

Please Listen A drama created by Kibble Education and Care Centre

Gavin Sinclair

A short background

I worked as a drama tutor at Reid Kerr College in Paisley for 14 years. As part of my teaching hours, I would visit Kibble on a Friday morning for three hours to work with kids on pantomimes and fun confidence-building drama classes. I had been doing this for 13 years and very much enjoyed it. In spring 2012 we decided to try something different with a group of kids at Kibble. We created a play about the war in Afghanistan. The kids responded really well to the subject matter and we soon discovered that it was more than just a play about war. The rehearsal process allowed us to reflect on life and things that are important to us. The play was a vehicle to tackle difficult conversations about life in care and opened my eyes to how drama could really help these kids in their struggle to understand why they behaved in certain ways or why they felt certain emotions or feelings, the importance of families and a sense of belonging. The performance was really powerful and very emotional, but for me it wasn't about the performance, it was about the journey that the kids had made and what they had got out of being involved in the process in a safe and secure environment. It was not long after this I approached Kibble about a full-time position. In June 2012 I was appointed as Arts Development Officer.

The Creation of *Please Listen*

In September 2012, just a few months into my new job I was asked by CELCIS to put together a ten-minute play about life in care for a EUSARF conference. We had three weeks to prepare. I approached two fifth year boys at Kibble who had worked with me for a number of years and they were up for it: Daryl Shaw and Jonny Wilson. We spent two hours just blasting their thoughts about being in care and examples of their experiences. They decided to call the play *Please Listen*. It was an intense two hours and it was getting quite emotional. I noticed Jonny was starting to withdraw and I thought I had bitten off more than I could chew. Still being new to this kind of work I was worried that I had opened a can of worms. I called a break to give them and me a bit of breathing space and think time. I considered pulling the plug. I thought about my lack of understanding as to the psychological effects of these kids talking about the past and their memories. I didn't know what to do, but I have never been one for giving up. After 15 minutes we met up again and things hadn't improved. Jonny looked really upset and just as I was about to say that we shouldn't continue, out of somewhere an inspirational thought came to my mind. Jonny loves playing characters. He loves taking on a different persona and, difficult as this might be to understand, he is happier playing a character than he is being himself. I asked him 'Jonny, would it be easier if we just gave you a character name? So when we are writing this play and performing it, you will just be playing a character. It's still your thoughts, your opinions, your ideas, but it will be a character'. His face lit up instantly and without thought he said, 'Call me Bush'. I laughed at such a ridiculous name. We all did.

Within another hour we had our play complete. There was a character called Gavin (me), a character called Daryl, a character called Dan (I'll come back to him) and a character called Bush. Bush was Jonny and Jonny knew that Bush was Jonny, but as long as Jonny was playing Bush and not Jonny, he was relaxed and comfortable. Did you follow that? Dan - Daniel Portman - is a Scottish actor who was a former student of mine, who volunteered to help out with the play. He is quite a well-known actor for his part of Podrick Payne in the hit HBO series *Game of Thrones* and his involvement at the early stages was a great help to Daryl and Jonny who were about to embark on an adventure that would take them all over Scotland including two visits to the Scottish Parliament, a performance for Royalty and even a four-day trip to a conference in Portugal. They were going to be in newspapers and on the television. None of us had any idea that *Please Listen* would be such a life changing experience.

The Conference

We rehearsed the play over a period of three weeks, although in total probably only about 12 hours. The EUSARF conference was in Glasgow and we would be performing to 400 international care professionals. A daunting task for anyone, let alone two 16-year-old boys. They were terrified, but at the same time excited about being heard. I focused my energy on their confidence, emphasising how brave they were to perform their own feelings and opinions to 400 strangers. Dan was also a brilliant help. The boys idolized him and were so proud to be performing with a star. He was brilliant with the boys and made them feel like the stars. In truth, he believed it. Nothing he had done in his career was equivalent to two 16-year-olds in care perform a play they had written about their own lives. We performed. At the end of the play there was a silence. It was probably only couple of seconds, but you could feel a sense of stunned astonishment and awe. We bowed and the entire room stood up. A 400-strong standing ovation. We had performed a play that had just blown away an audience who had been at the conference for a week listening to admired guest speakers from all over the world. We had done it. We had taken Daryl and Jonny's ideas and performed their play. Their words, their speeches, their experiences, their opinions, their tears and their own creation. Amazing. Job done. They were so full of confidence, they were walking on air. Nothing could stop them now. The very next day, they performed it at Kibble in front of their peers. Another fantastic response. The kids from the audience came onto the stage at the end of the show with tears streaming down their faces. They hugged Jonny and Daryl, congratulating them and praising them. Bravery personified. The end. Well done everyone. Pat on the back to all involved. What will we do tomorrow?

Tomorrow

We were inundated with invitations. Training events, conferences, schools, colleges, Universities. Everyone in the care sector in Scotland was talking about us and we were delighted. The boys were in the Herald, a double page in the Daily Record, the Evening Times, Third Force News, the Paisley Express and several professional magazines. Daryl and Jonny's confidence was growing with every performance and every article in the newspapers. We started doing a Q&A session after the performance and began to realise collectively that this was not about a play, it was not about being an actor, but it was about being heard. These boys were now talking

to professionals and telling them how things could be improved for future kids. They knew and openly said that it was too late for them, but if changes could be made to help kids in the future then what they were doing was special. They performed for Prince Edward who was amazed and wrote them a letter of thanks and congratulations. They performed twice at the Scottish Parliament and contributed to an inquiry into child care. They went to a conference in Portugal and performed to over 200 international guests. They performed in mainstream schools for teachers and pupils, talking to them about growing up in care. We teamed up with Who Cares? Scotland and started performing the play as part of their corporate parenting presentations for councils throughout the country. I should add that Dan was busy filming and so was replaced in January 2013 by Jamielee, a 14-year-old girl from Kibble. We changed parts of the script to suit and she wrote a section for herself giving her the same feelings of pride and ownership that Jonny and Daryl had enjoyed. They were filmed performing the play and then interviewed as part of a BBC Alba documentary about children's panels, which aired in November 2013. They also made a film version of the play which can be seen on YouTube - just search for kibblepaisley (all one word).

'Well done', you say. It's good they got to do that. That's nice that they got to perform their play lots of times and got a holiday out of it... but what? What difference did it make to them? I'll try to explain.

The Journey

Jonny has spent a lifetime trying to hide his childhood memories from himself and everyone else. He used to clam up and refuse to talk about his childhood, because it was too upsetting. He lived a life of people calling him names like 'stupid' and 'weird'. He lacked confidence in himself and didn't believe that he would ever achieve anything in his life. He was ashamed of his childhood and still believed that somehow it was his fault. He is now at college studying acting full-time, he is dealing with his learning difficulties and trying to improve his literary skills, and he has started writing a book about his life. Jonny now tells people about his life in care and before. When he meets new friends or girlfriends he explains what his step dad did to him and he is not ashamed, as he now realizes that it's not his fault. Seeing his face in the newspapers, reading about his achievements and watching himself on television has made him proud of what he has done and who he is. Jonny has a five-year plan and intends to become an actor or drama teacher. He has ambition.

Daryl grew in confidence. His performances got stronger and stronger as he delved deeper into the emotions of the play. During the first few Q&A sessions Daryl sat with his head down looking at the floor, embarrassed to answer questions and talk to the professionals. He didn't want to offer opinions and talk about the content of the play. After some time and gentle persuasion, he started talking. Within a few sessions he was articulating his feelings and really opening up to strangers. He was confident discussing the care system and offering sensible solutions. Daryl has given such a good account of himself in recent performances and communicated his feelings in such a mature and analytical way. These are real life skills. Presenting, discussing and communicating in a relaxed, professional manner about a difficult and challenging subject will stand him in good stead for the rest of his life and career.

Jamielee joined the team as a very angry young girl who was resistant to discussing her feelings. In the early stages of her involvement, she asked me to attend a review, which was a disaster. She got angry with her social worker, swore quite a bit, shouted lots and stormed out. Six months later, having performed and presented over 40 times, enjoyed her first experience in an aeroplane and confidence rising all the time with every Q&A session, she asked me to attend another review. This time she handed the group a written statement and started the meeting by saying, 'This is my review and this is how I'd like it to go. We are not going to talk about my childhood as it's in the past and we can't change that. We are going to talk about the last six months, about my behavior in school, my work with Gavin and we are going to talk about the next six months where I want to go home and live with my Dad'. I nearly cried. This angry 14-year-old girl was now calmly and assertively taking control of her own destiny. She was running the meeting. How many other kids in care have had the confidence and maturity to handle a stressful situation in such a professional matter? With every *Please Listen* performance she was learning how to talk to professionals and finding that her views were being valued. They were also telling her that meetings, reviews and panels were opportunities for her to express how she felt. Jamielee had learned to control her emotions, talk about her needs and discuss how she felt. She was regularly sitting in a room with maybe 200 adults talking about the care system and her experiences. Going to a review and talking to seven people was easy. The Social work team was impressed. Three months later she was back living at home with her dad.

The kids

Daryl - Doing *Please Listen* was amazing. People actually listened to what we had to say. It's been brilliant working on it and getting our point of view across to thousands of people.

Jonny - We got to create our own play with our own words. It was all ours and that's what made us so proud. I am so much more confident now and happy to discuss my life with people.

Jamielee - I used to hate talking to social workers. I used to just get really angry and swear at them. I've now taken control of my own life and my behavior is so much better.

Me - I've learned that working to people's strengths and empowering them to achieve through something they enjoy can change lives. Recognition for achievements and constant positive feedback goes a long way. I've been fortunate to be part of their project and witness the impact it has had on these kids.

What next

Jonny and I have written a new play with a workshop about life in care and we are going to offer it as a training package to external bodies. We will continue to support Who Cares? Scotland's Corporate Parenting sessions and we will hopefully be re-

visiting organisations who enjoyed *Please Listen* last year. Our new presentation is called *Open Your Eyes*.

In Kibble, we are going to create a theatre production about Auschwitz and use it as a vehicle to reflect on our own lives like we did with the play about the war in Afghanistan.

In general, we aim to keep developing new ideas and ways of building confidence and self-esteem through the arts, trying to improve the lives of our kids in care with positive experiences and celebration of achievement.

For more information or if you'd like to discuss our work, please contact me, gavin.sinclair@kibble.org 0141 952 9588