

Tracey's Speech to the OPFS Annual Seminar 2011

I'm not a public speaker so I'm going to read you a story. Is everyone sitting comfortably?

Good afternoon. My name is Tracey and I am a lone parent from Glasgow. I've come here today to tell you a little about the journey I have taken over the last year.

At the end of September 2010 I was introduced to Elaine Thackarey of OPFS by one of the School Gates Team. At the time of our introduction I had been claiming Incapacity Benefit for a little over five years. Life was looking rather bleak because I was stuck in a rut. My lack of employment and financial circumstances had become so bad that my son and I were both being affected mentally as well as physically.

The whole time we struggled I was very aware that certain people thought I was living within the benefit system through choice. As if living in such a fashion was easier! Nothing could have been further from the truth.

By the time I met Elaine I was in such a bad place mentally that I was attending sessions with a Community Psychiatric Nurse. Having been isolated from society due to my illness I had convinced myself that I was worthless, unemployable and my son would be better off having someone else care for him. Elaine explained that OPFS have staff who would give me advice about benefits and debt issues. I left that meeting rather stunned because I had finally found someone who empathised with my situation.

OPFS took their time to get to know me. They helped me build my confidence by enrolling me on courses, the most beneficial being the WIN project, which aims to help those with mental health issues prepare for work. The Beautiful Changes course helped me reintroduce myself back into social situations whilst teaching me beauty treatments alongside other lone parents. From there I was given another gentle nudge and enrolled myself in Archiving Awareness Sessions within The Glasgow Womens Library and later became a volunteer with them for a short period of time.

As I became job-ready I was invited to the Hubs. The Hubs are job clubs specifically designed for Lone Parents that include child care. With help, support and advice I created my C.V. and began to approach job hunting in a proactive way. I also gained advice about other organisations such as G Heat who are helping me with the installation of central heating and insulation within my flat.

Thanks to the tireless devotion of OPFS and the other associated organisations I became confident enough to start new and exciting chapters in my life. My son Aarron and I were treated to a day trip to Blairvadoch and enjoyed our time there so much that Aarron wrote and published a newspaper article about it. Together we were involved with the Herald and the Big Issue putting forward our opinions on the changes to the welfare reform and child care issues. We helped STV raise money to help eradicate child poverty in Scotland by allowing ourselves to be filmed for a documentary. We then moved onto being photographed for an art exhibition to help raise awareness of issues being highlighted by Save the Children.

After my 15 minutes of fame I continued to job search and registered myself for an ECDL course at the local college. I was aware that routine was important and felt the best way to utilize my skills

was to become a volunteer for OPFS. I helped around the office, supported the staff and engaged with the clients through conversation at the Hubs.

It feels good to tell you that two weeks ago I started a new job as a receptionist for a recycling company. General support from the GRA aftercare initiative is readily available and I have been linked to advisers who may be able to help me purchase a new laptop which would allow me to continue my studies and spend more time with Aarron.

Life is good now. The changes in my life have had a profound effect on my son. He leaves for school with his head held high – a striking change from the young carer that he used to be. His attendance has improved to 100%, he has improved academically and socialises with ease now. Our time together is of a higher quality. We spend hours chatting about our plans for the future. We go on day trips to the Science Centre, the Transport Museum and most recently (at Aarron's request) the A.C.D.C. Exhibition at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery. We're both looking forward to Christmas. I am now in the position where I can pay for school trips and Aarron has already got his thinking hat on in regards to where his birthday party will be held next year.

I myself feel more relaxed, I feel like a Mum. I no longer sit and wait for light at the end of the tunnel, I switch it on myself. I'm aware of what I want in life and fully intend to live it to the max. I've rekindled friendships and reconnected with family members. I've even been on a night out!

I would like to extend my thanks to all of the organisations who have supported and encouraged me during my journey – specifically Elaine. I fully intend to continue volunteering for OPFS in the hope that I will be able to help contribute to the wellbeing of other lone parents and their children. To help others like me find their true paths in life, to realise their full potential and to crash through the barriers we face as responsible adults.