

Out of prison high on



Prison drug workers and those supporting ex-prisoners in the community have a tough job. At RAPt's recent reunion for graduates of their 12-step prison drug treatment programmes, the gratitude shone through. Their personal stories show the scale of their journeys – and the difference drug workers have made to their lives.

life

'I'm in a place I thought I'd never be.'

Having chased highs since he was a child, Colin thought 'once an addict, always an addict' until he tried the RAPt programme just to get parole.

I believe I was born an addict. I was very unruly as a child. Anything that took me out of myself, made me happy, excited, scared – I just wanted more.

At night I would walk around by myself. I didn't want to go home, I needed something more. This was my behaviour pattern from an early age. When I came across drugs, I was ready for it. As a 12-year-old I would sit smoking a quarter ounce of weed. I thought it was normal.

I was first out of my peer group to do stuff. My biggest fear was that I didn't want anyone to know I was frightened. I wasn't particularly tough, I would come off worse in a fight. I was the first of my friends to drive. I would go to parties, roll spliffs, have drinks.

I progressed from party drugs. But the drugs weren't about having a good time, they were about changing the way I felt. I just wanted to be someone else.

My head wasn't a nice place to be, I was always beating myself up. When I came across crack and heroin it was ideal. All the stuff that came along with that – prison, being held up at knifepoint – I was prepared to go through that. I didn't want to be Colin, just sitting there.

I did drugs from age 12 to 35. I saw prison sentences as an occupational hazard. The only time I didn't take drugs was if I was in prison and couldn't get my hands on any. If they were there, I'd take them.

Once I was doing a slightly longer sentence – four and a half years – and I saw a poster for the RAPt programme. I was interested as I wanted parole, so I could start using again.

But on the programme something happened to me. Someone said 'you never have to use again'. I was frightened; I hadn't thought about that. I thought I'd become like the *Spitting Image* puppet of John Major – everything grey.

RAPt made me think. I'd thought only about myself. I used to ask mum why she was crying when I was the one locked up.

Having stuff of my own felt nice. I thought I'd try it, and thought 'what's the worst thing that could happen to me?'

Today I'm in a place I didn't think I'd ever be. I'm now working with people who are still using and trying to stop. It's difficult at times. I still felt at the beginning that I had more in common with the clients than the workers. Now I've got ten clients, and I'm trusted.

'I believe I was born an addict. I was very unruly as a child. Anything that took me out of myself, made me happy, excited, scared - I just wanted more.'

'I had to do my recovery where I'd done my using'

Cathy used RAPt's Island Day Programme to give her the support to carry on her recovery outside prison.

I was thinking about where I come from and what was wrong with me. From a very young age I didn't know how to ask for help. I hadn't a clue how to live. I didn't know how to communicate with other people. I thought if I stayed quiet and in the background at home, no-one would notice me.

Outside home, I was off and running. I started drinking by the time I was 11. I was brought up in the country and would drink half or a pint of homemade wine before school in the morning. It fortified me. From 11 to 14 I took speed, acid and cannabis. I thought it was normal.

When I was drinking I would reach my tolerance level so would have to have more and change substances. I kept on like that, taking speed and alcohol and running away. I thought I was wonderful, that one-one else knew how to live. I thought I was a rebel... but I was a rebel with nowhere to go.

I tried to manage my life. I thought if I had the right label, the rest would build around me. I used to live in university towns and go to lectures so they'd think I was a student. It took me another 20 years of using before I found recovery, including 17 years of methadone use. I tried many ways to stop the chaos.

I had a proper job with a pension and I thought that would do it. But I look back on those times and it's so depressing. I went and detoxed as I'd got to the point where I couldn't pretend to do life anymore. While I did my six-week detox I left my son at home on his own at 16 to do his GCSEs.

When I got home it turned out there was a 12-step programme on my doorstep in East London. Before that, the best they could offer was methadone. I had to do my recovery where I'd done my using.

What I got from RAPt was time, care and patience. When I first went there I was so angry, I kicked against those workers. When they had relaxation, I sat in the middle of the floor and cried, 'why am I here in this horrible place?'

They cared for me, loved me - and gave me my step work to do. I survived.

When I graduated I spent a year volunteering at Tower Hamlets DAT. I tried to get aftercare on the agenda. I tried to do service user stuff, but I found it really disenchanting.

I did some training with RAPt - it was brilliant. When I started volunteering, I was in a place of hope. I started to take on board that I had hope inside. I started to take responsibility.

I did my step work but I felt education was for other people. Now I've started to see evidence of myself being successful in my own life. I've had a shift in belief.

Sharing the journey

RAPt graduates who ranged from 20 years to just 90 days 'clean' shared their life-changing experiences.

'I walked into The Bridges [RAPt's residential unit that helps ex-prisoners resettle in the community] with two pairs of jeans and two tops. Now I've got a job, money in my pocket and a life. The 12 steps is a simple programme for complicated people.'

'Without RAPt I would never have heard of 12 steps or recovery. I went to RAPt so I could get a tag on my ankle and get out. But after six weeks it dawned on me I was in recovery and needed the rest of the 12 steps. I went to The Bridges and they taught me something I didn't want to hear, which was the truth. Without RAPt I would have done what I've always done - my perception of reality was so far out the window. I've got a really good life now.'

'I just came out of prison two days ago. It seemed safest to go back to what I knew - conning, lying. But I was tired, I was broken, I couldn't do it anymore. I've learned to trust people. I can never put into words how grateful I am.'

'Last week I was a year clean. If that counsellor hadn't appeared at my door at Bullingdon I wouldn't be here. When I was put in prison after a year on the run I was at rockbottom. I'm now a caretaker in a school. I've lots of responsibility. I actually feel human now. I'm eternally grateful to RAPt. You've given addicts a chance to live life and that's worth more than anything.'

'I'll be 18 months clean next week and my life is now fantastic.'

'I went onto RAPt because my friend was on there and I wanted to support her. Acceptance is my route to life. I'm due for my parole in January - if I don't get it I'm not made to get it. My mum's back in my life. There's so much I've gained from this programme and so much I need to give back.'

'I am a recovering alcohol addict. This programme has given me choices and peace. I was locked up but I gained freedom in my mind even though I was in prison. I'm eight years into my recovery. Without Geraldine [programme manager at HMP Send] and the programme, I would be dead today. I love having choices now.'

Let's put our hands together for all the peer supporters throughout the country. Four of us from our landing got together and have been four years clean. RAPt was the gateway to my life. I live in Bournemouth now, five minutes from the beach.'

'I've been in prison for five years. RAPt gave me a licence to save myself from myself.'

'I was an addict for 26 years but I never had a problem... does that ring a bell? Even though it cost me my wife, children and business. RAPt gave me my life back and love - that's what we all give each other at RAPt.'

'I don't need your approval anymore because I approve of myself. I was a serial relapser. One thing RAPt facilitates is education - believe in yourself, it can happen for you.'

'Before I came to RAPt I was a walking corpse. I frightened people, I even frightened myself sometimes. I was sick of not doing anything with my life. Every time I shut a door it locked behind me.'

'I went to RAPt on my knees. I came out of prison a year ago. Now I love life. Thanks to you all for giving us a chance.'

'When I came into Send, I was pregnant. I have five children, but I couldn't stop using till I found RAPt.'

'I graduated yesterday so I'm still fresh. My drug use nearly got me thrown out of the country. The country where I was born didn't want me no more. We didn't become addicts in a day, so we're not going to change in a day. But I'm now four years clean.'

'I've been in prison most of my adult life. I came into Send and didn't want to be touched by anyone. I've still got 16 months to go in prison but I'm free now.'

'I got onto the programme because of a carat worker who doesn't work there anymore. I would love to have seen her to thank her. I was four and a half stone lighter when I went into prison and I just didn't know how to stop using. This programme saved my life.' **DDN**