

# The Care Leavers' Annual Lecture: University of Dundee, 30 October 2015

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## **Keywords**

Trauma, care, love, identity

I'm going to share my care journey with you. For me to do this I'll take you back to a wee town called Tranent in East Lothian, Scotland, where I lived with my mum, step-dad and younger brother and sister. I spent 10 years there, mostly hiding under my bed. I was terrified of my step-dad.

The only escape I had was my Disney films: like *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Cinderella*. I'd watch each right to the end to watch the little clip of Disney World in Florida where I'd see a glimpse of a happy family: a mum, dad with their little girl and boy as they'd walk through the gates of Magic Kingdom in Orlando, Florida. Their eyes filled with excitement and happiness just being there together, meeting their favourite characters like Mickey, Minnie and Cinderella! Their wee faces would light up as they watched the fireworks light up the night sky and they'd watch on in amazement at the electrical parade making its way down Main Street in the Magic Kingdom as it played all the classic Disney songs. That was my dream. To be happy, to be in a family full of love and laughs. I spent so many nights looking out of my bedroom window wishing upon a star that my dream would come true one day.

When I was 12 my step-dad left. I thought to myself: this is it, maybe we can be happy now – we're finally safe. But I was wrong. My mum couldn't cope and soon I became my mum's mum, looking after her and my siblings. The endless household chores weighed me down and soon it all got too much and I found it difficult to cope. I was struggling, especially in school, and soon I became a target for bullies. One of my so-called friends told me: 'Laura, you're stinking!' And she was right. I was so busy looking after my family that I forgot to care for myself. At 12 years old I felt like a broken mess, I felt so desperate that I decided to pack some bags and run away to my Nana's house with my brother and sister. We needed help and I knew we'd be safe there.

Soon there was a knock at the door from the social worker. It was the first time I'd met a social worker. The social worker told us that we all needed a break; I was told that I was going into care for three weeks so I could get a rest from all the responsibility that I had. I was scared and hated being separated from my family but I took comfort in being told that it was a temporary arrangement. I never returned home. My path was right through the care system: from foster

care, back to Mum's house, Nana's house, residential care, secure care and residential school. I couldn't settle and had very little trust in anyone. As each placement broke down I got angrier and angrier because I was never really claimed. School was a nightmare because I felt so different from everyone else and the other kids would ask me things like, 'what do you do there?' – referring to a residential house I was in. One friend even introduced me to her mum: 'this is Laura from the home, her mum doesn't love her', she said with a laugh. I even remember my guidance teacher pulling me out of classes to ask: 'how are things in the home?' I didn't feel normal and suddenly I stood out from my peers. I remember my friends having sleep-overs and day trips but I was too embarrassed to ask my friends to get their parents police-checked just so I could go, I withdrew from my group of friends, I felt so alone. I was often labelled as 'mental' by other kids in school because I was so quick to anger and often labelled as challenging, manipulative or attention-seeking by staff around me. I didn't feel welcomed or part of my school or community, so I decided to fight the system.

I decided to take back control in any way that I could and took everything to extreme, something that is now often referred to as 'challenging behaviour'. The care system made me feel suffocated, I felt like I was in care because I did something wrong. Whilst in residential care I felt very restricted and hated that my every move was documented in daily records. I felt angry that any member of staff could access my case files, the files where I was often labelled and listed every fault and thing I did wrong. I felt very misunderstood.

I took control by running away all the time; every chance I got I was out the door or window. I even went to London twice! You know the barriers at the train stations now? They're probably there because of me. I went to London with a couple of friends from care; one was called David and I remember on the way down to London on the train he said: 'Laura you've been in a bad mood all holiday!' I had to laugh at him and replied: 'David we're not on holiday we've run away'!! David did have a point, though, I was miserable and angry at the world I was in and wanted out.

At 15 years old I was a chronically self-harming and used drugs and alcohol just to numb the pain I felt inside. I remember the feeling of helplessness and remember telling staff that I needed help, pleading through my tears of anger: 'help me, I need help'! Yet they didn't seem to know how to get through to me or how to help. I was prescribed anti-depressants, yet this had no impact on my mental health. I was a prisoner of my own thoughts and self-doubt.

To illustrate how out of control things got, I have a chronology from my social work files, taken from the Children's Hearing report, 14 June 1999:

'Laura visited the children's centre several times prior to her admission and appeared anxious about becoming a resident, clearly stating that she

did not want to move into the centre. At this time she presented as a shy, quiet individual'.

'Home visits: Laura can be very manipulative with mother and uses home visits to avoid addressing issues at the centre. Laura also has contact with her gran, again she manipulates this situation'.

What were you doing on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1999? I know exactly what I was doing because like most looked after young people I have a well-documented childhood. So I can tell you exactly what I was doing:

'On the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1999, Laura received an informal exclusion for swearing at teachers'.

'A further exclusion from school was issued on the 9<sup>th</sup> March 1999 for swearing'.

What is interesting about these exclusions is that when I was in foster care I swore at teachers, yet I was never excluded for it. It was only when I was looked after in residential care that the exclusions became a regular occurrence.

'22<sup>nd</sup> April 1999 Assessment at Y.P.U<sup>1</sup>, not clinically depressed, psychiatrist not seeing her again'.

'10<sup>th</sup> June 1999, serious suicide attempt. Admitted to Royal Infirmary overnight'.

I got so desperate that I took a serious attempt on my life and was taken into a secure unit at St Katherine's Centre in Edinburgh.

Under lock and key I felt desperate to get out and told everyone what they wanted to hear just so they'd let me get out so I could get back to my bottle of Buckfast<sup>2</sup>. Being locked up was horrible but I was very lucky that I had my Nana and Grandad who'd come to visit me. One day when my Nana was in for a visit in the summer time, it was a beautiful summer's day and I was locked up in a little visitors' room with my key-worker and my Nana who sat down and said: 'Oh can you no open a window son, it's roasting in here!' And he said: 'We can't, she'd jump out!' 'Oh right enough,' my Nana said. My key-worker was right, I would've run away.

Looking back at that now, I understand why I ran away. I was running back home to my mum, searching for a sense of belonging, acceptance. It's all written here in black and white...

'09.03.99 Walked out of school, arrived at mother's. Brought back to the centre. Threatened to punch social worker in the face'.

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<sup>1</sup> YPU (young person's unit), a mental health facility

<sup>2</sup> Brand name of fortified wine

- '22.03.99 Failed to attend school, went to mother's'.
- '24.03.99 Walked out of school, went to mother's. On her return she made various threats about self-harm and threatening to smash windows'.
- '25.03.99 Walked out of school and went to mother's'.
- '26.03.99 Walked out of school and went to mother's. Mother colluding with her, making no attempt to send her back to school'.

Yet it was never noted that I was running away to my Mum because I needed love, I needed to be claimed.

When I got out of secure [care] I struggled to return to my residential house because they couldn't have me staying there if I wasn't in education. I got to the point where I was being dropped off at the front door of school and I walked straight back out. I went into residential school for my last few months of education. This broke my heart; once again I felt a deep sense of rejection and didn't feel worthy of love and had no sense of belonging. I was taken away from the place I called home and it's the place I still return to today. It is only now that I understand the struggle that the staff had: they weren't allowed to keep me if I didn't attend school. I didn't fit the criteria of the house.

It was when I was in residential school that I met my children's rights worker, Lorraine. I remember Lorraine saying that she heard me before she saw me at that first visit. I was screaming and shouting at the staff and in walks this lady into my bedroom and she just sat herself down at the end of my bed. I was, like...who is this lady? She's not scared or pissed off at me! Lorraine was absolutely brilliant, she helped me go to meetings and spoke on my behalf when I got too upset or angry to talk. I had a lot of respect for Lorraine because she had so much time for me and really listened and genuinely wanted the best for me.

I remember attending my last Children's Hearing. I was 16 and had just moved into supported accommodation. I remember crying at the Hearing, pleading with them: 'Please don't take me off my supervision order', because I knew I wasn't ready to be on my own. I didn't want to leave care but despite Lorraine putting my case forward they took the supervision order away and I was sent to supported accommodation.

As I expected I didn't cope well in supported accommodation and they couldn't cope with my chronic self-harm. So they helped me pack up my things into bin bags and dropped me off right outside the young people's unit in Edinburgh. I remember being told that there was nothing they could do for me because I didn't have a 'mental illness', I was 'just traumatised' and they would not support me unless I had a stable place to live. This was really sad and

something that I've seen 15 years on in my own working life; there is not enough support for young people recovering from trauma. Some just don't fit the criteria or the waiting lists are too long and residential staff do not have the resources, training and time to carry out this much-needed support.

At 16 years old I felt utterly broken and found myself in bed and breakfast accommodation back in my home town, Tranent, where I felt isolated and alone. I had been moved five times in six months. One day when I was wandering down the street I bumped into a guy who I went to school with and he said to me, 'Alright Laura, what you been up to'? And I told him, 'Nothing much, just signed on and staying at the Tranmare B&B'. The guy says: 'Oh, I thought so'. This comment made me furious and I really wanted to prove him wrong and everyone else that labelled and judged me! I got angry, in a good way.

There was no quick fix to this and it took a lot of hard work! Six months of phone calls, detox and talking with my children's rights worker to find a stable place to live. I then found a supported landlady in Joppa, Edinburgh. It was when I was there I remember wanting to go back to school because the landlady's daughter was the same age as me and I watched her go to school every day. I wanted to do that. I wanted to go back to school and do it properly without the stigma and labels. I just wanted to learn and have fun like any other 16 year old. Holy Rood High School in Edinburgh gave me a chance.

I remember my first day at school wearing my white shirt and purple school tie and that feeling of belonging and the feeling that it might not be too late for me. I was just like any other pupil! For the first time in my life I felt 'normal'.

I didn't tell anyone about my Care Identity, how much I struggled to hold my tongue when teachers told me what to do, the struggle I had fitting in and how much thought I put into my cover story of 'living with my auntie' or how many times I had to ask my supported landlady for help to catch up with school work. It was a lot of re-learning in my first few months back at school after years of missed education. It was brilliant and so worth the hard work.

When I left school I got just enough qualifications to get a job in the bank and again I was given a lovely smart uniform that I wore with pride and with my first pay I took my Mum, brother and sister on a well-deserved holiday to Tenerife! It was there in Tenerife that I started to wonder: 'What's next? If I can go from a secure unit to a beach what else could I do'?

I decided to go to college and study for an HNC<sup>3</sup> in Social Care because I wanted to work in the care system so that I could do what Lorraine did for me. This time I felt strong enough to tell people about my care experience because I felt that it was a positive thing. My classmates welcomed me with open arms and once again I felt like I belonged! It was amazing!

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<sup>3</sup> Higher National Certificate

I had a decision to make whilst at college. Where would my placement be? So I decided to go back to secure. The same secure unit I was locked up in! I remember walking into the building through the locked doors as a student, a professional, hovering outside the staff office....as I always did when I was in care; as all staff and young people in the care system will know, young people aren't allowed in the office! My key worker, Tom, was sitting there and he says, 'Come in Laura', and he hands me a set of keys! My keys! This was incredible; I'll never forget that feeling and I will never forget the look of amazement on Tom's face.

When I was working in the secure unit it wasn't easy and it did re-traumatise me but I'm glad I did it. I used my training to understand my anger and I started to remember the staff that had worked with me over the years and their words of encouragement and the belief that they had in me. I really wanted to be a residential care worker because I wanted to help young people take control of their own life in a positive way so that they can achieve whatever they want to in life. My experience of life before and during care was something that stayed with me. I will never forget that feeling of being trapped under my bed, trapped in a system and trapped by the stigma: that I had to actively do something to change it and tell these young people that life won't always be such a struggle.

Around this time I also met Steven; he was my best friend and he really believed in me. Steven knew about my Care Identity and loved me anyway. My late teens and early 20s were hard and I would often return to self-destruct mode but Steven stood by me no matter how hard I used to push him away and he never gave up. I remember him sitting me down one day saying: 'Laura please just let me love you'. It was that day that I was ready to accept love and he saved me.

## Reflections

When I look back on my care journey I can see that it was the little things that gave me strength. It was the teacher who gave me a lift to school in the morning or the teacher that kept me a sandwich for my lunch. It was my key-worker that gave me a hug when I needed it and my rights worker, Lorraine, who stood up for me and spoke up when I didn't have the strength to.

I have carried these experiences with me into the way I work with young people. For 10 years I have worked with children and families as a family support worker, residential worker and then as a senior care worker. I really do pinch myself sometimes and wonder how did I get from living in the system to working in it? It's because I genuinely care and believe that there is always hope. I remember hearing a member of staff saying years ago: 'Sometimes it's just too late for these kids, the damage is done'. That saddened me and made me even

more determined to prove that damage is always repairable and every young person deserves a fighting chance. I wouldn't give up on young people so easily.

Earlier this year I was working as a senior residential care worker and I heard about my home, the residential house, closing down. This prompted me to attend a public meeting about it. I witnessed a community that was scared of sharing a space with children in care. I believe it's because they didn't have an understanding of what care was or what these young people need. One lady commented, saying: 'How safe are we' [if the house is built]? This prompted me to own my Care Identity and show that care isn't something that defines a person – it's just one part of the story. Care is something that children need, not rejection and prejudice. I joined [Who Cares? Scotland](#) as an Alumni member and have never looked back. I have shared my story with hundreds of young people and have seen the hope that it gives them.

When I looked back over my case files recently I saw that in seven years I didn't go to the dentist; it was something that was overlooked because my life was so chaotic. That is not okay! It's the little things like this that make a big difference. This is something the kids I've worked with always get. The young people say I'm always banging on about them brushing their teeth! I do this because I really care and want the best for them, as I do with my own child. I have since contacted the NHS and they are fitting me with a lovely set of train track braces in November. Lucky me!

Whilst on the topic of health, I discovered that I have a condition called coeliac disease. This was only diagnosed two years ago. It's an auto-immune disease where I am on a lifelong gluten-free diet. Again, whilst I was reading through my social work notes I could see that I was displaying symptoms of the disease all those years ago and it baffles me how something like this could be missed, even though I was underweight and suffered from numerous symptoms over the seven years I had been in care. It really is little things like this that can be missed, and that's why consistency and communication is really important.

I am now working for Who Cares? Scotland as a development officer and I proudly own my Care Identity because it's not something that should be hidden. Yes I am a care leaver but that doesn't define me, it is part of me and I'm okay with that. I tell care leavers who are thinking about higher education to tick the ['care leaver' box](#) on the UCAS<sup>4</sup> application because this will provide them with really valuable support. I spent many years struggling more than I had to because I was scared to ask for help. It was only when I had the courage to seek out support that amazing things happened.

What I want to ask professionals to do is this:

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<sup>4</sup> UCAS is the trading name of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, a charitable company which facilitates applications to higher education in the UK.

**Think about what little things you can do as a person to make the care system a better place for young people?**

When I look back over my personal and professional experience of care I can see clearly that the stigma is still there. The controlling culture of the care system is still there and I can see why so many young people want to get away from this system that controls more than it cares. I have seen young people being given after-care packages with enough money to live on, somewhere to live, a support worker to visit them – yet deep down I knew we were setting them up to fail! I have seen young people lose houses and we don't know where they are today because they want to get out of the care system and never look back. Yet on paper we did everything right, we ticked every box and even managed to get a fantastic inspection report, yet we don't know where some young people go! That's not okay – our care experienced young people deserve better than that. It's not what you'd want for your own child, is it? Young people need roots, a sense of belonging so that in their loneliest moments they know someone cares. I remember using sleeping tablets just to sleep my life away in my little flat in Musselburgh. If it wasn't for a neighbour checking in on me, I could have died. This is the reality for some of us leaving care – we need relationships we can count on, someone to check in on us to see that we're okay. It's the little things that make a big difference.

**I want you to ask yourself: how normal is the care system?**

Is it necessary to risk-assess everything a young person does and how necessary is it to hold so many meetings with big tables and notebooks? Do we really need those big sets of keys in residential care? Do we really need to call a young person's home a 'unit'? We really need to think about this. Is this what you would want for your own child? We even have a language in the care system that young people need to learn just to make sense of it all. I used a lot of colourful language at meetings I attended as a kid but what I was trying to do was get professionals to LISTEN to me, not try to make me fit into an unachievable box. I had to leave the place I called home just because I couldn't attend school. Care needs to just let us be, let us grow and develop and that means we need to get real and that will mean taking risks. Life is risky. I took a risk going back to school, even took a risk sharing this story with you – but look where these risks can lead. I'm thriving, not just surviving anymore, because I risked it. Nothing will ever change if we stay in our comfort zones. Let's take a wee step out of what we know and see what can happen. What I know about the care system is that it doesn't always get it right and we need to do something about it. I want to be part of this time of change. Do you?

Lastly I really want people to think about what care means. Everyone that comes into care has suffered a trauma. Going into care in itself is a trauma. It is my belief that the only way to heal that trauma is by showing acceptance, understanding and LOVE. I believe that love exists in the care system. I have



felt it. In the future I want this to be part of the culture shift that needs to take place. I want to see young people thrive in the care system, feel at home there, feel safe and hopeful for a future. How can we do that? By giving these young people a loving home – it's what we all want, right? I want care to be about relationships, attachments and LOVE. I don't think Maslow and Bowlby intended that their theories stay in books as a point of reference. These theories talk about attachment and love, yet there is fear about putting them into practice. Is this about keeping children and young people safe or about keeping the staff safe?

Now think back to that dream I had as a little girl, wishing on a star, wishing for that trip to Disney World in Orlando, Florida. I am happy to tell you that in 2011 my dream of Disney World came true! I walked down the aisle to the song, 'A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes' from Cinderella and married Steven in Florida, and we've been there 10 times! We're planning a trip next year with our little girl Maia!

It's been a privilege to share my story with you and I hope that you know that coming from care is hard but it doesn't define us. It's the little things that make a big difference and with the right support, opportunities and chances anything is possible.

Take a risk, do what's right and think about love.

## **About the author**

Laura Beveridge is a development officer with Who Cares? Scotland, a third sector organisation that champions the voice of care experienced young people. Who Cares? Scotland helps to empower young people to be heard, creating opportunities for them to participate in local groups and national events, and giving them a platform to influence change, develop their skills, and make fun happy memories along the way! Laura is based in Dundee and covers the East of Scotland. Email: [lbeveridge@whocaresScotland.org](mailto:lbeveridge@whocaresScotland.org) or visit [www.whocaresScotland.org](http://www.whocaresScotland.org).

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