missed it and the people.

Unfortunately, I was made redundant due to the Covid pandemic. Now what? Me, along with thousands of others, are out of work. No-one will employ me because of my record. Or so I thought. This is when I sat down and seriously thought about my future and what I wanted to do. I wanted to help people. I realised that.

I approached St Giles Trust as they were advertising for a Link Supporter. The job specification sounded perfect and more or less mirrored what I had loved doing at the Outside links. They saw my passion for helping others and I went into great detail about my time 'inside' and how I could support women in and out of the Criminal Justice System. I am so proud to say, offered me the job! All this because of my prison experiences!

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... My life is better than before I was sentenced. Whoever would have thought that?



I thoroughly enjoy working with 'my ladies' and offering support around many issues. Housing, debt, any form of abuse, substance misuse, employment, court appearances and wellbeing along with anything else that may come to light.

I have thrown myself fully into this role and have undertaken extra duties including East of England Expert Rep, I'm on the Grants Committee for the WREN project and many more.

I would like to say to anybody facing any adversities that life does not end. It changes, please make the most of what services are offered, they are offered for a reason. To help you change for the better. My life is better than before I was sentenced. Whoever would have thought that?

I am writing this to say to St Giles and staffThank you. Thank you for giving me the chance to prove and improve myself.

Our Solution

We see the person behind the problems and help them turn their lives around, then train and support them do the same for others. We know that they aren't defined by those problems, they're trapped by them and we help them see their strengths and find a way forward.

We can do that because many of our staff come from the same backgrounds and have overcome similar problems – they've been there, done that and speak the language of the people we support.

That combination of lived experience and expertise means that our staff work with passion and quality throughout everything they do.

ST GILES is an award-winning social justice charity using expertise and real-life past experiences to empower people who are not getting the help they need.

People held back by poverty, exploited, abused, dealing with addiction or mental health problems, caught up in crime or a combination of these issues and others.

The people we help each year have a diverse range of needs. These cover:

- Help for vulnerable young people involved in or at risk of criminal exploitation
- Services helping adults and young people facing unemployment and poverty
- Help for vulnerable women and families
- Prison and community-based support for people in the criminal justice system

Our objectives are:

- Building a sense of safety and stability
- Building aspirations, skills and positive futures
- Building connections to move forwards

We believe people have the power to turn their life around, regardless of their situation. Many of our employees have been in similar situations and use their lived experiences to inspire and support those living through it right now.

Our vision

We want to see a society where everybody – no matter what their background – has a positive future. This is because when somebody turns their life around, everybody benefits – their families, their children, the community they live in and society as a whole.

Those we help are facing huge challenges which have been made more acute as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, we are working with our partners and local communities to do something about it – supporting people to turn their pasts into positive futures.

Our Purpose

We believe strongly that, given the right support from someone who has been there, people can be empowered to turn their lives around.

We show people there's a way to build a better future – for themselves and those they care about – and help them create this through support, advice and training. It's not easy – we empower and encourage each person to overcome the adversity they face. If they stumble, we're there to pick them back up.

We inspire people to think big for themselves and their families, helping them to build internal resilience and a place in society. We raise awareness of their situation and fight their corner, agitating the current landscape to ensure long term changes are put in place to ensure people succeed.

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