

# MY STORY

"THERE'S SUCH A STIGMA ATTACHED TO HOMELESSNESS. I SUPPOSE EVERYONE THINKS IT WON'T HAPPEN TO THEM - BUT IT CAN"

I never thought I'd end up homeless. I came from a good home, had a good education and was used to a good quality of life. There's such a stigma attached to homelessness. I suppose everyone thinks it won't happen to them - but it can.

I grew up in Exeter and worked for thirty years for my father's business in the construction industry. I was a plasterer - he'd sort out contracts, and I'd travel all over the West Country to do the work. I lived with my father some of the time, but often stayed on-site or in B&B's when working away. I also spent a lot of time abroad.

I had a partner and young daughter in The Gambia, so I'd work for several months then use the money I'd saved to spend time with them out there. I wasn't allowed to work in The Gambia and they couldn't move here, but I wanted to support them and give my daughter a good way of life.

Just before Christmas last year my father, who I was very close to, died unexpectedly. Then my stepmother cut me off. In the space of a fortnight, my entire world came crashing down around me. I lost my father, my job, my home, my income and access to my family all at once. It was a massive shock to the system. I didn't know what to do.

I spent three nights sleeping in the bus station in December, which was a real culture shock - particularly as I'd just returned from a hot country.

Then I remembered hearing about St Petrock's, although I never thought I'd end up going there. Going in was hard - I kept thinking *'What am I doing? I don't belong here.'*

However, St Petrock's were brilliant from start to finish. The staff there deserve more praise. People look at the outside of the centre, but they don't understand the work that goes on inside.

Within two days of arriving at St Petrock's, staff found me an emergency room in a B&B through the No Second Night Out project. I was there for 3 months.

They supported me in applying for benefits, but there were delays. I was reliant on meals in St Petrock's centre and Foodbank vouchers for 2 months. That was hard to deal with, as I was used to looking after myself.

I had little contact with anyone and missed my daughter, who I could only get in touch with via email. I was grateful for the help, but it was a dark period.

"IN THE SPACE OF A FORTNIGHT, MY ENTIRE WORLD CAME CRASHING DOWN AROUND ME."

My mental health began to go downhill rapidly. On the outside I seemed to be holding it all together but underneath, anxiety and depression were building up. I was an emotional wreck. Normally, when you get one problem you can sort it out - but when everything comes at once it's just too much. Staff at St Petrock's referred me for more specialist support from a mental-health worker, and I continued to see him regularly until the end of the year. He [the worker] was absolutely fantastic. He has a lovely way of helping you to see that however bad things are, there is a way out. I don't know where I'd be today without his help.

In mid-March, St Petrock's helped me move into my own flat through their PRS scheme. It's a really lovely little place, and they helped me furnish it through Turntable Furniture. It makes me laugh though - I grew up in an expensive detached house around the corner!

"NORMALLY, WHEN YOU GET ONE PROBLEM YOU CAN SORT IT OUT - BUT WHEN EVERYTHING COMES AT ONCE IT'S JUST TOO MUCH"

I've also been having trouble with my arms for some time. Since moving in, I found out I've got a condition called focal dystonia, which causes nerve wastage - my left hand is paralysed. This means I can't go back into plastering, but I've been working with the Job Centre and careers service to find a new career.

I know I need to keep my mind occupied, so I'm looking on this as an opportunity to get new skills. I've recently completed qualifications at levels 1 & 2 in maths and English through Westward Pathfinder.

As I used to be left-handed, I've had to learn to write again from scratch - my handwriting is actually much neater now than it was before!

The Job Centre are funding me to do a 12 week PTLIS (Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector) course and I hope to get a job in plastering tuition at the end of it. After 30 years in the trade, I want to help others too.

My partner has recently remarried and my daughter has been sent to live with extended family. When I've saved some money, I'd like to go back to The Gambia and bring my daughter back.

I'd also like to spend some time teaching construction in schools out there - donating my time to show others that there is always light at the end of the tunnel and that with a skill, you can survive.

I can't thank everyone who has helped me enough. I came here with nothing - now I have my own place, diagnosis and treatment for my condition, new skills, a plan for the future, and hope.

"PEOPLE LOOK AT THE OUTSIDE OF ST PETROCK'S CENTRE BUT THEY DON'T SEE THE WORK THAT GOES ON INSIDE"