

Mile in My Shoes: Dalanya's story

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I'm Dalanya from Wimbledon. I live in South West London and have done all my life.

About a year and a half ago, I applied for a job as Community Health and Wellbeing Champion. And I went to the interview and when I got the address for the interview I... was so gobsmacked because I looked at the address and thought, 'I think that's the children's home.' And I went to the interview and got out the car and my eyes welled up because so many memories came flooding back. It was the very first children's home that I was in.

I remember being in the bedroom for the first night looking around, and all the walls were bricks, and it was like an institution, it was like a mini prison. And then, in the morning, you just heard so much noise. Loads of noise. You are the new kid. So, everyone's intrigued by who you are. The young people want to know who you are, they're assessing you, you know, if you can get taken advantage of or if you've got any vulnerabilities around you.

I was a very angry child in care. I went into the care system very angry. The fight of my life has been for injustice and being a voice actually, for those who can't use their own at the time. There was lots of younger children in there that I tended to mother. And I went in there, I think, a very headstrong, determined young lady and I knew what I wanted to achieve. I'd witnessed police brutality, I'd witnessed racism, poverty. I'd heard stories about children that had been abused in the care system, horrific stories. And so, I felt that I was right to be angry and I also was quite defensive about that, because I went in there thinking, 'These are things that happen, and I don't want them to happen to me.' So, I was very angry towards a lot of the staff because I kind of blamed them for the failures of the system.

Sat waiting to be interviewed. I could hear sounds of the home, names come back to me from the young people that I forgot. Memories came back. And at the end, I was so overwhelmed that I actually said to them at the end, 'I just got interviewed in what was my friend's bedroom.' I had to disclose then, because I had trouble keeping it in the whole interview. And then I left, and I thought, 'I've ruined that. I've said too much. I shouldn't have told them. I shouldn't have told them I'm a care leaver.' So, I was ruminating in my thoughts. However, I got the job, so I was absolutely delighted with that.

During the course of my role, the bottom of what used to be the children's home was empty. And they discussed talking about making it a health and wellbeing studio and then, I can have a space there and utilise it as I want and bring it to life.

So many services have... gone away because of lack of funding. And over the years we've been really oppressed. They took out hell of a lot of money from services for vulnerable people.

If you get on the bus at Mitcham and you go 15 minutes into Pollards Hill, the community I work, your life expectancy decreases by eight years for a 15-minute bus journey. That shows a massive inequality, but why? Because we're in the same borough.

So, I've been saying to everyone for so long, that people get bounced around from service to service, and it's traumatic to keep repeating your story. That person might not have the strength to repeat their story again and might not have the strength to go to another service.

The beautiful thing about this studio is, because my role is funded by health and housing together, it's unique, because I'm actually working below the housing office what has a number of housing on the estate. So when they come in, they get warmly greeted, there's a safe space, financial advice on hand, so they've – we've got a BIMAX officer, who looks at their benefits, maximising their income, making sure they're receiving the right benefits and the right entitlements, employment support, we have mental health talks, menopause, self-care, relaxation, support for carers – that's the beauty of it.

In the community I look at the resources that are around, look at the strengths, look at what's right in the community rather than what's wrong, and I build on that. Everyone's got a gift. It's about empowering people to realise what their gift is. It could be listening, then you encourage them to come and listen. And then all of a sudden, they start to feel empowered, they start to feel part of a community. Massive things happen. Improvement of physical health, improvement of mental health. Gone on to do voluntary jobs, gone on to do paid jobs. Feeling valued.

There's a model that was done years ago in Bromley-by-Bow. If you have a look, I think they've got about a hundred services, and they brought GPs into community settings. So the GPs are on hand frontline, rather than in a surgery and in their rooms. Completely changes the dynamics because if the GP's in the kitchen making a cup of tea at lunchtime and the community are in the kitchen, changes the dynamics. It makes it more accessible; you know you build relationships. So that's what I think should – needs to happen again is get to really know people again. And I think services, if you're working frontline with the people there in the building, you're much more accountable. If you're frontline, you have to do what you say you're going to do because people will ask you the next day, 'Have you done it?'

Being on the frontline, speaking to people, go out, listen to them. I can see the impact, the community can see the impact, the stakeholders that I report to can see the impact. A role like that works really well, that's really beneficial. How can we implement that in other boroughs? How can we fund that role to happen so that it doesn't become another inequality where there's not my role in another borough, so that people don't get what you would get from my role and services. So, I'm also mindful of that.

The studio is there. I can't see it, because there's lots of funding been put into getting it up and running, I'd hate to see it not continue because of lack of funding. Could that happen? Yeah, it could. It could. For me, to see it transformed from what was a negative experience



for a lot of people, lots of people have experienced you know, bad times in there. So, to watch it do a complete U-turn and watch the community come in, embrace the space, embrace the support – marvellous.