

My Story

I couldn't hear myself for the sound of the crowd. I couldn't quite believe I was actually there. It was electrifying. I knew I had to try and focus but it was hard - I couldn't hear myself think. I knew what I was waiting for though. Once I heard that pistol that would be it. Just go...

I was 15, living in Dennistoun, skipping school, told by the teachers I would never amount to anything in life - and standing at the start line of the 800m in Scotstoun. Running for Scotland. There were nine of us in the race and I was nervous, but I just dug deep into what I was good at. I knew I could run, and I knew I could run well. When the pistol went I got into my wee zone. At the 400m mark I overtook the leader and the way I was running was just so fast. I was off and no-one was catching me.

When I crossed the finish line I ended up falling to the ground - I couldn't believe I actually won. Even though I got over the line, I was still like - what just happened? I was exhausted, lying on the track they had to pick me up and tell me I had won. I couldn't take it in; my first race for Scotland and I won gold. I can still remember it so clearly in my head.

Running for Scotland in that race was the high point of my life. It made me feel great. I was doing something I was good at, something that was worthwhile. For once I could believe I was good at something no matter what other people told me. I was good at it and I just went for it. Who knows what the road for me could have been. Who knows? If I hadn't messed up, maybe I could have been running in the Commonwealth Games.

I grew up in Dennistoun and Duke St. and lived there for twenty-six years. It was a great community to grow up in. There was a lot of happiness there. The people were great and it's an amazing place. Everybody knew each other and looked out for each other. It was a good area. I've got a lot of good childhood memories.

I remember going on my first holiday when I was about six. We went to Blackpool, got the bus down from Buchanan St. I just loved seeing all the lights, I kept thinking - wow - there was just so much for your eyes to feast on.

We went for a week, my mum, my dad and me and it was good. I remember wanting things out of the shops, nagging my mum and dad for them. And I loved it down on the beach. I loved just being on holiday, and didn't want

to come home. I kicked up a fuss, moaning and crying because I wanted to stay. It was a great holiday.

School was different. I don't know why, but I didn't like Primary School at all. I was a stubborn wee person at the time, I just didn't like it. Apart from playing football. Every day I just couldn't wait till the bell rang to get home and get out to play with my friends - that took a bit of the boredom away. Football was a big bit of my life.

I thought TV's were awesome, and when I was about nine or ten I remember becoming more aware of the news, and how things were changing politically. The way the world was changing. I wasn't afraid, but I was curious and interested in what was going on. I used to listen, even though I was in my room I could still hear through the walls what they were talking about and how bad it was for people.

I used to go round to my Granny's a lot - she just lived round the corner from us. I liked her. She was strong, she enjoyed life - she was just full of energy. She was my Gran. She believed in me and I believed in my Gran. We were very close. I loved her so much.

My Granny had been all over the world, and she was good friends with Ricky Fulton too. There was one photo where Ricky Fulton was playing on my Granny's piano. She had a beautiful piano. I don't know if my mum still has that photo. But I would love to show it to you, because it was so beautiful.

After school one day I went round as usual and I knew there was something wrong. The storm doors were all closed and that usually never happened. She didn't answer the door and I knew something was wrong straight away.

So I went to a neighbours and got a towel and put my hand right through the glass. I climbed through, even though there was the risk of cutting myself but I knew I had to. It was hard, but then I found her lying there, - seeing her face, and that was even harder. She'd taken a stroke. She went to the Royal and then got moved to Aberdeen and died on arrival at Aberdeen.

I think the lowest point of my life was losing my Granny. I still find it hard to take - she was my rock. I didn't find it easy to talk about missing my Gran with my family - I bottled it all up. I started to sneak away and drink more. My mum could smell it off my breath. My head was away and I

started dogging school more. I said I was going and then just wouldn't turn up. I was only fourteen and had lost the inspiration of my life.

My gran would have been so proud of my running. I started when I was fifteen. I wasn't enjoying school was dogging a lot. I was looking for other things to do and came across the running club at Crown Point. My teachers hadn't encouraged me in my running; I just kind of stumbled on it. It was every Tuesday and Thursday. Mostly I went for the extra training to keep fit. I didn't think I was actually going to end up running races, but I ended up really enjoying it and the next thing I knew I was buying a set of running shoes, spikes, and that was me. I got the taste of running. And I was good at it.

The teachers didn't believe in me, they thought I was a failure. Especially one who had it in for me and said I would never achieve anything. One Sports Day I won 4 races out of 5. I turned round and said to him, who's the failure now? He didn't know what to say back. It was good seeing his face. He could stick his failure down his throat. That motivated me more. It made me determined. It made me more determined than ever before.

Running opened my eyes to being good at something. Even though my teachers had told me I would never amount to anything - I was good at it, and I just went for it. It's like life, isn't it, goals and aspirations. Even though you feel so low at certain times, always have goals, always have dreams, always have aspirations. Everybody has dreams, everybody has goals, and aspirations. A year before I was sixteen, I was achieving those goals.

I used to run for Shettleston Harriers in the old McDonalds League at the Kelvinhall, 800m and 200m, and have a lot of medals for that. My mum still has them all in a wee box back at home. Then I started on Cross Country. I came second in the first race, but by the third I had come first. I just loved running.

At the weekend my pals and I were bored hanging about the streets at night, but was nothing for the group of us to do. We started drinking more. It wasn't like we were drinking every night, but it did become more and more. We were drinking through boredom though - boredom, boredom.

As we drank more, I started to miss a few training sessions. I would just think - I'll just have a few beers tonight instead and go next time; it won't matter missing one session. I started missing more and more sessions and then suddenly I hadn't been for a really long time. In the end I stopped

going altogether and that was it. A few people tried to encourage me back, but I didn't listen, I was a really stubborn person. My own person. I had loads of ambitions when I was growing up, but they never amounted to anything, just all these ambitions just sort of wasted away.

When I hit sixteen, I just wanted out of school. I'd got put back a year at Primary 7 and I was kind of gutted because all my pals were going on to Secondary, and it kind of bugged me all the way through - I always felt behind. Soon as I hit sixteen I was out that door, and just into training schemes and stuff, you couldn't hold me back.

My pals and I hung about on the streets at night, drinking and getting into trouble. You had all these different schemes in the East End. You had Dennistoun, you had Duke St, Alexandra Parade, you had the Gallowgate - we all kind of just clashed really, and then you had Calton as well so like there was always gang fighting. And in gang fighting there's always repercussions. Sometime down the line you might think it's all over and nothing will pop up, but people don't forget a face, and people don't forget stuff.

Peer pressure and boredom makes people join gangs. That and feeling excluded. Because you want to be like them, you want to be a part of something if you feel like you're a part of nothing. If you feel a part of a gang, you feel a part of a group, you feel safe, you're part of this, you're with your friends, you're feeling good. And then if somebody's got a knife, you'll start carrying a knife. If somebody's drinking, you'll want a drink. If somebody's smoking hash, or more - that's how you start.

So there we were, jumping about corners being bored, always getting pulled up by the police. And then you start getting into that spiral, you're getting angry, you're getting lost. You're always getting pulled up by the police, you want to just graffiti on the walls, spray stuff.

When the police saw you drinking they would pour the drink out and then you would be gutted. Or you used to see them coming and you would drink it was fast as you could, get as much down you as possible, cause you knew they were coming to pour it away. Get as much down the belly as possible before that. It was warrant checks they stopped you for - if they had a warrant for your arrest and then the next minute you know you're up the Sherriff Court. You were always in and out, it was like a second home London Road. In and out for stupid things - drinking on the streets, sometimes gang fighting, just a lot of stuff building up and a lot of court cases over the years. Luckily enough I never got the jail. I know a lot of my friends have been in and out of the jail, I've just been fortunate not to be.

Growing up from a teenager to an adult was a downward spiral. We were all drinking, we were all still bored. The Shettleston Harriers seemed like a long time ago.

I was on wee training schemes where you were earning £70 a week for learning how to do bricklaying, gardening, plus you got bonuses £30 on top of that, and they would pay your travel expenses. I thought that was good, I thought it was amazing at the time. It was my first money, I've actually earned this, I've actually done something to earn it. At the end of the day I would finish and sneak into the pub. I was 16, but I would dress smart so I wasn't getting ID'd, so I would sneak into the pub, and it was kind of good.

Then I got a job as a porter at a hotel. That was good, a good wage. It was my first big wage and was lot of money to me. I bought myself clothes with my money and that. The shifts were 11 hours, 15 hours though, and it was too knackered, it was affecting my health. It was too hard. It became too much. I had to give it up in the end.

I was still living with my mum and dad at that point, but with me not working now, it became more and more difficult. I did some bad things. I was being bad with just drinking, being an idiot - my mum ended up having to threaten to throw me out.

Things were really bad at home and I had to go - I decided to go myself though rather than be thrown out. I thought this was going to be the answer, I would make myself homeless. I didn't know what to expect - I thought I would be able to get my own place. So I came into this world of homelessness for the first time, and it was tough. I did not expect it to hit me the way it did. It opened a new world.

I was a nervous wreck at first but was just trying to be strong. I got put in a hostel. I didn't like it there. I got robbed it was a bad experience. People could just nudge into your door, and your door would be open, so I was scared to go to sleep. It was not the environment for me.

It was a tough world. You have to be tough in the hostels, because if you show weakness, they'll pick on you. Try to bully you. If you show a weakness, you'll be the one walked over. You have to be strong or you learn the hard way. Being in a hostel you need to be strong.

I was still drinking. One night when I was out I ended up getting slashed by a bottle through drunken stupidity. I had taken Ecstasy the night before, and was coming down. I drank a litre of wine in 20 minutes to try and take

away the feeling. I was drunk, staggering about, not realising the stupid things I was doing.

I ended up in a fight but I can't really remember very much about it. I was outnumbered, surrounded by about 20 bodies around me - folk from another area. I got that - the bottle - down my face. The night is kind of blurry still, but I get flashbacks sometimes. I went to hospital myself. Ran up there and got my face stitched. And I have to keep looking at that reminder in the mirror, that reminder of how stupid I was.

I went to stay with a friend for a while, and then got back into my mum's - things were a bit more sorted out for me. I tried to just stay in at night, not to fall back into my old ways, but then the boredom cut into me and I got back into the wee circle again. The downward spiral again. If I didn't get out I was going to get put in a box or in the jail. And so I found myself homeless again.

That time I went to the Hamish Allan Centre. They sent me for a weekend to the Talbot, and then when the Monday came, they put me into Clyde Place. I was there for 5 months. And the after that I was moved into supported accommodation through the Simon Community.

Then at last I got a flat. My first home of my own. It was a three apartment in Tollcross. They weren't able to offer me anything smaller, and it was hard work to keep it up and to furnish it, but I loved my flat and it became like home. My first home of my own. It meant so much to me and I told myself I would never become homeless again.

Four years later when the bedroom tax came in I was hit with extra money for the spare room I hadn't wanted in the first place. I couldn't afford to pay and got into debt and arrears. Things spiralled, and I couldn't cope. It started to affect my mental health - I suffer from depression - and I wasn't able to ask anyone for help. I didn't have the energy. I just dragged me down and down and then I was evicted. I had to give up my nice home.

And here I am now, back in a hostel again. I thought I would never go back. I feel as if my life is going backwards instead of forwards. But I'm not going to let it beat me. It's a slow process, but I'm just going to keep my head held high. I don't want people feeling sorry for me. I was doing so well. Don't say it's a shame for me.

There hasn't really been one turning point for me, because my life journey has been so rocky. It's been an unsteady road. That's the way it's always been really, so many uneven roads.

I started going along to the Lodging House Mission. It's a Day Centre for people with homelessness needs and stuff. I went there for the cheap food, just to eat, but I wanted something more so I started getting involved in things. I got involved in the choir they ran. It was good - I grew to love singing.

Scottish Opera ran a project with the Lodging House Mission, and I got my first lead role in their production - "Who Killed John King?" We ended up performing it at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Who would ever have thought that I would be performing with the Scottish Opera at the Royal Opera House.

Our play was 8 minutes long and there were other groups there from all over the world, all of us experiencing homelessness. We got a standing ovation at the end of our piece. I'll never forget that. It was a beautiful experience. Our play was about two families and a gangland war. I felt like I was going to be sick from nerves, heavy nervous before I went on - but I done it and it was good. I still can't believe I done that. People dream of that sort of thing.

That's when I got my first taste of acting, and I wanted to continue. My heart is in singing and acting and I would love to be able to make a career out of them.

That gave me the confidence to go to college. I did Sound Production, and the music side of stuff. I get to work on my own music. It's amazing and has given me something that I like doing - singing is a big part of my life. Learning how to deal with sound, adding sound onto your music and adding wee beats and stuff, and its amazing the door it opens, its just amazing.

I want to be an actor; I've made my mind up. I'm doing a course in the Citizens Theatre now. Cause that's what I want to be. Like being on stage because you can get to be whatever you want. And then you just leave it on the stage at the end.

But day to day life isn't easy. I'm still running that race like when I was fifteen, but now there are lots of hurdles in the way too and people trying to pull you back. It's a long road but I keep running in the race to win. You want to beat the odds, you want to beat everything. The finishing line is when you conquer everything, when you feel good in your head. Instead of having all these worries about the DWP, sanctions, money and homelessness. So you're not going to be stressing, so your mind doesn't

play games with you - that's all I want. Poverty really affects your mental health, but I want to be strong, not back down the hole, not back in the slump.

I don't feel like a strong person. I'm using food banks and stuff the now and gambling. I want to be strong but I'm not yet, there's a long way to go. It's a long slow road, but it's a road, not a stop.

I get £104 a fortnight to live off. Crisis loan repayments and Council Tax comes off that first. Then £30 to the hostel. £40 for messages. I will have to start paying back my old rent arrears if I want a new flat with the Housing Association. I have very little left at the end of it. It's hard to cope. Even though I get my Housing Benefit, it's hard times. Everything is money. Everything. And everything is going up apart from what you've got in your pocket.

Sometimes I end up going back the Bookies because I'm desperate to make my money stretch a bit further. I used to gamble a lot in the past. It gets a hook in you; it's like control in the head. Sometimes it's like it's just whispering to you. But you can never beat a bookie, no matter how hard you try.

They push you and push you at the Job Centre. I'm always worried I'm going to trip up and get sanctioned. Every time I go in there it's a worry.

I feel trapped because I'm living in a hostel, and if I took a job and lost my Housing Benefit, I wouldn't be able to pay the hostel. It would be too hard. But they don't listen to me at the Job Centre, I'm just another number. I really want to work, but I don't know how, and it feels like they're choking to sanction me.

At times I feel socially excluded out of everything. I feel like people look down on me because of the way I look, the way I dress. I start to think in my head that I'm a waste of space. I might look homeless, but there's still good inside of me. Don't insult my intelligence. I don't want people to pity and patronise me when I walk down the street. I am still a human being. Every time I get up, get a shower in the morning, get ready, go out, every day is a battle. Sometimes it really affects my mental health. But I know there will be low days and try to keep going.

I try not to use food banks because they make me feel worse. They make me feel low, ashamed, it shows I'm struggling, it feels like another judgement. I know they're there to help people, but that's how they make me feel. Sometimes I have no option though.

I'm much more than someone who is struggling with money, mental health and homelessness. I am a singer, an actor, a striver. My strength is being with people, building relationships, and supporting them. I know what it is like to be alone and isolated.

I volunteer with Bridging the Gap in the Gorbals. I feel happy when I go there. They are amazing. Every time I go in there it's always a positive and something I'm good - I can be somebody.

And now I am part of the Poverty Truth Commission too. I want to help change things. Actions are better than words. We all need to take a stand together, and I want to be a part of that change.

The most important thing I've learnt about myself is to never give up on yourself. If you give up on yourself, what chance have you got?