

‘Playing Our Part’ – Conference 2006 Highlighting the needs of families affected by imprisonment & substance misuse

Speaker I

My experience was with my younger sister. She went to prison and it was the first time in our family ever that someone had been in prison for any..., for any reason. By that time it was more of a relief because of the substance issues, because of the drug addiction and the chaos that had been going on for years. We saw it as a form of respite.

She has a young daughter, my niece, who at that time then had to go and live with my mum and..., there was issues around first of all it being in the local paper and because it's a small rural place, the stigma, the embarrassment for all our family, but particularly for my mum who is elderly and for my niece. And then the uncertainty of what was going to happen, how we were going to see her and just not knowing how to go about even visiting her.

We saw prison as a form of respite; we naively thought, well, at least she won't be taking any drugs while she's in there and my mum's words were at the time: 'Well, I can go to sleep at night because I know where she is now.' And we hoped that going to prison that she would get help with her drug problem and she would get help with other problems that she had that led her into drug addiction in the first place and that she would come out the other end a changed person. I feel that we were totally let down and I feel to an extent so was she because when I went to visit her at first she was really..., her eyes were clear, she was back to her old self and was the sister that I'd known all my life. And the visit that took place a couple of weeks before she was due to get out, I knew that she had taken something and I couldn't believe that I was sitting in a prison visiting room, visiting my sister who I could see was medicated, and I couldn't understand how the prison officers couldn't see that also. And my heart just sank that day because I knew what would happen when she came out.

We gave each other support within our family but our local Family Support Group were terrific. We've been involved with the Family Support Group for quite some time so it was a place where we could go and talk about what was happening and feel safe and there were other members in the Family Support Group who'd had family members who'd been in prison, so we got support from them. Well, I mean, it was in the front page of the newspaper so, you know, when a child who had nothing to do with this, in a small town, had to go to school next day as a lot of the children do and face up to the consequences of her mother's drug addition and criminal behaviour.

But it also meant that we had to look at how we..., were we going to visit her and if we were going to visit her it would have to be from my niece's point of view: did she want to see her mum and if she did how were we going to go about doing that, because we'd never been in a prison in our life. So that was quite daunting. We were lucky because we... I'm a car owner and so is my other sister so we were able to make our own way there and finance our own prison visits. There is no way that anybody using public

transport could arrive in Greenock for a prison visit and get home using public transport from Stranraer. It's impossible.

We were offered no help with prison visits from anywhere. We were offered no information. We didn't know what to expect; I didn't know what to expect. When I arrived there I was extremely nervous and trying not to show it in front of my niece. It was a place where I think everybody assumed that you knew what the procedure was to get through the front door and which of course I didn't and my niece certainly didn't. It was..., an experience that I'll never forget.

We had talked to my sister about the fact that, you know, she needed a new start and we hoped that the prison authorities would help her find that new start and get her resettled somewhere outside Stranraer. We didn't know whether that was possible; we just thought it would be part of the remit as it's rehabilitation. And I realised that whatever it was that I had in my mind that took place in prison as far as rehabilitation of drug offenders was concerned, wasn't what was actually happening. Because she arrived...she got out of prison and she didn't arrive home for two days and my niece waited at the window for two days, waiting on her mother to come home. I think if we'd had known what happens when somebody comes out of prison from a family's point of view it would have been helpful for us with my niece.

It would have been helpful to have information as to what a prison visit..., what to expect. My mum had spoken to my sister on the telephone and she'd given me a carrier..., a bag full of clothes and underwear to take to her and I didn't know what to do with the bag when I got in through the door, I didn't know who to give it to and I didn't know if they would need to search it. Because, obviously, she went into prison with just what she was standing up in. I didn't know what I could take into the visit with me, if I could take anything in with me or not. I didn't know if we would be searched and, if we were searched, what would that consist of. It would have been so helpful to have had some sort of mediation and somebody to facilitate that mediation for my sister coming out of prison instead of everything that had been left up in the air and within two days our family realising that we were going to be..., dropped into the chaos again. Because after the twenty four hours we knew she must have been somewhere and she was using again. Because I had seen it two weeks before she got out of prison.

I know now a lot more than I did then and..., I don't know if I would be able to visit my sister again. And, I mean, she's still using now..., if she was to go back into prison. She's been in prison since that first time and I didn't visit and I don't know if I could do it again because it was such a traumatic experience for *me* and, you know, I feel that if there was more support for family members to encourage you to feel as comfortable as is possible in a situation like that with visiting then, you know, it might be different.

Speaker II

Well, it was actually both my sons went into prison just... on New Year's Day, on New Year's Eve, I should say and both of them had got lifted. They'd dabbled in various things; they'd been in bits and pieces of trouble but they went out but they didn't come back and because it was a New Year I didn't know where they were and two or three days went on and I was totally climbing the walls, phoning up. I phoned the police station and I got to the point where I think the duty sergeant knew it was me again. And I said: 'Can you please tell me if they've been arrested?' Em...not allowed to tell me that sort of thing. But he was quite good, the policeman, when he says..., I said: 'Well, I'll report them missing'. He said: 'You don't need to report your two sons missing'. And then I realised what had happened.

You cannae find anything through the court, you cannae find out what's happened or what's that through the courts cos I phoned them a few times. But I had to find out who the solicitor was. And then you get the wee secretary who was saying - she was really quite nice - 'I'll try and find out what has happened to them.' Phoned the court and they said they'd went up to the court then but they'd been released. And so, for two or three days I was saying what if my sons are released where are they? They really wouldn't go anywhere else - they'd come home. And of course at that time I still didn't know what they had supposedly done. And I said, if they've done something that bad they didn't want to talk to me, eh, this is ridiculous. But the court had made a mistake. They hadnae got sent home, they'd been put in prison. And so when I found out they were in prison that was kinda a relief. Oh, they're all right, they're alive. But the lack of information that comes to me, as a family member, it's almost as if you don't... 'they're adults, we don't need to tell you anything'. But they didn't realise they were making me ill by no letting me know where my sons were. If it happened to anybody else, if your son walked out the door and didn't come back for his tea and a week later before you find out whether he's alive or what... That's what was the horriblest thing, really, that whole week. At that time I didn't tell anybody, I didnae tell my other son, my oldest son, I just didnae want to tell anybody

So, rushing up to see them, going into the prison was such a horrible experience for me and because my two sons were in, I had to be photographed and I had to get my fingerprints scanned in and I had to answer these different questions. Then I had to go through another building where they search you and they put this stuff on your hands before you've even seen them to see if you've got any drugs - if you're coming in with it. So I went through all that procedure and eventually they brought my older son down.

For two or three days I was like a... I was like a zombie. I was going in there, going and seeing them, seeing if they were all right, seeing if they had enough money for cigarettes and things. I walked out and as I came to the front door there was this wee woman sitting, I'll never forget, wee cheery face, and she looked down at me and she said: 'Are you all right?' And I said: 'I don't know.' And that was from the Lighthouse Foundation and I just blurted everything out with her and I said I cannae tell anyone and I don't want any of my family to know the boys are in here. I said I am climbing the ceilings here and told her I was really worried about them getting more into drugs, I feel, more into drugs. And then she said there's things you can get told about more at the Lighthouse, but practical, how are you getting in here, how are you getting your transport, can you afford it. Well, I couldnae: it was costing me a fortune coming to see the boys. But I was totally devastated, I really was, with the boys being in there and I was worried about what was going to happen when they come out. Are they going to go back into the same old stuff, are they going to see the same old people? And I was asking what can I do with them? I really need to keep them busy. Then Lorraine from the Foundation says there a few things they might be able to get involved in and then she told me about I think what saved my two laddies. It was the Prince's Trust.

The older one he was just withdrawn, quiet: 'That's me. No way am I going back in there, no way'. See, the 18-year old was: 'Ah, it was all right. I actually met some mates there.' They're no your mates, for goodness sake, you know.

After they come out of prison, the Lighthouse Foundation were sort of a-steering them. They were there for me, they were brilliant for me, but they were also there for my two sons. They were the ones that was in prison and so in helping them they've helped me when you've nobody to turn to, naebody to talk to and you're like they're in prison and, well, so was I right through that. I was stuck in the house.

And if it wasn't for they women, honest to goodness, I'd have been the same myself.

Oh, from the doctor it was like: 'We'll gie you some Valium'. And I don't want Valium. 'But, you'll need to sleep, you need a sleep, you know.' And I went: 'I don't want it. I waken up and they're still there. The last trouble's still here. What's the use?' So, thankfully, with my determination, I didn't go on to medication which was all that was on offer for me. 'Take this, knock yourself out. Take this stuff. If you take these drugs you'll calm down.' Then I took panic attacks; I'd high blood pressure and all the rest of it but thankfully it didn't go down that road and I've been myself. My boys are dependent on drugs and the doctor wants to put me on drugs to deal with it? No thank you.

If anything did happen I know that I'd just lift that phone and I'd phone the women at the Foundation and they just give you that wee bit..., just having somebody to talk to, to give you that wee bitty advice. It makes me stronger, stronger for ma sons, really, to keep them going, for me, to get the support from the Lighthouse Foundation is fantastic. Then I can be, I can be a strong person for them, really and that's what they're needing too.

Speaker III

I could go back five years, probably, when I first had my grandchildren – maybe even longer than that. Two little girls they are and it was my daughter and I didn't know at all she was taking drugs, I didn't. I was naïve to it all so, sleepless nights? That's an understatement. But I tried to focus on my two granddaughters because I thought well, she's old enough if that's what she's chose. I'm no letting these grandweans go through this. It was terrible.

But I didn't know as well she was in trouble with the police. There was warrants out for her and everything. I never knew. And then, I hadn't seen her for about four month and it was hearsay from people in the street that she'd upped – her and her boyfriend – upped and hopped it to Blackpool. She was down there for over a year, on the run, because, of course, there was a court case to go to over drugs. And then she got caught. The police went down to Blackpool; they met her there, in Blackpool, got them, and she was brought up last October, Halloween night, they brought her back because they phoned me and told me they had her in King Street Police Station.

So she's been in Cornton Vale since last October. I've..., I could honestly say it's been a big weight off my mind. She's no lying in the streets in Blackpool. That was what was in my head. She's lying dead. But she's been in there for a year. I have the contact with her on the phone and the girl that speaks to me on the phone now seems the daughter I lost 5 years ago. And I'm hoping and praying that this has been a learning process and that she's turned her life around. She is...she isn't due to come out of prison till next March. But I have had somebody out to visit me at home because she's eligible to come out with a tag, right. So I have said, yes, that she could come and be with me and her two girls. So she's getting out on the 8th of December with a tag on till March. Now there's a lot of bridges to be built. I'm under a wee bit pressure as to how things will go with it but at the end of the day she's still my daughter and I've got to be there for her. So..., the girls are over the moon but they don't know she's in prison. I don't think the oldest one could take the truth. So, I've told them mummy is in a rehab, right and that's where they think mummy's coming from.

I've had to hide a lot. Things have been really hard, I just have to phone Ann and she would be there. The support I get from them has been overwhelming. Because, obviously, when you're in a situation like that. And what I felt at first was shame. And, you feel so

isolated and you think it's only you. And then I'd look at those two wee girls and just cry and cry and cry. They know about the drugs. They know mummy took drugs. I've explained about all of that and they understand that cos we warn them about the dangers of drugs. But to tell them that mummy is in prison I just... see... the oldest one is seeing a psychologist because she is a very emotional wee child. And I just didn't think she could cope with the truth. So, I had to tell them what I thought and I told them mummy was now in a rehab because from the prison she was phoning regularly or she was writing. So, after being away in Blackpool for nearly a year and a half suddenly mummy's writing, mummy's phoning. So they had to know what's going on. So, I have lied, I know I've lied to them but I think I've done it for the best. They do believe she is in a rehab and they're over the moon because she's told them she's coming home. So they're saying to me, like, 'Oh, Mummy's got better!'. I'm delighted if she's back with her two children and getting that bond. I'd love to see that bond back and I'm saying to myself, well, will she really stay off drugs? That's in the back of my mind because you hear of so many that go in and they come back out and they do the same thing. And I'm saying, well, how would it be different for mine, then? She could come out and she could promise the earth and maybe go back the other way. But I know from the 8th of December to March anyway she can't go anywhere, you know, because she will be out on a tag. So if that time could build bonds or bridges whatever then I'll..., I'm just going to hang in there, you know. I've still got to stand by her.

The letter I got from her yesterday about... on her letter she said she'd been off methadone for nine days now. So when she went in there, I mean, she was on about six or seven bags a day of heroin. So to hear that she's now off methadone so..., I don't know if they give her something to counteract methadone, I don't really know. But that to me in a year has been well worth it.

She was taken in last October. For health reasons and other things I didn't actually manage to go up to the prison until July this year. So she had been in about eight months by then. And I took the children up with me. Again, they think that was a clinic, not a prison. That is the gospel. They come through the gates, right across the prison forecourt to get to where my daughter's unit was. But they children..., the oldest one asked me why they wear uniforms but I told them that was security men in case anybody brings drugs into there. I don't know how I managed it but I done it. And they really accepted that. All the way back the oldest girl cried, back from Stirling right back to our house in Prestwick, all of us travelling in the bus. She broke her heart, the oldest one. And I just had to keep reassuring her that, you know, it won't be long, that mummy's doing well. And I had to keep telling her things like that and so...

I praise her, you know, when she comes on the phone and says she's passed this other thing and I say 'That's great, that's great, you stick in, keep your chin up', you know. But I don't actually know who works with her in prison, you know, or what turned her about or what... I really don't know how it happens in there.

Social Work don't want to know. I haven't even had a Social Worker all the years the children have been with me. The Lighthouse is the only people I've had and who *have* supported me. Because, you see when... when....when my daughter first went in and that, all I felt was, oh God, shame, if her name goes in the paper these kids are going...at school. That did worry me. I thought all this is going to come out in the papers. I was all worked up for that. Actually, I ended up worrying myself so sick that I was taken into hospital for a day with pains in my chest and...but anyway Ann....Ann, you know, she said 'Don't worry' and she's such a lovely person.

Because I think that when you are in that situation, who wants to know? Who can I tell my problems to? Who's going to listen? Who wants to know that your daughter's on drugs, your daughter's in prison. All people want to do is just talk about it. It ended up that's what I thought. I'm not even going out the house; I'm not going out. They'll say 'That's her mum; that's her children'. That's how I felt. But the Lighthouse they made you feel..., they taught me not to feel like that, should I say: 'You don't feel like that. The children have done nothing; you've done nothing. So your daughter's went a wee bit off the line but it's no the end of the world.' And that's what I really loved about it. They didn't turn me away; they didn't judge me.

I feel a wee bit stressed thinking what will happen after March. Will she just get up and leave? I don't know. I was dead worried when she first went in prison but, then again, I was relieved. I know that sounds strange but I knew she wasn't lying in the streets. I knew she wasn't overdosing on drugs, and you know, it was a relief, actually, for me that she went to prison, And if it's took prison to turn her life round then so be it, it's took that road to do it. So they do say there is light at the end of the tunnel. But this time two year ago I never seen no light. But in the two year between her going to Blackpool and the court cases and going to prison... it's two year on now and, aye, there's a wee flicker there somewhere. Hopefully.