



It's My Life - Thanks to C-FAR and Life Change UK

My name is James Dwyer. I am 22 years old and currently working as a carpenter in the Medway towns. This is the story of how a charity called C-FAR made it possible for me to turn my life around from that of crime and violence to one of happiness and success.

Up until 10 years of age I was a happy normal schoolboy. Unfortunately, around this time my home life started to go wrong as I realised my step-father was physically and mentally abusing my mother. It was at this time that he also started to do the same towards me. When I tried to protect my mother from what he was doing he took his frustration out on me. This started to affect my schooling as I was constantly worried about what was happening to my mother. I began running away from school to go home and check that my mum was ok. This is when I believe I also started to become very angry and aggressive towards other pupils and friends. I soon lost friends, was looked upon as a bully and became an out cast.

As I started secondary school I got into a lot of trouble and started bunking off from lessons, all of which led to me being expelled. Not being at school I was wandering the streets and met with new and older friends who had already left school. Most had been regular visitors to prison and they began to introduce me to crime. We stole cars and broke into sheds to get money for cannabis and other drugs which led to me smoking cannabis from a very young age. This cycle of activity went on for the next 4 years. I was in and out of court, attending probation and having to undertake reparation orders etc.

I then found out that my real father had died. This hit me very hard and I became very aggressive and violent which led to further crimes such as GBH and street robbery. It was not long after this that my mother got the courage to leave my step father and we moved to the Medway towns where we lived in Rochester. This was another real problem for me as I did not know anybody. Having left all I knew behind I started to go out stealing and fighting. I soon received my first ever custodial sentence which was 18 months in H.M. Y.O.I Feltham.

On release from Feltham I had nothing whatsoever and resorted to getting money to survive by the only way I knew, more crime. I was soon back in prison. The same thing happened to me over and over again. It was like I was trapped in a circle and I did not know how to break out.

It was during my last prison sentence that I learned I was to be a father myself. I did not want to have anything to do with my son as I felt I would be a bad influence on him and did not want to ruin his life the way my step father had ruined mine. I was then approached by a prison officer and asked if I would be interested in speaking to some people from a charity organisation called C-FAR based in Devon. He said that they helped offenders. I spoke to a lady called Tracie from Moving Forward; an organisation in Chatham that I later found out was a partner of C-FAR. Tracy interviewed me and described what C-FAR was all about.

After the interview I was accepted on to the C-FAR course and at the end of my sentence left for Burdon Grange in Devon. The C-FAR Life Change programme consisted of an 11-week residential course where I undertook a tough structured regime of education, life skills training and one to one mentoring with a designated trainer. We also tried out new things that I had never thought possible before, such as camping expeditions on Dartmoor, caving, kayaking and much more, all of which taught us team work, how to communicate, leadership and trust. It was also great fun and a really good life experience. All the trainers and mentors at C-FAR treated the other ex-offenders me like real people and not just like criminals. This taught us to believe in ourselves so that we could change our lives. All we needed to do was learn how to do it and put this into practice. For the first time since I was 10 years old, I was happy with myself and how I was changing and thinking.

After returning from Devon with my new skills and qualifications I was supported by a community mentor and helped to gain employment as a trainee carpenter with a local builder. This was another turning point in my life as I had never had a real job before. I was extremely excited about the prospects, but also very scared and nervous. I spoke to my mentor about this and with her help I overcame the worries and concerns and attended my first day at work. It is now 2 years since I started and I am still working for the same company and am now a fully qualified carpenter.

On returning from Devon I stopped driving illegally and worked towards getting my drivers license. I have recently achieved this. This was a real plus for me as since the age of 15 I had been banned. I have now found a real passion for sports bikes and belong to a club and many organisations that deal with raising people's awareness of motorcyclists on the road. I attend rallies such as Kill Spills which help to reduce the number of bike related accidents on the road from spilt diesel.

I also have a fantastic relationship with my son Billy who I go and see every spare moment I have. We often go out at weekends to the zoo or play football and other things that dads do with their sons. All of this was only possible thanks to the C-FAR team and the parenting lessons and life experiences that I learned while I was there.

I really cannot stress enough how important it is to have places like C-FAR. Prison "DOES NOT WORK". Although it is a punishment, it does not do anything to teach offenders the skills they need or provide the information to become a positive contributing member of the community and to start working on their futures. As a prisoner you are just locked in a cell and faced with violence and segregation, all of which is scary, often forcing people to build mental walls or become more violent simply to survive. This never helped me at all.

Do not for a second think that C-FAR is an easy option. Compared to prison, the programmes structure, work, lessons and mentoring was very intense. I believe that this was one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life, but with the help from the trainers and my mentor it worked.

C-FAR was a dream come true. It helped me get my life back on track, not only in the sense of stopping crime, but also in my personal relationships with my son and my Fiancée.

I was very distressed to hear that C-FAR had had to close because the government refused to pay enough money towards the programme. C-FAR is the type of programme that people like me desperately need. If the government spent as much time, money and effort on programmes such as the C-FAR Life Change programme as they did on prisons, I am sure they would cut the number of prisoners and re-offending. People who get into crime need 'HELP' to stop. Locking us up and leaving us with nothing when we return to the community does not do it.

I was so happy to hear that Trevor, Theresa and Steve, whom I have enormous respect for, had made the decision to start a new company, Life change UK, and that they are still working to help offenders turn there lives around. I cannot thank the C-FAR team enough for all the help that they gave me and for giving me a chance to change my life and prove myself. I will do anything I can to help promote Life change UK and the work they do with people like me.

Thank you for taking the time to read my story. I hope that this inspires you to assist Life Change UK and to promote how important it is to have alternatives to prison that work. -www.lifechangeuk.com

Yours gratefully
James Dwyer.