

MY STORY

Gareth Williams: Wales

I was born in a little mining village named Ynyshir in the Rhondda Valley, South Wales. Before I was born, Mum and Dad had twin girls, Johann and Louise. Louise was born with medical problems and died when she was only a couple of months old. I then came along. My Dad was the youngest of four boys and my Mum had a brother. My grandmother, my Mum's Mum suffered with mental health issues, so my Mum's life growing up was difficult. My Dad's was quite normal.

I can remember growing up that Mum was in and out of hospital on a regular basis with mental health problems. My Dad spent many nights alone and he started to drink to ease the pain. I suppose when you see your brothers leading good lives and yours seems to be falling apart, that must be very painful for any man or woman.

By the time I was twelve years old, my Dad had gone bankrupt on a big construction business leaving thousands of pounds worth of debt. This was when things in the family took a turn for the worse. I have tried to understand what took place next but this was when Mum took her own life. I was twelve; Johann was 14. Dad sold the house and we moved onto a local authority council estate. This was when I started to totally rebel against society.

Family life was in total chaos so I searched for the answer on the streets, and with the streets comes gangs and drugs. It started off with stealing fags off the mantelpiece and pinching money out of Dad's pocket, to breaking into cars for radio cassette players, to stealing cars and bikes and then eventually breaking into houses. I can remember at one point being so persistently hunted by the police that they closed three miles of the valley off and drafted in police from many surrounding areas to search for me. I was known as 'The Whippet' and I was constantly on the run.

At the age of thirteen, I was eventually caught and I was put in care. At this point, Johann was in care because life at home had become so hard. I was sent to various different care

homes but I would always run away and go back to the Rhondda. It was at this time that I met a girl by the name of Helen. She was not on the streets. She lived with her parents. At night, the police would be racing around the town looking for me and all the while I would be under Helen's bed being fed pizzas and milky coffee. I love milky coffee.

At the age of fifteen, the care system could no longer control me so I ended up in prison for a few months. I was the youngest in prison and I thought I was the man but behind my door at night I would cry like a baby for my Mum and promised God if he gave me a chance, I would change.

One of many chances was to come and I was taken into a house for children with dysfunctional backgrounds. My sister was now out of care by this time and had a flat of her own so she asked me to move in, along with Helen. My Dad was back on the scene so I thought great! We can all move on in life. I was so wrong. Within three months of going home, my sister was diagnosed with Leukaemia. Watching her lose weight from fourteen stone down to six stone in a matter of months broke me. I thought she would get well with all the treatment she was getting but sadly she died eighteen months later. She was nineteen and I was seventeen. At this point, the lowest of my life, my Dad moved into a flat on his own and I turned back to the streets again – searching for something. I was totally lost and hurting. This was when I was introduced to dope, Cannabis. I thought I had found the answer to life's problems. In fact, I thought I could take over the world with my David Bowie albums and my chillum [Cannabis]. I thought I am going to live forever; me, and Ziggy and the Spiders From Mars. Oh boy! Was I about to crash back to earth with a bang? Family and people said that dope will lead to harder drugs but being young and naïve, I thought – no way, mate, not me – but I was wrong.

For the next ten years, I was in and out of prison for theft, burglary, drugs and violence. I had gone from smoking Cannabis to an Amphetamine and Valium infused thug. I was constantly breaking the law and I was a jealous partner and everyone seemed to have something that I longed for. All my self-worth had gone. This resulted in me being violent towards Helen and I could see that the very thing that had destroyed my family was now destroying Helen and me. I was totally lost.

At this point, Helen and I were living in an abandoned church. Despite all the pain I was causing Helen, she refused to go home and leave me. She was always there. Rumour had it that there was a man looking for me from the local church. His name was James Williams – a pastor from America. He wanted to talk to me. On the 22nd June 1997, I entered the church and that night I was told there was a way out from the heartache and the pain. It was God and the way to him was through Jesus Christ. I gave my life to Jesus that night but I was not prepared to give up everything, like the drugs for example.

Four months after giving my life to Jesus, Helen got pregnant and I accused her of having an affair. On 5th November 1997, I threatened her and beat her. I was sentenced to three years in prison. I had made yet another terrible mistake due to my drugs and violence. As a result of this my son was put onto the social service records and on release I was told to stay away. If I could sort myself out, stay clean and away from crime, I would be able to see him in a year. Having lost my family and now my own family and feeling all alone, I couldn't do what was asked of me. I turned to the only thing I knew which was drugs. Again, over the next ten years, I was put into prison for violence towards Helen yet again and I had lost all my friends and family. I moved out of my village and lived on the streets of Pontypridd, South Wales. At this time I was addicted to heroin and cocaine and I would take these drugs and wander for days searching for an answer, which soon turned into months, then years. I would sleep in sheds and empty houses and eat out of bins from various supermarkets. I had lost my looks, my home, my clothing, my self-respect, my family. The list was endless. In my heart I cried out to God and 'Why, Lord, Why?' I would look up into the night sky and say 'If you can hear me, if you're real, hear my cry'. Looking back, God was moving.

At this time, the lowest of my life, I was put on probation for theft and possession of heroin and my probation officer, Natalie Bevan was a strong believing Christian and she had faith in me. I went to see Natalie one day and she said 'Come on Gareth. You can do this'. She put an arm around me and the dams broke. I had not had human contact in years and Natalie gave me hope. She believed in me. She mentioned Teen Challenge to me and I went for an interview in March 2010. I will never forget the day I walked into Teen Challenge. I saw men from all over the UK. No smoking, no drinking, no taking drugs – everything I had looked for

an answer in. Yet these guys had something I wanted. I felt the presence of God that day. I felt love.

Whilst waiting for a place at Teen Challenge, I had a dispute with my Dad's neighbour, which resulted in me cutting him with a knife. I was charged and put on remand on my birthday. I was looking at a possible life sentence. What comes to my mind is the book by David Williamson, the founder of Teen Challenge – 'The Cross and the Switchblade'. On the 22nd June 2010, I went to court and the charges were dropped to 'Actual Bodily Harm' on the condition that I attended Teen Challenge as I originally intended. I believe since I gave my life to God in 1997, he has not let me go and he has been paving the way for where I am today. Jesus forgave a criminal on a cross. That gave me hope. The first person into heaven with Jesus was a crook. Praise the Lord.

By the time I was at Teen Challenge for six months, I was learning to forgive myself and to forgive others. When the love was stripped from my family, I intended by God's power and healing to replace it, also to my own little family. I hoped to attend the school of ministry of Teen Challenge and learn more about God and myself and share it wherever possible with people who need faith, hope, and love – love being the greatest commandment in the Bible.

So what happened next? I went on to finish the Teen Challenge programme and complete the fourteen studies ie anger and personal rights; growing through failure; love and accepting myself; personal relationships with others and so on. These studies helped me to get to the root of issues of unforgiveness, drug addiction and healing in my life. I came to realise that giving up the drugs was the easy bit. The battle was facing up to the giants – the reasons why I took drugs in the first place. Also the big question is – what will I do with my time that drugs doesn't play such a big part of my lifestyle? Teen Challenge gave me work skills also and helped me to manage my time through involvement in sport, by going for meals, for long walks and reading and it helped to springboard me into my future.

After spending years on the streets caught up in addiction and crime, never seeing a way out, I now had a plan and a purpose. I travelled to Romania with Teen Challenge and spoke to people on the streets where nine out of ten addicts are dying of HIV or AIDS, where there

is no National Health Service, and men and women are living in the sewers of the city trying to keep warm. We fed these people and prayed with these people. Twelve addicts went out to Teen Challenge, Romania and gave these people hope. It is truly amazing when I look back in hindsight and see I was once like these people. I thank God for the opportunity to do this and for so much more and I would like to thank Teen Challenge Romania for allowing me to support them and for their welcome and their love and for their ongoing work on the streets.

After leaving Teen Challenge in March 2012, I moved into a lovely two bedroom house in Ammanford, West Wales. I entered college to study for my NVQ Level Two in Health and Social Care and joined an organisation called Turning Point. This organisation helps people with life controlling problems get housing, doctors, dentists and prescriptions, and puts on activities such as art class, dog walking, football tournaments and fishing and so on. It helps people to build confidence, to help them get CVs, to attend college and then eventually, access employment. It also gives people the opportunity to train to become a mentor – someone who has broken the cycle and wants to support other hurting people. It gives you a chance to go through a training course and obtain qualifications in mentoring and in substance misuse.

Since June 2010, when I arrived at Teen Challenge, I have grown from strength to strength. Let me tell you some of the amazing things that have taken place in my life. In June 2012, I was invited to the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff to talk about social issues and mentoring. It was an event put on by the probation service and they asked me to speak as a success story. Probation has played such a big part in my life and was directly involved with the change that took place in my life. So here I was at the Welsh assembly, talking to cabinet ministers about my life. Let me tell you, the only time I went to Cardiff was in the back of a Reliance van on my way to jail, or to get drugs – so to find myself in the Welsh Assembly was totally bizarre, but it just felt right in the most strange way.

A few weeks later, there was a celebration being held at the Swalec Centre in Cardiff. It is an event which is held once a year to honour probation officers around the country for the good works and achievements they have done in districts and communities for that year.

Winning probation officers and teams are then awarded certificates for their works. I was asked to attend this event and be the person to hand out the awards. Quite odd really when the only thing I was handed in the past was breaches or further orders to do: return to prison, do not collect £200 – what an honour!

At this time I would like to tell you where I am and what I am doing. I am now taking driving lessons and I am looking to pass my test in the next month, travel around Wales talking to people on the streets and help them in accessing drug rehabilitation around the country and getting support with housing and benefits. I am a friend to the friendless. I am building bridges with my Dad and we now go fishing together and have meals together. We now have a father and son relationship. My Dad is so proud to have his son returned to him; he is forever thankful. I don't see my son at the moment. I am waiting for the right opportunity to talk. Until then I am sure he will hear about the good things his Dad is doing. Also, I have come to realise that the way to my son is not through the courts but through his mother who has been there for him for fourteen years. Words will never express how thankful and grateful I am to Helen. She is an angel – but I will prove my love not by words but by actions. I have since met a beautiful partner and we plan to marry next year¹. For twelve years I suffered with Hepatitis C. In July 2012 I got the all clear. Statistics show that only 15-20% of people can clear this virus themselves and I am one of those people. I have also been offered employment with Wales Probation Trust as a Probation Support Officer – amazing really considering I was an addict three years ago – like the song by John Newton, Amazing Grace, once found, never lost.

So this leaves me with giving thanks. I would like to thank Teen Challenge for their love and support. This would never have happened without you. I would like to thank Turning Point for the organisation they are and for all their support – keep up the good work! I would like to thank the probation service for their support – and continuing support. I would like to thank Beth Weaver for the opportunity to share my story. I would like to thank Natalie Bevan, my probation officer through all of this, who believed in me always and for never giving up on me – thanks Nat. Mostly I would like to thank one man, because without him

¹ Gareth has got married since writing this.

this would never have happened. I would like to thank Jesus Christ for his love and for dying for me and for making all this possible.

If you're reading this story, my message is simple. Never give up hope. What has been done for me can be done for you. Stay strong and God bless you all. In closing, then, I would like to say that three year ago I was an addict, living on the streets, with no hope and no future, thinking I would never find an answer to life's problems. Today I don't smoke, drink or take drugs and I have not just found an answer to life's problems but I am being equipped to help find answers for broken men and women to live drug free, independent lives. Again, thanks to all those involved for making this possible. God bless you all.

