

I was born a victim of the system from a mother who was also a victim of the system and I've been trying to fight my way out of this vicious circle my whole life.

My path in life was set at an early age. My family collapsed in spectacular fashion in a frenzy of domestic abuse. We were literally broken. My mum didn't have any coping strategies and so her life spiralled into chaotic and risky behaviour and I followed suit.

From the ages of 8 – 16 the system really messed me up. I was bright, opinionated, and frustrated. The system didn't understand me at all. I gave up on them, then gave them another chance so many times. In return, at 16 I was told, 'It's a pity you're not pregnant.'

I was signposted to different departments with no one willing to take responsibility. Their signposting sent me in every wrong direction. I knew what I needed but when I spoke out, I was medicated. The medication was a sticking plaster which had 'We don't know what to do with you' written all over it.

I was passed from pillar to post and then I took myself off across the country looking for my own solutions. I know Social Services are doing their best in an impossible situation. I get it, but it nearly destroyed me.

I arrived in Grimsby having just lost my mum. I was in a mess. It was pure chance that led me to the writing group. I didn't realise it at the time but I was reaching out for help without knowing who I was reaching out to. Joining the group caused me a lot of anxiety and meeting these new people triggered the problems a lifetime of struggle has given me.

But I soon realised that I had found my place in life. The members of the writing group saw who I was and accepted for who I was. They put their arms around me. They listened to me and helped me to put all my frustration, fears and problems into words. I could express my past for the very first time and this lead weight that I'd carried through of my life began to lift.

I can tell the group anything. They are unshockable and they always come through for me, offering different approaches to the problems I still have.

Community is the answer because it's made up of people who have lived through a whole range of experiences. These people have faced their problems and have genuine solutions and suggestions.

They are my family, my therapy, my freedom and my safety. They have taught me the power of words which are my tools to express myself, express my past and see my future path.

This is true therapy. This needs to be provided at the beginning of people's struggles before they are signposted in the wrong direction and find themselves at the wrong destination.

**Kelly McLaughlin**