

‘HE’S A LOSER AND WILL NEVER DO ANY GOOD’

KEVAN’S RECOVERY STORY

After 25 years of problem drinking and eight years in and out of psychiatric hospitals, Kevan Martin developed NERAF (Northern Engagement into Recovery from Addiction), which eventually had nearly 100 staff and volunteers.

1. Early drinking days

I remember my ninth birthday when I was given a couple of glasses of homemade wine to drink. I loved the feeling, especially when I fell into the coal bucket and everyone laughed at me. Little did I know then, I would later misuse alcohol for over 25 years.

In my early teens, Dad would go to the pub every night after work and more often than not bring his friends and bottles of beer home after closing time. I went downstairs one night and was shocked to see my mathematics teacher drinking with Dad. I thought, ‘Is this what men are supposed to do after a day at work?’ It rekindled memories of my ninth birthday, so after the guests had left and Dad had gone to bed, I snuck downstairs to drink what they had left.

Another regular visitor had his own building company and when I was 14 years old, he gave me a job. I worked after school, and on Saturdays and school holidays. I spent the £3 I was paid after each shift on alcohol. How I managed to get served in the off-licence I don’t know, but I would drink my stash in quiet places before going home and then go straight to bed without my ‘Mam’ (Mum) seeing me.

The person who gave me the job was also my judo coach. After training, the lads took me to the pub and my fascination with alcohol grew stronger. These visits made me feel like a man, and as the buzz of a pub excited me much more than drinking in solitude, I continued testing my luck. I usually got served.

As I was offered an apprenticeship in the building trade, I only sat (and passed) two of the five O levels I had studied. Before I started college, I was given mundane, character-building jobs on the building site.

One day, I was told to work in a trench along with a digger driver who dug out foundations. I questioned the set-up, because the driver was a one-eyed Lithuanian bloke who had to have two bottles of Guinness before he started work! They wanted me to go into a ten-foot deep trench with him pointing a big JCB bucket at me after he had been drinking! I was told, ‘Kev, you are safe as long as he has had his bottles, but don’t ever get in the trench if he hasn’t!’

The job also provided me with another opportunity to drink, as I would go to the pub with the digger driver as soon as we had finished our shift. I felt like I was being a normal bloke.

When I was seventeen, I had two other passions in life—cross country running and judo. However, I'd go to the pub after these activities and the lads would buy my drinks, as I was only on an apprenticeship wage of £21 a week. I gave my Mam £5 for my board and lodgings.

I achieved my black belt 1st Dan when I was eighteen and was invited to train with the regional squad, which meant weekends away at various Royal Marine and Air Force bases. My boss was a British squad member and he always encouraged me with my judo, but more importantly he bought my beer as most training weekends finished with a drinking session.

I was trained and encouraged by British internationals and national coaches who inspired in me the belief that I had potential. I started to think about a career in sport and set out to achieve my ambition.

My days of going to the pub straight after work stopped, because I would go for a run or visit the gym. However, I now went to the pub after completing a two-hour judo session. As I wanted a career in sport, I applied to join the Royal Marines with a view to becoming a physical training instructor.

However, tragedy struck in the form of a training accident, which effectively ended my running, judo and prospects of joining the Marines. My right knee was shattered and this injury led to many operations over the years. I was devastated and didn't know which way to turn, although I knew that I would have to go back to the building trade after convalescing. I was soon drinking again.

I met my childhood sweetheart when I was thirteen and we had always stuck together. We married when I was 21 and bought a house. We were both working and things seemed to be going well. I wasn't going to the pub after work anymore, as we had Saturday nights out together, but I was missing the regular visits.

Six months into our marriage, Ann declared that we couldn't afford to go out any more because of the bills we had to pay. I questioned this belief, since we were both making good money and had no debt. She kept going on about how her parents lived and I said, 'I don't want us to be like your parents, this is us.'

I ended up going out alone, returning to a barrage of questions and two or three days of silence. This situation continued for several months, so in the end I stopped going out. We sat in the house, night after night, week after week. It began to really annoy me because I was missing the buzz of the pub... or was I just missing alcohol?

Winter came and I couldn't work Saturdays because the site was shut down. Ann was at work and I couldn't go for a run, so I was totally bored. I started to go to the local off-licence as soon as she had gone to work and buy a stash to drink before she returned. It must have been that I wanted alcohol, not the buzz of the pub!

I then started to buy a quart bottle of vodka and drink it before going home during the week, which led to countless arguments and my inevitable promise, 'I won't do it again.' I was unhappy that my life had to be in line with her parents' wishes (who were teetotal) and I resented this. I didn't want our marriage to be slippers, knitting and cocoa.

Things got too much one Saturday, so I went out... and didn't return for three days. I returned home to the usual questions and five days of silence, during which time I assured Ann that I would never do it again. Two weeks later, I did it again and returned to an empty house. I found Ann at her parents' house. She came back home with me, but three weeks later I did it again. Things went on like this for almost a year.

Ann eventually told me she wanted a divorce, to which I agreed because by then I knew that I loved the buzz of the pub and alcohol more than life with her. The divorce went ahead, as did the sale of the house. Ann returned to her parents' house and I went to live with my Mam, with a cheque for £3,000 in my pocket.

2. Drinking, touring and settling down

Reflecting back with the knowledge I have now, it is clear that I had a serious problem with alcohol at that time. So, having three grand in my pocket was probably the worst thing that could have happened to me. However, what was to happen was inevitable anyway. I was upset about the breakdown of my marriage, but only felt it when I went home after a night on the drink. My life became a ritual of work, home for a bath and bite to eat, then on to a night in the pub (and at weekends, clubs too). I 'partied' hard, again and again. On reflection, I wasn't going out to have a drink or socialise, but to get drunk, because I loved the feeling.

This pattern continued for six months or so, but then it began to have adverse effects. I became the 'three-day-a-week man' at work because I never got up in time on Mondays and Fridays. On the other days, I joined the digger driver by having a couple of bottles before I started. I became a liability on the site and to my workmates. Eventually, I was sacked. I got another job, then another, and then another—each time the same thing happened.

One day, my foreman introduced me to someone he thought I needed to see. Colin asked me how often I drank alcohol and when I answered he told me I was living the lifestyle of an alcoholic. I remember asking, 'What is an alcoholic?' I wasn't 25 years old, so how could I be an alcoholic? He explained and I replied, 'I

am just doing what my Dad did after a hard day at work, which I am entitled to do.' I stood up seething...and headed to the pub.

I had a go at the foreman the next morning and I remember his reply:

'Son, you are a young and lovely bloke, but alcohol is ruling your life. I'm an alcoholic and I think you are heading that way. I wouldn't want that for you.'

I answered, 'Don't call me an alcoholic and stick your job up your arse', and stormed off. I was in the pub by opening time.

I now developed a new lifestyle. I didn't get up for work anymore, I just went straight to the pub. I was the first in every day and when it closed I would take a few bottles home to keep me going until the pub opened again in the evening. My behaviour was starting to annoy my Mam and sister, who also lived at home.

I spoke to the barmaid regularly and we confided in each other a lot. Julie was very unhappy in her marriage and we soon started to see each other. Instead of going home, I went to her place with a few bottles. Eventually, her husband found out about us and she came to live with me. Mam wasn't too happy about this state of affairs, as her marriage had ended because of my Dad having an affair, but she tolerated us in the house.

Collectively, Julie and I had about £2,000, but we partied it away in pubs and clubs over the next few months. When the money ran out, I started to feel ill, as I couldn't afford to drink, but I still didn't associate these feelings with alcohol. My Mam, rightly so, eventually got to the end of her tether and kicked us both out. We spent nights in bed and breakfasts, getting up early so that we didn't have to pay the bill.

Our salvation came to town in the form of a circus that was recruiting staff. We were hired and given a caravan, which was our home for the next three years whilst we toured the UK and Europe. We started by putting up posters advertising the circus. Julie used to calm herself with a drink, but I needed more than one. I had a pint whenever I requested pub staff to display a poster, and insisted on another in exchange for any free tickets that were requested.

Part of our job was dismantling the circus in one town, before rebuilding it in the next. I had always considered the building trade to be hard working, but this job showed me what hard work was really about. After hammering 280 eight-foot stakes into the ground for the tent, all the seating had to be installed. This took hours. However, I loved the hard work and the touring.

We went on a tour of Europe and I was pissed from the minute we got there, as I had bought litres of blue label vodka in duty free. I'd never tried blue label vodka before, but sank half a bottle on the ferry before we disembarked in Holland. I had to drive a 60-foot load, but couldn't even get into the truck, let alone drive it.

There was a big drinking culture amongst the lads, but not the performers other than the strongman Ivor, who couldn't go into the ring without being pissed. His act involved a metal plate being placed on his chest and one of the tent crew swinging a sledgehammer onto it with real force seven times. One evening, Ivor miscounted and started to get up after six strikes, but the seventh was on its way. Needless to say, he didn't finish his act.

After the tour ended, Julie declared that she didn't want that life anymore and we moved in with her parents in the North East. I wasn't aware that they were strict Christians and teetotal. I saw a big change in Julie, as her liking for a drink and a good time stopped. However, I couldn't stop drinking and this led to much confrontation with her family.

Julie fell pregnant, we found our own home, and I got a job back on a building site. By now, Julie was saying that I drank too much. However, after my beautiful daughter Sarah was born, making me the happiest man in the world, I didn't want to go the pub anymore as I doted on her. I also recognised Julie's concern and wanting to keep things sweet, I just had a few cans at weekends.

I wanted out of the building trade. As I had always cared about animals, I applied for and got a job as an Animal Care Auxiliary. I did 14-hour night shifts, starting at 18.00, making sure the animals were comfortable after their operations and assisting the vet when emergency cases came in. I loved the job and, more importantly, I was getting home in time to see Sarah wake and spend a couple of hours with her before going to bed.

3. Descent into hell

Nine months into the job, I was taken home ill at 03.00... to find another bloke on my side of the bed. There I was, a hard-working bloke and doting father, finding his six-months pregnant wife screwing another bloke in the next room to 18-month old Sarah. I was devastated and when I had manually removed the visitor, I asked Julie, 'Why?' She couldn't answer, or look me in the face.

The following days were very strained. I kept going to work, but when I was at home we were jostling to look after Sarah because I didn't want Julie near her. One morning after I had finished my last shift of a stint, I had an overwhelming need to drink. I returned home drunk, late in the afternoon. A blazing argument erupted.

I went to the pub the next day and got drunk again. Another argument erupted. When I returned home in the same state a couple of days later, Julie handed Sarah to me and said:

‘Take a long last look at your daughter, because this is the last time you will ever see her.’

I couldn’t comprehend what she was saying until, a few minutes later, she took Sarah off my knee and left the house. I went upstairs to find that all of their clothing had gone. I kept trying to contact Julie, but her parents always said, ‘She isn’t here.’ It wasn’t Julie that I wanted to see; it was Sarah. I returned home from work one day and found that I now only possessed a chair, TV, cooker and ‘that bed’—everything else had gone.

I approached a solicitor about seeing Julie and proceedings were lodged, but Julie didn’t attend the first three hearings because of ‘illness’. I asked the Crown/Family court for access to our second child as well, but Julie announced that the second child wasn’t mine. It felt like a bullet had gone through my heart.

A date was arranged for me to see Sarah, but Julie never turned up with her, so it was back to court where she was given the same directive. She did turn up this time—Sarah was three by then—and this made my day. I thought I would see Sarah every week from then on, but it didn’t happen that way.

At this point in my life, I pressed my ‘self-destruct button’. I was hurting deeply and was miles away from my hometown. I considered returning home, but remembered that my family didn’t want me anyways, and there was always the chance that Julie would allow me to see Sarah.

Alcohol really did become my best friend then; it was my means of coping and sleeping. Nothing else mattered and I ended up losing my job again, as I was regularly caught drinking at work. I didn’t drink in pubs, as I didn’t want to socialise, but bought alcohol from supermarkets and off-licences. I was drinking myself into oblivion and I didn’t realise how rapidly I was going downhill... but a friend did.

Terry used to call in to see me now and again. One night, he brought around his friend Ian, who was a CPN (Community Psychiatric Nurse). We talked and I broke down and cried my heart out. Within two hours, I was in a psychiatric hospital, where I was to stay for three months.

4. ‘Treatment’

I was informed that I had experienced a mental breakdown due to all the pressures I had been experiencing over losing Sarah. No one mentioned to me that I had an alcohol problem, although I was detoxed off alcohol without actually being told what was happening. I remember early on trying to knock the ash off the end of a

cigarette, but couldn't because I was so sedated by the diazepam (Valium) I was prescribed for the detox.¹ I was also diagnosed as being depressed and prescribed antidepressants.

In my first days in the hospital, I was really worried about meeting one of the 'crazies' walking around with an axe, which goes to show how little I knew about mental health problems. I spent the first few days hidden in my room, but once I met my fellow patients I realised how wrong my preconceptions were. I met people from all walks of life, including people with high-powered jobs, and made some good friends. I also gained a good insight into various mental health conditions.

I returned home with my prescription of antidepressants and the first thing I did was go out and buy alcohol. I kept my outpatient appointments for a few months, but then thought, 'What's the point, I'm okay now?' I got letter after letter offering more appointments, but threw them all in the bin along with my empty cans and bottles.

One morning, Ian turned up for a chat and when I told him all that had happened, he told me that I needed another detox. I asked him what one of them was, and he explained it to me! I was now 31 years old, but still in denial about the severity of my alcohol problem, just as I had been those years before when I told Colin, 'I haven't got a drink problem.'

My life then became one endless stream of admissions into hospital for a detox over a period of eight years. Yes, eight years! Each time, I'd leave hospital for an environment where nothing had changed, at least in a positive manner. I would continue my isolated existence, drinking heavily and experiencing all the resulting mood swings, until I had finally had enough, at which time I would go to see my GP again. I would be diagnosed as depressed and sent back to the hospital. Reflecting back now, anyone would have been depressed living the life I was living!

I will never forget the feelings I had going through each detox, as it was always the same, particularly the first two weeks. Sleeplessness, sweating, restlessness, acidity, vomiting and the pain of Thiamine injections²—boy, are they stingers!

¹ Withdrawal from long-term, heavy drinking can result in a withdrawal syndrome which can be life-threatening. Seizures, delirium tremens (DTs) and Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome can all complicate alcohol withdrawal. Agitation, anxiety, depressed mood and insomnia are common symptoms during withdrawal. Diazepam (Valium), which has similar mechanisms of action in the brain to alcohol, is given to minimise these withdrawal symptoms.

² Thiamine is used to treat or prevent a vitamin B1 deficiency. People with serious alcohol problems are at high risk for being deficient in vitamin B1, which is known to put the person at an increased risk for Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome, cerebellar degeneration, and cardiovascular dysfunction.

However, by the third week, I started to eat more and wasn't as edgy, although I still felt as if I was walking on eggshells to some extent, as my heart would begin to beat rapidly after any loud or sudden noise. Eventually, I would feel well again. I'd interact with my fellow patients—the only people I really trusted—and lead a life very different to that of my isolated existence in the outside world.

Whenever I left hospital, I felt like the magic carpet had been pulled out from underneath my feet. I realised that I was becoming institutionalised. No one talked about my alcohol problem during this time.

At one stage, the council moved me out of my home and put me in a block of flats, which I couldn't handle. It was full of young people, who were too noisy and busy, and there was lots of criminal activity. I felt very vulnerable. I ended up homeless for four months.

Although I sometimes slept in a hostel, I'd feel vulnerable there, and I hated being badgered for money by other people. Sometimes, I would sit in an A & E department to keep warm before a night in a telephone box, bus shelter or car in a car yard. Life was the pits, and the only friend I had in the outside world was alcohol.

After about three years of going in and out of hospital, I started to exhibit symptoms of alcohol-induced psychosis. I became paranoid, spending one day on buses trying to escape people who were after me. I experienced hallucinations, one common one being a magician who would pop up in a corner of a room. Another time, I tried to charge a person £5 for standing across a crack in a paving stone!

I really started to feel unwell within myself after five years of going in and out of the psychiatric hospital. I met Ian again and told him that I wanted to end my life—this sort of life was too much. He arranged for me to be hospitalised again, but this time I was there for nine months. I was back to seeing my old friends. I also started to get back into exercise again, using the gym and going for long runs. The hospital tried various medications to stabilise my mood and my psychotic episodes stopped occurring.

During this visit, I finally accepted I had a drink problem and needed to do something about it. I talked the matter over with my family and hospital staff, and the latter arranged for me to see a drug and alcohol counsellor. He told me that I had an alcohol problem and needed to do something about it! When I asked him how to stop drinking, he suggested that I take a walk or a hot bath when I had the urge to drink. Hospital staff also started telling me that I needed to sort my drink problem, because I couldn't keep coming there.

I was kept in hospital so long this time because they were trying to find me suitable accommodation. However, as soon as I was discharged into a flat, the first thing I did was buy alcohol and before long I needed another detox. This time I was sent to a residential rehab. I was told that rehab would involve lots of

alcohol education, teach me how to look after myself (including living life without drinking), and involve meaningful activities that would keep me busy.

It was nothing like that. Eight of us stayed in a house that was more like a holiday camp. The only things that we HAD to do were to complete a house chore by 10am each day, and attend one house meeting and two one-to-one sessions (with our appointed support worker) each week. The rest of the week was ours to do what we wished. My support worker was a 22-year old who wanted to be a real social worker one day. He had no experience of what I was dealing with, so how could he guide me through my challenges?

I sat in front of the telly all day or went out for a walk to ease the boredom. The lasses in the rehab would go out together shopping in the charity shops. The staff left at 5pm and were never there at weekends, unless we called them out. There was lots of drinking and weed smoking when the staff weren't there.

I managed to keep away from these activities for four months, before eventually starting to drink (but not smoke weed). People were being kicked out all of the time when they were caught out by random breathalysers and urine testing. They were coming in and going out so fast it was like living in a sausage factory. Whenever I drank, I only ever had a maximum of four cans, just in case I was tested the following morning. Restricting myself in this way was killing me, because I always wanted more.

After six months, my social worker asked if I wanted to stay for a further six months and I said, 'No!' Rehab wasn't for me, because it hadn't been structured or challenging. I went back to my flat to sort things out myself.

Eventually, I went three months without drinking and then relapsed. Six months, then I relapsed. This pattern continued for maybe three years. I was sick and tired of starting to drink again after stopping, time and time again.

I started to wake up thinking, 'I don't want to live like this anymore. I would rather be dead.' I voiced my concerns to my psychiatrist, almost begging, 'Is there anything you could give me that would stop me being able to drink?' I'm a very black or white, yes or no person, and I needed to be put in that sort of situation with alcohol. He suggested that I try Antabuse³ and I decided this was my way forward.

³ Antabuse (Disulfiram) is a pharmacological treatment for people with severe drinking problems. The drug works by inhibiting the enzyme acetaldehyde dehydrogenase, which can result in an immediate negative, often severe, reaction if the person drinks alcohol, due to an increased concentration of acetaldehyde in their body. See [Wikipedia](#) for more information.

A drastic measure I know, as I had literally begged for a drug that could kill me if I used my best friend. However, on the other side of the coin, if I continued to use my best friend it was going to kill me anyways. I had tried so many times to stop drinking and failed miserably. Each time it happened I was losing motivation to try again.

I knew that Antabuse wasn't the answer in isolation, and I knew that only I could sort out the rest of the shit in my life, but I thought it would give me the freedom to do just that. I assumed that I wouldn't wake up thinking about my first drink and if I did, I wouldn't be able to drink anyway—unless I wanted to die! Mind you, it was easy thinking in this way in the safety of a hospital, but in reality, things proved to be a lot more complicated when I returned home.

5. Life with Antabuse

I will never forget how I felt when I took my first Antabuse tablet. I was petrified that the alcohol hadn't completely left my body, despite the fact that 56 hours had elapsed since my last drink. When I swallowed the tablet, the only thing on my mind was, 'Will I die?'

The feelings I had were so alien to me and I didn't like them. In the past, it had all been down to my personal choice whether I drank alcohol again. I'd go months without alcohol before kidding myself, 'I will be able to have a couple,' which would lead to the inevitable full-blown relapse. The opportunity to choose was a comfort zone.

I now felt that by taking Antabuse, I had limited my freedom of choice and taken away my comfort zone, because I knew that if the cravings got bad, I wouldn't be able to have a drink. Believe me, the cravings were far more intense and more frequent after I started Antabuse than I had ever previously experienced. I tried to calm them down by eating lots of sweets and chocolate, and drinking sweet drinks. I couldn't sleep, as I was so restless, but then often fell to sleep just as I would normally be getting out of bed.

By lunchtime, I would be out of bed and the 'What am I going to do today?' syndrome would set in. I didn't want to watch Crown Court, Farming Outlook, or any of the other crap that was on daytime television. I felt agitated and couldn't concentrate on anything.

I remember when attending the Job Centre one day to sign on as unemployed, I was told that one of the Advisors wanted to talk with me and I was to wait to see him. I didn't like the environment I was in, as I felt very uncomfortable with so many people milling around me and with the noise of their conversation. Eventually, I was interviewed and allowed to leave, but by then I was shaking and sweating. I spent hours

every day walking just to tire myself out, but I could never remember where I had been. It was all a timeless blur that led to an inevitable sleepless night.

I would go to bed physically tired, but as soon as my head hit the pillow thoughts of my best friend (alcohol) crept into my mind and I knew that I would get a good night's sleep if I drank it. I tried depriving myself of sleep for 48 hours, and when that didn't work, for 72 hours, but that led to the same outcome. Yes, I got to sleep for a few hours eventually, but it was a very disturbed sleep and I would wake thinking, 'I need my best mate.'

The first thing I did after getting out of bed was take my Antabuse and anti-depressant, because that was my mind-game of wanting to drink dealt with for the day, until I woke up the following morning after another night of restless sleep. I couldn't understand what was happening. I knew that I couldn't be with my friend anyways, so why wasn't my brain accepting it?

I never was, and still aren't, a 'Go to see the doctor' kind-of-person, believing you should only see them if you are very unwell. However, I went to see my GP because I couldn't get a good night's sleep and was experiencing so much agitation. I was prescribed a course of sleeping tablets for a week to, 'Get me into a pattern.' I headed to bed early after taking my Zopiclone.⁴ I felt so much better for having had a restful night of sleep and looked forward to the same sleep the following night.

However, this wasn't to be. I took the tablet but could not sleep, and ended up thinking of my best friend again. I managed to get a few hours of sleep, but awoke feeling dry-mouthed, lethargic and like I had a hangover. I decided not to take any more sleeping tablets.

This disrupted sleep pattern continued for six months and really concerned me. One Sunday evening, when I was out trying to tire myself out, I walked past a church. I believe in God, but I am not a religious or spiritual person by any means. However, I felt this overwhelming urge to turn back and enter the church. I sat at the back of the church watching the congregation sing and started to feel comfortable, relaxed and at ease.

I must have fallen asleep, as I didn't realise that people had left until the Vicar woke me. I apologised for being asleep. He sat down and we talked for perhaps an hour, during which time I poured my heart out and cried like I have never cried before. I told him everything about myself and what I was experiencing.

⁴ Zopiclone (Imovane) is a non-benzodiazepine drug used to treat insomnia. Tolerance can develop rapidly to the drug and withdrawal effects can be severe after withdrawal. The drug has strong addictive potential.

I don't know if the Vicar was a recovering alcoholic or not, but his words put things into a totally different perspective for me, which made my feelings easier to deal and live with. He explained to me that part of his job was not only to bury the dead, but also to help distraught families deal with their loss. He tries to help them come to terms with the fact that they will not see their loved one again, but have to move on from the loss regardless of still wanting to be with that person. I thanked the Vicar and left.

On my way home, I reflected on what had been said, and it began to dawn on me that I was going through some kind of mourning process. I was missing my best mate, so bloody much it actually hurt. However, I knew that I was better off without my best friend, even though 'he' was still alive!

After this conversation, I began to look at things differently. I considered the detrimental effects my best friend had brought to my life—divorce, job losses galore, homelessness, couldn't see my daughter, family rejection, loss of dignity and self-purpose, etc, etc. The list was endless. I then had the stark realisation that I had allowed alcohol to do all of this? Or had I? I was an addict, wasn't I?

Could I have prevented all of this? Yes, simply by not allowing alcohol to dictate my lifestyle many years earlier. I had grown up thinking that drinking alcohol was a normal part of life and an entitlement after a day at work. I hadn't seen alcohol as a drug.

I initially thought it was a grown-up's pop that made you feel giddy. When I tried it as a nine-year-old and fell in a coal bucket, I liked the feeling of giddiness, but also the feeling of popularity because they all laughed when it happened. I grew up as a miserable kid—for reasons I care not to mention because all that is resolved now—and was always looking for an escape from that situation. I hated school because I wasn't interested in the subjects, other than pottery and P.E.

Knowing what I know now, I realise that I'm an addict, because no matter what I do and enjoy, I always want more. I loved running cross-country when I was 11, because it brought me an escape from my misery and gave me a buzz. Judo came along and again I was addicted, because it was another escape. I didn't realise then that I was always trying to escape.

I also always had to be the best, so I would be popular with other people, especially my Dad. It was the same when I started working on the building sites at 14. I didn't want to do it one night a week, I had to do it all week. Anything I enjoyed I couldn't get enough of, and the same thing happened with alcohol.

On reflection, I have been a sportaholic, workaholic, alcoholic, and now I'm back to being a workaholic. Does this mean that I have a disease, because I have always done things to the maximum? When I stopped

running and doing judo because of a knee injury, I felt the same way as when I stopped drinking. I missed it all so much. However, dealing with not being able to run or do judo was relatively easy to live with, because a shattered kneecap dictated the terms.

Doing without alcohol was totally different. It was a chemical addiction, rather than physical addiction, and whilst I thought it had been my best friend for so many years, I was now realising it had in fact been my worst enemy during this time and had nearly killed me. As far as I can see, all of my addictions have been down to how I lived my life. I was not only responsible for my addiction, but also for overcoming it and getting better.

6. Moving on

I had not been drinking for nine months, and was thinking clearer and coping with things easier. I was even developing a hatred towards my best friend. I would walk past a pub and hate the smell of alcohol. I wanted it to be banned!

However, life being life, the unexpected always happens and I nearly tripped up following a knock-back from the DSS, who rejected an application I had put in for money to furnish a flat that I had found. My immediate response was:

‘Fuck it, I’m trying my best to move on, but it’s just barrier after barrier. I might as well be back on the drink.’

Maybe this rejection caught me at the wrong moment, but I felt gutted and as a result stopped taking Antabuse.

The beauty of Antabuse is that it takes up to 11 days to clear out of your system, so you can’t just start drinking alcohol straight away. Within two days, I had given my head a shake, come to my senses, and was back on the Antabuse. I moved into the flat with no furniture, but then found out about a Charity that gave me the basics I needed. This flat would later play a significant part in my life, but more about that later.

I felt so alone. I was missing Sarah badly and my family too. The only people I knew were people I had been in treatment with and they were drinking again. I contacted all my family and told them how well I was doing—almost a year without a drink—but sensed that they didn’t believe me, as they had heard it all before time and time again.

However, with my new thinking, and knowing that I hadn’t buckled, I felt more confident. I also felt better about myself. I was healthy and had put on two stone in weight. Although sleeping was still a problem, I had

the positive of a year's sobriety. However, despite all these positives, I felt that I needed more support... the support of others in the same boat as me.

I started to attend AA meetings, but I knew after the first one that this wasn't what I was looking for. However, I stuck with it and one evening I 'shared' my story and told them that I was on Antabuse. I was rebuked and told that I wasn't facing up to my problem, amongst other things. I never went back.

What I was looking for was a service that would help me to address my social issues such as housing, employment etc, but I couldn't find it. I knew that I had to get my arse off the sofa and keep as busy as I always had been in the past.

I started to attend a Community Centre that had a gym, and I was soon working out every day. It was like going back to my roots and it also helped my sleeping, as I wasn't closing my eyes thinking about the past. My thoughts were more positive, about getting back into the gym the following day and my whole future. Life wasn't just life anymore. I'd been through a bad existence for many years, but life now felt valuable again.

I had a lot of 'what ifs' running through my mind at this time. For example, 'what if' my kneecap hadn't been shattered and I had gone into the Royal Marines, as I had wanted? I could have been shot and killed in Northern Ireland or the Falklands.'

'What if' my marriage to Ann had worked out? I would have been unhappy living the life she wanted.'

'What if I never see Sarah again? 'I will,' I told myself.

'What if I hadn't turned into an alcoholic?' I wouldn't have had the fun I had experienced along the way. Everything seemed different because I was looking at things in a different and a positive manner, rather than thinking, 'Why me?'

Yes, I still had things to deal with, but I felt more able to do so. My thinking was much clearer and I was able to rationalise things much better. I was also really loving the buzz of exercising, even though I couldn't do what I used to be able to do.

I now lived five minutes from the sea and would spend a good deal of time walking. I watched the waves for hours, sending my thoughts and feelings out with them. Every wave that came back in brought me reassurance that things would be good. I realised that the best things in life are free of charge. You couldn't beat the peace and tranquillity I got by watching the sea and listening to the noise of the waves.

One evening, my sister called to tell me that Mam had been run over by a vehicle and was in Intensive Care at a hospital 250 miles away. I rang the hospital and was told that I should go immediately, as Mam was in a critical condition. I was at Newcastle Central station within an hour ready to board the train, shaking and really wanting a drink to help me through the situation. I couldn't have a drink.

I arrived at the hospital in the early hours and saw my Mam's horrific state. She was in a coma and I stayed by her bedside for 30 hours, before being offered a room in the doctors' quarters in which I could sleep. In the interim, my sister arrived and I could see the relief on her face when she saw that I was sober.

I stayed for three weeks and my Mam made a recovery against all the odds. I felt so proud that I had been there for her when she needed her son the most. It also brought our family back together again, as they didn't see me as a piss-head anymore. There was no way that I would risk losing these newfound feelings.

I went to College for a couple of years and qualified as a Health and Fitness Instructor. I achieved nationally-recognised Diplomas in Diet and Nutrition, Anatomy and Psychology, and Sports Psychology. I sailed through these three courses because I was interested in the subjects.

I also became involved with a drug and alcohol user forum run by my local Drug Action Team (DAT). I was then involved at a regional level and elected vice-chair.

Our National Treatment Agency (NTA) regional manager attended a meeting and heard me (and our treasurer) banging on about the views of people who were addicted to alcohol. We were both summoned to see our area NTA manager a few days later, to be told that we weren't allowed to attend any future meetings as they were focused on drugs, not alcohol!

I couldn't believe it, but me being me, I thought, 'If it's good enough for drugs, then it's good enough for alcohol.' However, there was nowhere we could take our concerns, as alcohol was very much on the back-burner then, with little government investment in treatment for drinking problems.

I finished at college and felt at a loss as to what to do. The only option I had was to go back to the building trade, and I didn't want to do that. I also stopped taking Antabuse by mutual agreement with my doctor. I had been on the drug for two years and was asked at each six-monthly review whether I wanted to stop using it. I had always replied, 'Not yet,' but this time I felt confident enough to stop, as my life had improved so much. I was exercising, eating healthily, and my sleep pattern was slowly returning.

Throughout my journey on Antabuse, my doctor had been amazing, as she had an active interest in addiction. (I would later often return to speak with junior doctors about my alcoholism.) When I stopped Antabuse, I had feelings of trepidation and uncertainty. I hadn't drunk alcohol for two years because I couldn't, and when I opened my eyes on the first day that I could, I wouldn't be being truthful if I said I didn't want to 'test myself'.

However, I soon dismissed these thoughts, thinking instead, 'I never want, and will never, allow alcohol to dictate my life ever again.' I got out of bed, had breakfast, and then went to the gym.

I have not drunk alcohol since the day I was prescribed Antabuse, over 12 years ago now. I take onboard the 12-step philosophy of alcoholism being a disease, because I was powerless to stop drinking. I had tried to stop unsuccessfully so many times.

After my rebuke at AA, I did what I did to stop drinking and my particular approach saved my life. For me personally, attending AA meetings would not have led to such a positive outcome. My alcoholism was a behavioural thing, not a disease, and I have never looked back since addressing my behaviour and thinking, and changing my lifestyle. I still firmly believe that addiction is not a disease.

My life was now so good without alcohol. I was thinking logically and knew that alcohol had been my worst enemy, rather than a friend. I didn't fear the change in my life, as things were so good now that I didn't want my ENEMY back in it.

7. Helping others and...

Over nine years ago, when I had stopped drinking for about two and a half years, I started to reflect on how I had tried and failed to find a service that would help me with my personal needs when I was trying to stop drinking. I had met so many people along my journey who had similar needs and who had found that AA did not suit them. The kind of service we all needed did not exist—at least where we lived—so I thought to myself, 'Why can't I develop such a service?'

So, I started a support group, in my own home, for people with alcohol problems. I often used to meet people that I had been in treatment with out and about, and eventually I started to say, 'Come down to my place Tuesday night.' Within a month, I had six people attending. Word of mouth ensured that my home was soon packed with people I had met throughout my years of spinning through the revolving door of treatment.

I decided to take this approach further and went through the process of registering NERAF (Northern Engagement into Recovery from Addiction) as a charity. Believe me, I nearly threw the towel in on many

occasions due to the red tape and protocol I had to go through in that process. The support groups soon grew to a size where they couldn't be held at my home, so I knocked on doors for what seemed like an eternity before local service providers allowed me to use their premises free-of-charge. A network of support groups evolved from there.

News travelled fast and I was soon receiving calls from treatment workers who had a person interested in attending a support group, but didn't have the confidence to walk in alone. I used to meet them for a coffee and chat beforehand, and then take them to the group. From this, a 1-2-1 peer mentoring service developed. The common factors for the majority of people joining our support groups was that they were needed assistance with social-related issues, and they had not found AA to be to their liking.

At this time, I was funding the work out of my Unemployment Benefits. I was able to manage this because I wasn't buying any alcohol. However, I then secured short-term funding for a small project in Sunderland and also a part-time job for myself. I obtained some development grants, so was able to secure professional management support to develop a business case for longer-term funding.

Once a business plan was developed, NERAF continued expanding across Sunderland. I started to recruit to our volunteer programme and developed robust support and training for those people who were providing peer mentoring. We also engaged in service user consultation and became strong advocates for service users at a local and national level (with Alcohol Concern).

I was slowly bringing more funding in. We employed a Women's worker, recognising that we had a high volume of females attending who felt happier working with a female. NERAF continued to thrive; it was a busy service and we were making a difference to peoples' lives.

I remember receiving a phone call in late 2008 from the head of Substance Misuse services across South of Tyne and Wear NHS Trust and arranged to meet him at his office the following day. I barely slept that night, fearing the worst.

However, he informed me that the NHS wanted to commission NERAF services in Gateshead, Sunderland and South Tyneside. He told me how much funding I would receive, a massive amount in comparison with what we had been pulling in. I remember getting into my car and crying. All the hard work had been worth it. NERAF was a valued service that the NHS wanted. A while later, Darlington NHS also commissioned NERAF to set up recovery coaching and mentoring, and peer support groups, in their area.

I now have 41 full-time staff, supported by 50 volunteers, and provide over 50 support groups every week across the patch. We are open 9.00 - 20.00 throughout the week, and on Saturday and Sunday afternoons too. We have a women's only and family care service, and run SMART Recovery groups as well.

Our work with Durham prison ensures that released inmates can immediately connect into a support network. We have recently been asked by commissioners to work with people with drug problems, and we will soon be opening a Recovery Academy (recovery community centre) in Sunderland.

I am particularly pleased with the family service, as I remember how much damage I did to my family during my drinking days. Now, whenever anyone with a drinking problem comes to NERAF, we ask whether they think any family member (adult or child) might need our help. Carers sometimes call us to ask whether we can help someone they are looking after who has a drinking problem, and in some cases the carer accesses our help before the person who is drinking excessively.

There I was, the alcoholic that everyone gave up on. 'No hope,' 'He's a loser and will never be any good. He'll never change.' My recovery has been my recovery and has been very personal to me. I used a way that certain people didn't agree with, but I got there?

I now have a meaningful relationship with my family. I see them regularly and we spend Christmas together every year. It feels good to be included again, as I had always viewed myself as the family 'black sheep', having brought so much shame on them in the past. I regretted this deeply.

The Christmas lunch table is always set out beautifully and my sister Jill cooks an awesome meal. My wine glass is always full of water. During our sixth Christmas dinner, Jill said, 'It's been years since you have had a drink, you must be all right now?' I told her I didn't want to drink alcohol and her reply made me laugh:

'Fucking hell, I never thought I would ever hear you say that, but we are all proud of you for sorting yourself out.'

Three years ago, I was at work in a meeting when my Admin knocked and came in to tell me that someone wanted to see me. I replied, 'I'm in a meeting. Who is it?' She replied, 'It's your daughter, Sarah.'

I ran out of the office and there she was in front of me. We cuddled and cried together. It had taken 16 years, but there she was. Sarah had seen me on the local news a few days earlier, and found out that I was actually alive. We have a great relationship now, making up for lost time and just recently she gave birth to my first grandchild, Benjamin David.

The last part of my 'recovery jigsaw' fell into place when I accepted a friend request from Ann, a lady I had dated many times in my early 20's. When I met Ann a couple of weeks later, I knew straight away that she was the lady with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life. We currently live 112 miles apart, but we are together every weekend and enjoy holidays together.

Ann is my karma. I sometimes have crap times at work, but she takes all the stress away when she puts things into a different perspective. She has a son, Aidan, of whom I think the world. We are working on things so that they can both move up to the North East to live with me, and then we will set a wedding date.

It is fantastic to know that I set up NERAF from nothing, starting as a support group in my flat and employing people that wouldn't usually been given the opportunity. Knowing that we have made a difference to so many lives puts a big smile on my face.

I mentioned earlier in my story of how I once thought that, 'I would prefer to be dead than lead the life I'm living.' I'm so glad that I didn't follow that path! I now have a fantastic career ahead of me, a loving family supporting me, and my lovely lady Ann by my side.

Now that's Recovery and I'm the happiest man in the world! If I can do it, YOU CAN!

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Eight Years On: October 2020

1. Trouble at NERAF

Things started to change at NERAF in the middle of 2013, not long after we had a funding application knocked back. The potential funder informed us that we had not explained clearly enough the impact the project would have. Immediately after this rejection, the Chair of NERAF's Trustees, Lynn Duggan, who I had appointed as a Trustee some years ago and who had been involved in writing this particular project proposal, changed her behaviour towards me.

For example, she would terminate conversations she was having with our Operations Manager (Graham Frend) when I entered the room, and stopped welcoming me in the morning in the way she did with everyone else. It was all rather disconcerting. I had the feeling that Lynn thought I was blaming her for the funding bid failure, but this was certainly not the case.

In early September 2013, a meeting of the Trustees was held which I attended. Strangely, I had not received a copy of the agenda, which I had always previously received in my position as Chief Executive of NERAF.

Lynn Duggan and Graham Frend started to talk about the necessity for a restructuring of the organisation, as well as the need for positions and salaries to be based on professional skill-sets and qualifications. They had earlier discussed these ideas with an external firm of human resources advisors, Professional People Management, again without my knowledge.

I was very concerned about what they were suggesting, as it was biased against recovering people holding key positions, or potentially any position, and it was against the ethos and identity of NERAF. The organisation was built on the premise that it needed to be run by people in recovery (with or without business qualifications), not by people who had such qualifications but knew little about addiction beyond text book knowledge.

I was also concerned about my own position, since I suspected strongly that I would be removed from my Chief Executive position and replaced by Graham Frend, a former police officer who had business qualifications. My concerns increased when I attended a Trustees meeting later that month.

I was so worried about the situation that I posted 'a word of advice' on Facebook the following day, warning 'folks' who were setting up addiction recovery initiatives as charities to be careful when selecting their Trustees. I indicated that our Chair of Trustees wanted NERAF to be working in a way of working that was against the ethos and identity of the organisation, as well as remove me from my position as I did not have business qualifications. It only seemed fair to warn friends and colleagues working in the field and let them know what was happening with NERAF and me.

Ann and I headed off to Tenerife for a holiday, returning on the 11th of October. I then tried to access my work email account and found it to be blocked.

When I returned to work, Lynn Duggan took me aside and informed me that I had been formally suspended from NERAF for bringing the organisation into disrepute. I was told I couldn't go anywhere near the building. I was told to hand over my keys and computer. When I remonstrated about the latter, I was told the police would be called if I did not hand it back that day. I was also informed that my NERAF email account had been terminated. I was shocked, devastated! I was being locked out of the organisation that I had started over seven years earlier.

I initially didn't tell Ann what had happened. She was still living in the Lake District, although she and her son Aidan were due to shortly move to Sunderland. I hoped the NERAF nightmare would go away.

The Trustees had meanwhile brought in the human resources firm Professional People Management to deal with the matter. I was interviewed in mid-October by a member of this firm and I expressed my concerns about Mrs Duggan. I then had to attend a disciplinary hearing in mid-November headed by a member of the same firm. There was no representation by NERAF staff or Trustees.

On the 3rd of December, I had a meeting with the same person who put forward a proposal to me, whereby I would be given a written final warning, redeployed within the organisation, and have to resign as Chief Executive. I was sure that this proposal would have come from, or been approved by, the NERAF Trustees. I was told that I would be made the volunteer co-ordinator.

Not only would my role helping determine the running of NERAF be taken away, but my salary would be greatly reduced. This was all very distressing. However, I was tempted to take the job, as NERAF was my baby. I couldn't see life without being involved with my baby. I asked that I be given until the **6th of December** to make the decision. This request was accepted.

By this time, I had contacted a lawyer and he had told me that I had grounds for unfair dismissal. Obviously, the final decision was mine, but he thought that if I took the job, Lynn Duggan, and whoever else was involved with her, would likely find new grounds to sack me.

As it turned out, I didn't get the chance to make a decision. I received a letter, dated the 5th of December 2013, from the same person I had met two days earlier, telling me that I was fired with immediate effect. I received it on the day (6th December) that I was supposed to inform the organisation of my decision!

I was devastated by the news and very angry. I felt as if the whole process had been a sham. That a decision had been made by Lynn Duggan and her colleagues long ago that I was to be removed as Chief Executive of NERAF and the organisation be run in a very different way to how it been set up.

I appealed my dismissal a week later, and in February I received a letter that stated, '... that the decision of the Board is that they do not think they can work with you effectively in light of what has happened to and after your dismissal and therefore your dismissal is upheld.' I now had no option but to challenge this decision in court.

2. Going to court

By now, Ann and Aidan had moved from Kendal in the North-West to Sunderland in the North-East. Ann soon obtained a job. My case for 'unfair dismissal' was heard at an Employment Tribunal in Newcastle upon Tyne on 19th June 2014. In the Tribunal, both parties were represented by barristers before a judge. Ann attended

the Tribunal, as well as three people who had written character references for me and would be questioned if required. The fourth character reference was sent by David Clark, the author of this book.

When Lynn Duggan was in the witness box the judge pointed out to her that she was trying to assassinate a person who has a character reference from an Emeritus Professor of Psychology in Australia, and three other people of good standing. Two of this latter group had previously applied to be Trustees of NERAF, stating in their applications that they knew me personally. Lynn Duggan had rejected their applications.

In my humble opinion, Ms Duggan's performance in the witness box was underwhelming and she was taken apart by both my barrister and the judge. She made statements that were not backed up by written documents, and she lied. The judge said a number of times in his report that statements were made about the past by the respondents (NERAF) with no written proof of their veracity.

He also pointed out that the respondents provided a whole load of documents at the beginning of the hearing that had never been seen by my barrister or myself. As for me bringing NERAF into disrepute by posting on Facebook, the judge pointed out that my posts would hardly have had a large audience.

Lynn Duggan also referred to my past criminal record, a few 'drunk & disorderly' convictions from over twenty years ago. The judge responded, 'But all those convictions are spent.' What a situation!? I had instilled in NERAF the ethos that we could not hold a criminal record against someone who was coming to us for help. Now, my 'record' was being used against me in court!

Lynn Duggan also told the judge that when NERAF had their AGM three weeks earlier, they had to have a policeman there in case I turned up. Graham Friend was heard by all in court telling Lynn's legal representative that I had violent convictions in 2003 and 2007, which was totally untrue. It was all very unpleasant.

The judge eventually decided in my favour, that my dismissal was unfair. He said:

'Taking all of the above into consideration I have found the respondent [NERAF] had failed to show the reason for the dismissal... the way the disciplinary procedure was conducted was inherently unfair. The decision to dismiss and the rejection of the appeal were all done remotely without any input by Mr Martin. The dismissal was unfair.'

The judge did not consider a Polkey reduction appropriate⁵, as the procedure used to produce the dismissal was so flawed that it was impossible to say what the outcome would have been if a fair procedure had been used. He said that the evidence pointed to me being retained by the organisation. I was later awarded substantial damages for this unfair dismissal from NERAF.

I was able to leave court with my head held high and my credibility intact. The support I had received from people around the country and David in Australia was humbling. The story went into local newspapers, with my face adorning the front page of one.

BOSS IN TRIBUNAL VICTORY

A CHARITY founder was unfairly dismissed from the organisation he set up, a tribunal has ruled.

Former alcoholic Kevan Martin turned his life around to establish Northern Engagement into Recovery from Addiction Foundation (NERAF) in Sunderland 10 years ago.

But last year he was sacked after a disciplinary hearing branded 'inherently flawed' and a 'sham' by an employment judge.' **Sunderland Echo, 26th November 2014.**

After the Tribunal Hearing, I heard nothing from the people at NERAF. I kept trying for jobs in the addiction field, but was getting nowhere. I was feeling terrible. Over the years, I had bought a lot of books about addiction and recovery with my personal money because of my interest in the field. As I had kept them in my office, I asked NERAF to return the books. They sent back just one book back which had a 'To Kevan...' inscription on the inside cover. When I asked for the rest of my collection, they asked if I had receipts for the books. I never saw the books again.

In the end, I knew I had to get out of Sunderland, given how I was feeling about Lynn Duggan and Graham Frend. I was angry and knew I would do something that I would later regret if I stayed. I often walked past the NERAF building knowing I couldn't go in to see my friends and former colleagues, as I was banned. Everything that had happened had finally got to me. Revenge was festering in my mind.

However, throughout all of this, I never had a drink. Having a drink occasionally crossed my mind, but I never got close to picking up a glass.

⁵ A Polkey deduction is a deduction made from a compensatory award in an unfair dismissal case to reflect the chance that although a dismissal was procedurally unfair it would have happened in any case.

Before leaving the topic of NERAF, I'd like to say that the time between my dismissal and Tribunal were an emotional rollercoaster and what helped me through it all were the numerous phone calls and messages of support I received from people all over the country and beyond. They were very comforting.

NERAF were working in partnership with NECA (North East Council of Addictions) on a project commissioned by Darlington Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) to provide support groups and mentoring in Darlington. The day after my Tribunal, I received a call from the CEO of NECE who told me she intended to speak with the DAAT Commissioner about cancelling the partnership agreement with NERAF.

Two days later, I took a call from the Commissioner who told me she had terminated NERAF participation in the project saying, 'I commissioned the NECA/NERAF bid because of the NERAF element and your knowledge and experience. NERAF isn't NERAF without Kevan Martin.' Within two months, NERAF had lost the remaining three NHS-commissioned services.

3. A new life

Ann was missing Kendal a lot. I was originally from Kendal and my family still lived there. It was time for us to move on and back home. We did so in the second half of 2014. I was finally leaving NERAF behind me.

I started working for an organisation called 'User Voice', which involved gathering the views of people in prisons and those working in the prison service. I ended up as the North West Regional Manager and had staff in all the prisons and prison services within that region.

I worked there for 18 months but eventually came to hate the job, as I spent far too much time driving around the country on the motorways. The driving did my head in. The large number of idiotic drivers I came across 'convinced me' that I would eventually meet a sticky end on some motorway or other.

I left this job and worked for the Water Board for two years, making sure that water was safe to drink! I then took up my current position as a Night Warden at a Holiday Park in the Lake District. I am in charge of security at the Holiday Park and I deal with any issues raised by our visitors, such as a boiler or electricity failing. It's a really varied job, one where you're interacting with people all the time. I love it! I absolutely love it!! The Park is in Troutbeck, close to Lake Windermere and about 15 miles from our home in Kendal. I love the drive to-and-fro work. The whole area is just so beautiful.

Ann owns a pub in Kendal with her brother and is in charge of the catering side of things. Aidan, who is now 24 years old, is a self-employed gardener and his business is going really well. He'll be employing someone else in the near future. Given all that he's been through in his life, it's awesome that he is now doing so well.

To be honest, I'm glad to be out of the addiction field. I did what I could for people, got 'shit on' a bit, but hey... that's life.

Reflecting on the past, I guess that even with NERAF in later years, I was doing something that wasn't really me. In having to do so much organising, I lost touch with the people I wanted to help. I wanted to be working directly with people, but ended up in a more strategic role. I was running up and down the country giving talks and attending meetings; I wasn't running our support groups, which was what I really loved. I had to do all that administrative stuff to move NERAF along and obtain funding to help more people, but that wasn't really me.

I'm out and about in the beautiful countryside. I have a fantastic, happy family life. My Mam and Dad are doing great, and Ann's mum is doing great. I enjoy the job I'm doing and I'm not living to a routine. Every day is different. People are paying over £1,000 pounds a week to come and stay at our Park. I get to live there for free, at least 42 hours a week. I'm so grateful to be living amongst trees, fields, wildlife and lakes, rather than in the midst of buildings. I'm so happy now. And I'm at peace with myself!