

A client's story. Sept 2008

Up until 3 weeks ago, I was working, and living with my girlfriend. Then on the 27th August, I lost my job. Because I was then unable to pay my way, my girlfriend asked me to leave. The following night, I found myself homeless and out on the streets with no money and just a change of clothes in a bag.

I have no family and friends I could turn to because I'd managed to isolate them one by one over the years. I'm not a bad person but I've made a lot of silly choices. That is not the issue here – it's just a brief history of how I got to be on the streets.

My aim today is to try to make people aware of some of the problems facing homeless people on a daily basis – a time when you are without hope and left alone to face the dangers of life on the streets in Wigan.

Wigan is my home town, and I'm proud to be a Wiganer, but after my second night on the streets I was left bewildered and frightened. I had fallen asleep at the side of the Parish Church, and thought I was out of view, trying not to offend anyone and at the same time ashamed at being huddled up against a Church wall. I was woken by a painful kick in the ribs, quickly followed by two more, and then I watched helplessly as two men laughed and walked away.

A few nights later, I was walking down the canal at Poolstock Lane looking desperately for some shelter from the rain. I was approached by two men who asked me for change for the bus. When I told them I had nothing, one of them thrust a screwdriver in my face, just missing my eye, and cutting my cheekbone. I remember sitting under the canal bridge crying. 43 years old and crying, and I consider myself street-smart after being a taxi driver for seventeen years. I was mistaken. Nothing had prepared me for what I was going through. Feelings of vulnerability and helplessness stayed with me making me paranoid. I even considered jumping in the canal I felt so degraded.

The days are so long, but the nights are longer. In the day you can go to the library or the job-centre or, weather permitting – the park, and while away a few hours. You can even pretend you are waiting for a bus – that can normally buy you an hour if you're lucky before you're asked to move on.

The nights are a totally different thing. There is nowhere to shelter at all from the wet conditions, or even just to put your head down for an hour because it is unsafe and I am constantly being stopped by the Police, who have to by law move me on, but they are also sympathetic to my plight once they have heard my story.

The things that have happened to me and are happening to other people like myself, would not happen if there was somewhere for us to go at night. Surely it's not too much to ask for a dry room and a mattress. I am not homeless by choice and I'm sure that applies to most people on the streets. We are victims of circumstance that could strike anyone at any time, and we desperately need help.

I thought that all hope had gone, until last weekend when I plucked up the courage to go into the Queens Hall on Market Street. There I met a lady who, on learning of my situation, told me to go to the Bricklayers Arms – the drop-in centre for the homeless and ask for Trish. This turned out to be quite possibly the best decision I've ever made. Those people that run that shelter are angels, every last one of them. From the minute they opened the door, they made me feel welcome and human again. They have given me renewed hope to fight. Their work is endless, but they always have a smile on their faces, always willing to listen, and nothing is too much trouble for them no matter what your situation. I can testify to all this as I have witnessed it first hand. They are without doubt Wigan's unsung heroes and should be duly recognised so.

I wasn't born on the streets and I don't want to stay on the streets or die on the streets, and I'm sure I speak for the majority of homeless people. I'm not drug or alcohol dependent and I'm quite aware that there are people who are, but they are still human beings who surely deserve the right to a warm safe place to sleep at night.

I am a decent respectable citizen, and the only thing I am guilty of is being homeless.

Rob