

Fighting addiction

Gary Topley describes his journey from alcohol-fuelled violence to a new life helping others as a service user representative

MY FIRST AWARENESS that alcohol even existed was back in the 1980s. I was adopted when I was four, and my adopted dad was a professional darts player so a lot of time was spent in the pub from an early age, as well as going away to tournaments. As you probably know, darts and drink go together.

Back then the smell of alcohol made me feel sick, but alcohol would become my best friend and worst enemy. I first experienced it in any quantity when I was sent away to boarding school – we'd often go into the local town and drink, more or less always quite excessively. This was when I was about 14 years old.

It wasn't long until I was expelled because of drink-related violence. I came back drunk from the town one night and my friend started being sick – when the housemaster questioned us I flew at him with a chair in a drunken rage. I was placed into local authority care, and it seemed the right thing to walk around the town at weekends in a big group, getting as drunk as we could and fighting rival towns and villages. After a while it was 'watch that Gary, he drinks and fights' – a reputation it became hard to shake off.

I met my real mum after I left care, and both her and my older brother were big drinkers. My mum once said to me that she wanted me to drink like her to make her proud, and at one stage tried to make me drink a bottle of vodka – I did it as I wanted to make her happy. I was 16 and so drunk I remember fighting with the wind on the way home. Now it's been 12 years since I've spoken to her.

A couple of years later I moved into a hostel. I'd started cutting myself after getting drunk and moved there for support. I was drinking heavily in there, from around nine in the morning – most days I'd drink at least ten pints of lager, plus a few cans. I'd regularly cut myself, get into fights and into trouble with the police and it seemed wherever I moved I had this label of Gary the drinker – he likes a fight and is nothing but trouble.

I moved to the Derbyshire area in around 2001. By this time I'd been in lots of trouble, had numerous failed relationships and had even been refused custody of my son, partly because of my drinking. But I was to learn that this was my journey – I needed help. I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew for sure I didn't want to give myself that label, alcoholic.

When I moved to Derbyshire the same pattern continued – drinking, fighting and failed relationships, until last year I was sent to prison for an alcohol-related offence. My girlfriend was pregnant and came to visit me, crying as she left. I walked back to my cell thinking 'Gary why are you so selfish? When someone who loves you, and who needs you most at this time, sees you in here, and through your own stupidity and selfishness you're not there for her?' I got back to my cell and cried. 'What a waste of space', I thought. On the next visit the same thing happened.

After I was released I wrote to Derbyshire police and expressed an interest in doing something to help others, because I was now sick of my worst enemy – alcohol. They referred me to Derbyshire DAAT, and this year I started as a service user representative. Operation Relentless is running across Derbyshire until November (see page) and I and other reps went out with the police



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meeting people and raising awareness during Alcohol Awareness Week. The police have been very, very supportive, and I'm interested in doing other alcohol awareness work, if anyone will find me of use.

I am now completely drink-free and in a stable relationship. I have a beautiful daughter, Jasmine, who one day I just want to say 'Daddy, I'm so proud of you'. I'm also taking driving lessons and feel I've finally taken the steps to get my life at last on track. In the future I hope I can be there to support alcoholics on their journey of recovery, give them a shoulder to lean on and help them believe with inner strength, courage and determination that they too can overcome their dark times with drink, work within their realistic sights, and become free of alcohol, just as I have.

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