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LIVING IT

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND JUSTICE

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MOVING ON FROM A VIOLENT CHILDHOOD

Kate* is a 28 year old who would like a career in youth justice. She was involved in offending between the ages of 14-27 and was first convicted at the age of 16.

* Not her real name.

I WAS GIVEN a two year community payback order in March 2013. Before this, my life was very unstable.

From as young as I can remember violence was just a part of growing up, a way of life. When you are brought up the way I was, you don't know any better.

As a little girl, the council close where we lived was quiet, until we got new downstairs neighbours who from their first night had the street in an uproar. I can remember constantly being woken up, lying in bed scared as I listened to the man smashing up his house and fighting with his wife. I remember always seeing her with big black eyes. To this day I've never seen anyone with eyes as bad as hers, and I've seen a lot of fights.

One of my earliest memories is of being chased by a group of older children as I walked home from school. Terrified, I ran home as fast as I could, where my Dad was waiting. I panted out what was happening and was relieved when he stood up, and marched me to the door. I thought he was going to sort it for me. I was wrong – he told me to stand up for myself or he'd batter me! Knowing from experience that a battering off my Dad was much worse than anything else, I ran out, kicking and punching as hard as I could as I went. I got knocked out, but my Dad's proud face was the first thing I saw when I came round. "That's how you take a doin' hen' he said, handing me a glass of his favourite brandy – my first taste of alcohol, and acceptance.

From that day on, I had an appetite for fighting – for the adrenalin, the buzz and the respect of the people I'd previously feared. I became popular, with older kids taking me under their wing. I started drinking with them and finally felt I belonged somewhere. Although I got caught by the police a lot, my dad's only reaction was anger that I'd brought the 'polis' to his door.

During this time, teachers must have been aware of what was going on with me, but I never had any support. I think they were glad to get me out of their classrooms.

I spent the next ten years in a cycle of offending and getting caught. It finally came to an end when I was arrested and ended up getting a supervision order, with which I had no choice but to comply, or risk losing my wee boy.

Since then, I've turned my life around. I can't believe how much things have changed in the last 19 months. Two years ago I'd never have imagined being in the place I am today. I now have dreams and goals and not only that, I have people who believe in me. For the first time in my life, people see me as a person. Not an ex-offender, not a case, but as a young woman with my full life ahead of me.

It hasn't been easy though, and I'm still coming to terms with my violent childhood. I can't help but wonder how things would have turned out if someone had taken the time to reach out to me, and show me other options besides fighting, drinking and belonging. When you haven't been brought up with boundaries, or adults setting good examples, then you don't think about the consequences. Your main worry is the doing you'll get off your parents if you get caught. In all the years I was offending, I never really gave a thought to the consequences of my actions, or the people I might have been affecting.

I want my little boy to have the chances I never had. To grow up with a moral code, knowing what is right and what is wrong. I am excited for my future although I'm not sure what it holds yet. I know that without criminal justice I would never have found myself, and am so grateful to the judge who sentenced me, for giving me the chance to start again. I just wish I'd known how to access this help sooner.

UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 2

6 May 2011 to 5 May 2012

UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 3

6 May 2012 to 5 May 2013

By Richard Garside, Arianna Silvestri
and Helen Mills

UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 1

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