



## **Youth at Risk: Some Preliminary Longitudinal Research**

### **1. Methodology**

In the spring of 2011 structured telephone interviews were carried out with thirteen former participants in Youth at Risk programmes. Six of the programmes had run in the 1990s, six between 2000 and 2004, and one in 2008. The interviewees came from across the country, from Belfast to Basildon, from Merseyside to the West Midlands.

### **2. Issues Brought by the Participants**

Almost all of the interviewees had recognised on some level, at the point in which they were enrolled onto a Youth at Risk programme, the need to address major issues in their lives. Half of the interviewees were living with their family, most of the families were single parent, and relationships within the family (particularly with parents) were very poor. Two of the interviewees were, at the time of the programme, living in a Foyer<sup>1</sup>.

Loneliness is very common theme and all but one interviewee had recognised they were “on the road to nowhere.” Some reported being very angry (a couple mentioned violence specifically) and the majority mentioned drug and alcohol problems. Three alluded to some form of addiction and seven mentioned criminal behaviour (including one was stealing from his own family).

### **3. Initial Attitude to the Programme**

At the point of enrolment almost all interviewees reported feeling cynical or pessimistic about the potential of the Youth at Risk programme. One mentioned being “coerced” onto the programme while others were “persuaded” or “made to go” by a parent. Some were referred by social services or probation officers but clearly felt very “sceptical”, “dubious” or “unsure” about the programme: one described how initially he “in some ways felt it could have been a waste of time.” One had originally declined the offer of a place but, having seen the impact on her sister, was persuaded to give it a try.

Others clearly did not understand what the programme was about: “I thought it was a free holiday,” or “I heard it would be on the telly.”

This scepticism remained in the early days of the programmes with many “unsure” and “questioning whether it was going to work at all.” The interviewees recalled struggling with highly contradictory impulses. Feelings of disorientation (it was “strange being around friendly people”), confusion (“I loved it from the beginning but there were times when I

---

<sup>1</sup> Supported accommodation

thought I would much rather be somewhere else”) and fear (I was “terrified and didn’t think I should be there .. I hated it”) were very common.

Clearly, however, each interviewee had, at some level, recognised something in the programme that could help change his or her life. Thus, one “felt it was the wrong decision to stay” and that, at the time, she claimed “didn’t want to change,” she saw the programme through and, as another put it, “although no-one seemed to like it we still went so it can’t have been that bad ... I really enjoyed it ...I stuck it out.”

Only one of those interviewed clearly saw something in the programme at the outset which, at the time, “sounded good” and “after the first night I told my mates that I knew it was going to work.”

#### **4. The Tipping Point**

Some of the interviewees vividly pin point the *tipping point*, a moment of realisation when a fundamental breakthrough in their thinking came about. There was an instant when it “all clicked into place” or when “I understood my committed partner was really there for me.” One reports how his “excitement grew during the week” (of the intensive) as he realised what was happening to him; others simply intuited something was happening as it “wasn’t till the end of the programme that it dawned on me.”

This tipping point almost always happened in the intensive phase. Several of the interviewees recall the sessions sharing experiences with other participants and how this “cleared out the clutter, making me ready for change,” re-evaluating “the stuff you know and the stuff you don’t know.” The moment when “everyone started opening up and the things that were discussed will always remain with me,” is identified by one interviewee as the point at which he was able to finally identify his own issues. Another remembers how witnessing the change in other people made change for him seem “manageable and possible.”

This supportive community, recall the interviewees, helped them “instigate the change”, whether it was becoming “comfortable with what other people think about me,” realising that it is possible “to be in control of your life” or, as many describe, taking on the responsibility to change yourself. The experience became a “door opener to a life of freedom.”

This is, perhaps, best typified by one interviewee who powerfully evokes the intensity of the “let-go process.” On the last night of the intensive a bonfire was lit, the participants wrote about their past on a board and then threw the board into the fire, crystallising the breakthrough point at which his life began to turn around.

#### **5. The Role of the *Committed Partner***

Interviewees describe profound relationships with their committed partners that “grew and grew” beyond the lifetime of the project. Most striking, perhaps, is the duration of some of these relationships and the sense of the Youth at Risk programme being the start of a long personal journey.

One interviewee, for example, still talks to his committed partner on the phone every month or so 12 years after the programme, another is still in touch 14 years later. Others have kept in touch for between two and five years: "I know if I email her she would be there to help me"

Some of the interviewees describe this being the first positive relationship with an adult who was genuinely supportive of them and committed to their welfare. One speaks of the realisation that "somebody actually cared for him." Others spoke of committed partners being "really there for me," a "reliable friend," or the "most amazing woman ever."

These relationships clearly enabled the interviewees to continue the process of resolving some of their most fundamental issues. One describes how he "allowed myself to open up to her and discuss my most personal and private feelings," another how the committed partner enabled another to "trust someone again." The committed partners, too, have been a considerable source of strength as interviewees strove to keep out of trouble (resisting "unbearable" pressure) and giving them "the courage to say 'no'".

The critical long term impact of the role played by volunteers is clear: "if it hadn't been for him I don't think I would have been able to change my life."

## **6. The Immediate Impact of the Programme**

Taking part in a Youth at Risk programme marked a clear break with the past for all interviewees. For some it was simply led to the revelation that they "wanted to change;" for others it was "the beginning of the road to giving up" an addiction to alcohol or starting to make positive steps "in relation to my school work and home life."

Around half of the interviewees see the break in more absolute terms: "I loosened the control my mum had on my life... this was just the start for me and I wasn't going back to my old life I knew that for sure." Another moved out of the Foyer and "just cut off the people I was doing drink and drugs with."

For others, however, this break was less easy to achieve but, with the support of their committed partners, they managed to resist the "unbearable" pressures to return to their old, destructive lifestyles and begin the process of forging new ones.

## **7. Subsequent Impact of the Programme**

It is clear that all of the interviewees saw the Youth at Risk programme as the start of a process not the end. As one puts it, "You can only help people for so long. You have to make an effort yourself to change and stick to it."

For some this was straightforward: "My plan was to get back into education and I did." Another describes how "I wrote a plan for the next five and ten years and although I didn't stick to it 100% it did get me on the right track again," while, before the programme finished one interviewee was able to "go clean from drugs, get a stable job, find a new place to live and come off probation."

Others found it more of a struggle: “After the programme I felt like a stone thrown back into the ocean, but I think I needed that to see that I had to stand on my own two feet.” It took several years for another interviewee to conquer his alcohol addiction but he firmly maintains that the foundations for this success were laid on the Youth at Risk programme: it “teaches you to keep focussed, to believe in yourself.”

### **8. The Impact of the Programme Today**

The influence of Youth at Risk programmes is still powerfully present with the interviewees: “I use it everyday ... I tell people all the time about my Youth at Risk experience and how I then went on to become a youth worker.” One still uses the techniques learned with Youth at Risk to evaluate situations and risks in her life and, thirteen years after the programme, she continues to use the “conversation of consequences” with her two children. Another interviewee describes how she “still set myself goals and work on them and achieve them” while a third continues to use the tools learned through Youth at Risk to manage his anger.

Some report on the wholesale impact of the Youth at Risk programme: “It changed everything about me ... I’m not even 10% the person I used to be,” or “it made me the person I am today.” One interviewee traces his whole sense of self-respect and self-worth to the Youth at Risk programme while it played a “pivotal” role in the life of another. When asked about the impact of Youth at Risk, one interviewee said, “Loads, so much,” with another remarking that without Youth at Risk, “I would not have achieved a single thing that I have.”

More starkly, for one interviewee the impact of the programme could not have been greater: “Without Youth at Risk I don’t think I would have been around today to tell my story”

### **9. Where They Are Now**

Six of the thirteen interviewees report they are now happily married with families of their own. Six used the word “settled” to describe their current state, and seven describe their lives as “happy.” Almost all problematic relationships with parents have improved beyond recognition and several interviewees describe thriving jobs and careers. As one interviewee put it, “The Youth at Risk [programme] is the most beneficial thing I have ever done.”

*Jon Down, Youth at Risk, November 2011*