

'CHOICE & CONTROL': MARTIN'S STORY

INSPIRING SCOTLAND

In 2010, aged 20, Martin's life turned upside down when he became the primary caregiver for his mother. This triggered struggles with poor mental health, social isolation and financial worries; complex challenges compounded by COVID lockdowns and other changes in Martin's life. However, his resilience, the supportive presence of his community and the flexible, person-centred support provided by Link Up Gallatown workers over many years, helped Martin re-establish choice and control over his life, giving him purpose and direction.

Background

Martin, a lifelong 'Gallatownite', left school at 16 with limited qualifications. However, being well known in the community as a hard worker, he got a start at a local car showroom valeting cars, a job he loved. He had many friends through work and despite long hours, had an active social life. Then, in 2010, Martin's mum was diagnosed with Huntington's disease, forcing him to give up his career and opportunities he had worked hard to realise. *"I tried hard to make it work. I asked for compassionate leave which was refused and then asked to go part-time, which was also refused. The only option they gave me was to resign. I was gutted and felt helpless, hopeless and totally let down..."*

Impact of Caring Responsibilities

Martin didn't know how to take care of his mum, or look after the house, as his mum had done everything up until then. He also had his niece to look after as they were kinship carers. As his mum's health deteriorated, Martin's life started a downward spiral, facing significant challenges with his mental and physical health, self-esteem and overall life outlook.

"I lost touch with my pals from work and overtime stopped seeing anyone apart from my mum. We were skint and struggled to buy basic stuff for the hoose. I didn'y ken how to use the washing machine, cook, clean, hoover and was too embarrassed to ask anyone for help. I was totally lost and didn'y ken where to turn for help..."

Initial Community Participation and Support

The Link Up team first met Martin in 2012. He was a quiet, shy, isolated young man, suffering from severe anxiety. But the team's unique way of working gave him and his mum the confidence to get involved in our cooking and bike projects. And as trust grew, the team provided additional support. These initial steps contributed to some key outcomes:

- Participation in Link Up groups and activities helped Martin and his mother improve their situation as they became socially included and connected.
- Martin gained valuable life skills such as cooking and budgeting, which drastically improved homelife.
- Support was provided to access carer benefits and connect with professionals for his mother's care, including liaising with their Huntington's worker.



'CHOICE & CONTROL': MARTIN'S STORY

INSPIRING SCOTLAND

Employment Challenges

Given mounting financial worries, securing employment was important to Martin. Therefore, in 2015, Link Up staff helped him apply for a part-time job as a community centre supervisor. Initially this was positive for Martin, but he quickly struggled to make the early starts due to caring for his mum and niece. Eventually he was forced to leave the job in 2016. This led to another decline in his mental health and that summer he reached an incredibly low point.

"I felt like me again. I was getting out, meeting new folk and had a sense of purpose beyond my family and 4 walls. Those walls started closing in when I couldn't get there on time, especially at the weekends. I felt totally useless, and life started feeling ever more pointless to the point where I really thought about ending it all..."

From Community Participation to Volunteering

In response, we encouraged Martin to volunteer and participate in skills training (food hygiene, first aid, bike mechanics) and personal development sessions. This brought structure to Martin's days and helped him regain his sense of self-worth.

As a result, he became a founding Director of the new Gallatown Bike Hub Social Enterprise. He also helped run galas, cafes, football and cooking sessions and sat on committees for the new Gallatown Community Hub and Neighbourhood Development Plan.

"Volunteering with Link Up changed my life...I started helping to fix bikes and to help with bike rides at the hub and before you know it, I had loads of qualifications. Then in 2016 I helped start a company and became a company Director at the bike Hub and was helping to fundraise over £80,000 to build a pump track...it helped me believe in myself again..."

A Training and Employment Opportunity that Worked

Securing employment remained a priority. So, in 2019 Martin participated in an employability opportunity organised by Kirkcaldy YMCA in partnership with NHS Fife.

Community Wealth Building: A Unique Collaboration between Kirkcaldy YMCA & NHS Fife

In 2019, Kirkcaldy YMCA and NHS Fife launched a pilot employability programme to fill domestic jobs at the Victoria General Hospital on the edge of the Gallatown. Specifically targeting Gallatown residents, 10 local people participated with significant results:

- Six participants completed the two-day industry standard training course, the UKCPAS Industrial Cleaning Foundation Certificate Level One delivered by ACU Scotland.
- Further one-to-one guidance and support on the role and expectations of domestic staff, including encouragement to participate in the work shadowing element, was provided by the NHS Fife Support Service Manager.
- Six participants completed the four-week shadowing placement at Victoria hospital.
- Five of the six participants secured domestic positions in late 2019.

'CHOICE & CONTROL': MARTIN'S STORY

INSPIRING SCOTLAND

Due to COVID, only one follow-up programme took place in May 2021. 11 people participated, 4 going onto the work shadowing component. Initially, no one secured a local position. However, two later secured positions as auxiliary nurse pool staff with one offered a permanent post. Additionally, a younger participant secured a weekend domestic post.

This experience demonstrates the role that NHS anchors can play in building community wealth through new employment opportunities for local people while addressing resource gaps in the hospital. Plans are underway to relaunch the programme in 2024.

On completion of the work shadowing element, there were no vacancies available to Martin. However, the Link Up team supported him to attend the local job club to update his CV and attend classes to improve his literacy and numeracy skills. They also supported him to apply for domestic posts in the Victoria Hospital when they were advertised later in 2019, helped him to improve his interview skills, and secured funds to buy clothes for the interview.

370 people applied for 6 posts and Martin was one of the successful applicants. The NHS commended the strength of his CV and application, noting he had a strong range of skills and experience gained through his work placement and volunteering.

"I was over the moon when I was offered the job and it didn't really matter that it was only 16 hours per week, it was a job that I could get my teeth stuck into and one that would work round my caring responsibilities..."

Martin was finding his feet when the COVID crisis hit, a massive challenge for anyone working in the NHS, especially those cleaning wards. He found himself in full PPE in baking hot wards but was quickly promoted to be in charge of the COVID wards because his work was of such a high standard. At least half of his work colleagues left or went on long-term sick leave due to the stress. Martin's sense of duty meant he responded by doing more overtime:

"I was very worried about mum who was in a high-risk category and felt that I should work hard to help protect other people, including patients and colleagues in the hospital. It was really stressful, but also really rewarding and it made me feel like I was making a difference..."



'CHOICE & CONTROL': MARTIN'S STORY

INSPIRING SCOTLAND

Martin remains in post, regularly commenting on what his job means to him: feeling more confident, better able to express himself and manage his life and his mum's. He added that being able to navigate NHS services better also has benefits in terms of his mum's care. Martin explained that as his mum's health deteriorates, he feels intense pressure to be her constant companion. This makes his time at work incredibly valuable to him in other ways:

"...it feels like breathing space and time to chill - a wee bit time to think or just have a laugh with ma work pals and not feel weighed down with worry all the time..."

A Continuing Journey

Martin worries about the future and what will happen as his mum's health deteriorates. His sister also has Huntington's and is exhibiting early symptoms. He accepts he will need additional support but knowing he can continue to count on his community and the Link Up team helps enormously. It gives him the courage to face his future with confidence; he is considering applying for supervisor roles and other more senior positions at work.

Conclusions

- Martin's experience demonstrates the powerful role that the continued supportive presence of a community and skilled community workers can play in getting a person through challenging circumstances to lead a better life.
- Central to this was the Link Up team's ability to create and nurture the conditions in which Martin could comprehend and manage his life in a way that had meaning and was worthwhile. This enabled him to exercise choice and control over the circumstances that influenced his life. The absence of this choice and control would otherwise have undermined the essence of who Martin is and could be.

Martin's journey since 2010 is testament to his strength and resilience. He has not only survived by thrived, providing inspiration to others in his community. His dedication to his family, community and others where he works goes to the heart of this, making the lives of others better. His crowning achievement is his niece who is pursuing a nursing degree:

"...my niece is me and mum's pride and joy. The way she's worked so hard to get to University and pursue her career makes me so proud. I'll work hard every day to make sure she has all she needs to keep going. We might not have the money to help, but we've got enough love and smiles for a lifetime..."

