



STEVENAGE HAVEN

Shelter & Support for Single Homeless People

RESIDENT STORIES

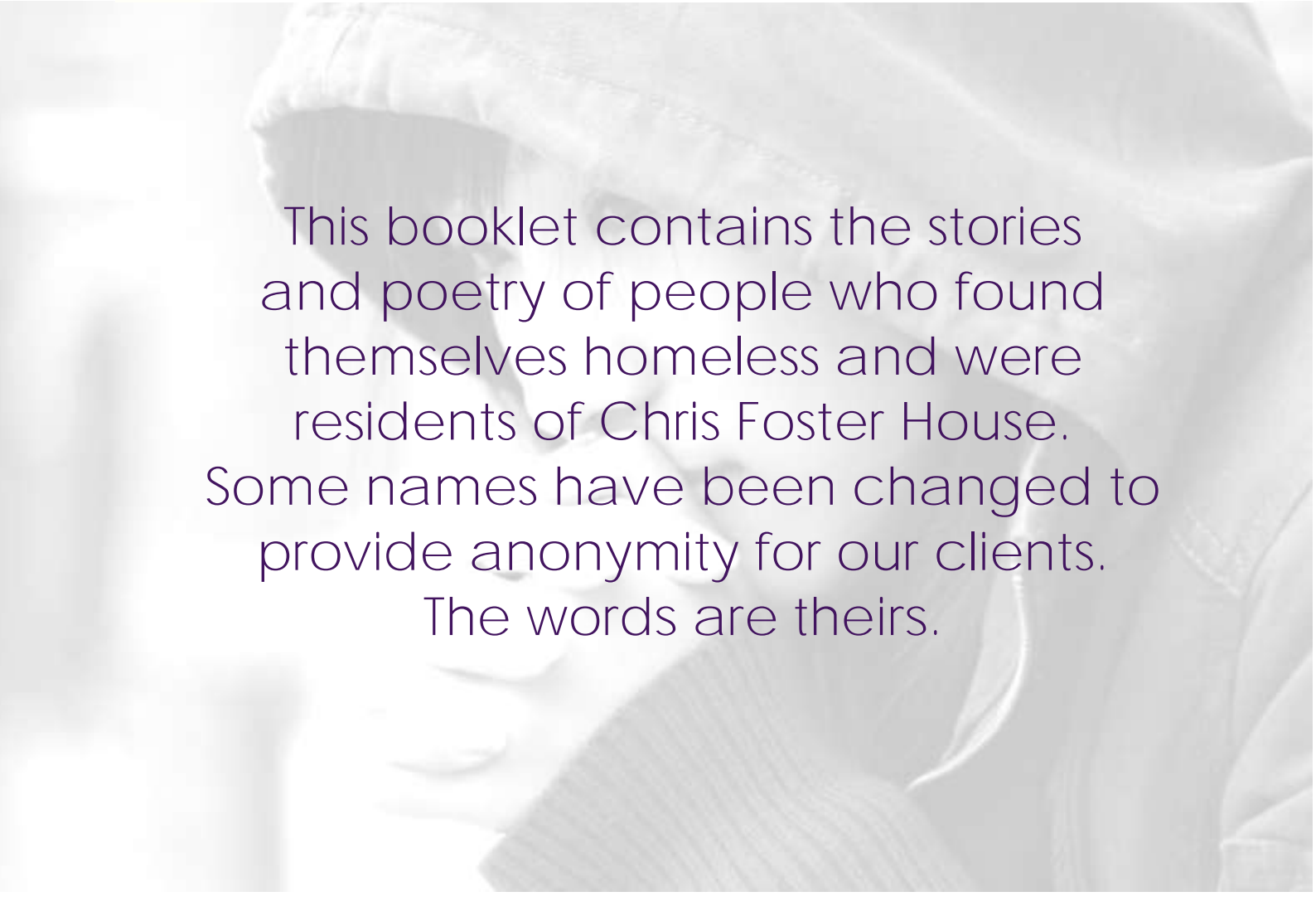


October 2011



Our Mission

Stevenage Haven exists to provide homeless people in Stevenage and the surrounding areas with emergency accommodation and the means to move forward into secure and settled lifestyles within our community.



This booklet contains the stories and poetry of people who found themselves homeless and were residents of Chris Foster House. Some names have been changed to provide anonymity for our clients. The words are theirs.

Director's Introduction

In reading these stories, I am struck by their ordinariness. We could all so easily become victims of poor health, be it physical or mental, most of us are dependent, to a greater or lesser extent, on the love and support of our families and friends. The experiences that lead to homelessness are not extraordinary. They are stories of bad luck, ill health, family rejection, addictions or loneliness. They could happen to any of us.



Spending any time at Chris Foster House is a richly rewarding experience. The atmosphere reflects the care and commitment of our staff and volunteers, and gives a sense of being in a place of safety; one where people really do lay foundations to rebuilding their lives in a remarkably short space of time. It is very special.

Some clients arrive after very short periods of homelessness; others have long histories of sleeping rough or sofa surfing. Many have long standing health issues; others have suffered breakdowns in family relationships. All have suffered loss.

Developing and delivering effective and responsive services requires an organisation to listen to and understand its clients, as real people with needs and aspirations. Stevenage Haven has always believed that it can learn from homeless people, volunteers and staff having a genuine empathy for our clients, accepting all as people, individuals with differing histories and stories to tell.

So many feel no hope, that they have failed life in a unique way and are left with nothing. The saddest truth is that they are not the first to experience this, and nor will they be the last. Chris Foster House offers a chance to rebuild lives and move forward. Our starting point is seeing and valuing clients as individuals. People like me, like you.

It is my hope that the stories being shared here will help others understand the simple truth that no one is immune from encountering homelessness and remember that homeless people are, first and foremost, people.

Barbara Howard, Project Director

What is homelessness?

A selection of thoughts from 7 to 9 year olds on what they think homelessness is....

"Homelessness means someone that has no home and they don't sleep in a warm bed like we do." (age 9)

"I think homelessness is when you have no home and you live in the street or somewhere outside." (age 8)

"I think homelessness is where someone had a home and lost it or they didn't ever have a home. I think it must be horrible." (age 9)

"I think homelessness means you don't have a home and you don't have very good things and maybe you don't have a mum and dad." (age 7)

"Homelessness means that when you have not got a home, no clothes, no shoes, no hats, scarf, beds and sofas. If I was homeless I would hate it a lot." (age 8)

Some thoughts from staff, past and present, about what working at Stevenage Haven means to them....

"You can always help those who want to be helped but that doesn't mean you should ever give up on those who don't!"

"Stevenage haven is both a place to nurture and a place to grow, where each individual is recognised and appreciated as unique."

"Just try and imagine what it's like to have nowhere you can call home and remember that homelessness can happen to anyone, including you"

"I love working at the Haven as every day brings new challenges to face and the strength shown by the residents never ceases to amaze me."

"I will never tire of seeing people getting their lives back together after major upheavals and the pleasure I get from the feeling that however small, I might have played a part in that."

"Working at the Haven has shown me that there is no limit to life's potential and that real and positive change is really possible."



A Tale to Tell

The Haven is somewhere that you'll know

When you have no place to go

They'll take you in and feed you well

And listen to the tale you tell

They make you welcome in every way

And try to help along the way

But keep it good and keep it real

You know the score you know the deal

Gareth (2011)

My name is Gareth and I am 41 years young. I have suffered from mental health problems linked to long term addiction to drugs and alcohol. I progressed from gas **and glue sniffing aged 10, through to cannabis, speed and E's and on up to heroin and crack.**

My relationship broke up in early 2009 and I became homeless in Cambridge. For a year and a half I just existed on a daily basis, lying, cheating and stealing to get my next fix. I started to deal and as a result I came into contact with some very dangerous people. I was attacked and had my jaw broken and lost 8 teeth. I moved to Stevenage as I had some family here who offered to help me. I continued to use **drugs though and in September I had a complete breakdown. I just couldn't cope** anymore. I was admitted to hospital and spent a month on a psychiatric ward.

On my discharge from hospital, a very nice man from the D.I.P team called Pat introduced me to the Haven. They gave me a bed in October 2010 and then my life started to get better. I met two other people in the Haven who had similar stories to me and were no longer drinking or taking any other drugs. They, along with the staff, encouraged me to go to Narcotics Anonymous and The Living Room and as a result I am now over 10 months clean and helping other people to recover. The staff helped me to find a better way to live and encouraged me in so many **different ways. The cooks gave me 'love handles', and when it came time to move** on they supported me with everything from bill paying to budgeting and furnishing my new flat.

Currently I am waiting to start the second part of a counseling course at university, having finished the first part, (again with encouragement from the staff even **though I'm no longer a resident!**). I am about to start helping to facilitate a new Recovery Group at CDAT in Saffron Ground and my life is unrecognisable from a year ago.

Words are insufficient to express the gratitude I feel towards the staff and volunteers at The Haven. I truly believe they have helped to save my life and change it for the better. A year ago I wanted to die and felt hopelessly lost. Now I have a life worth turning up for and I thank them all for their support and encouragement. They do an amazing job under difficult circumstances, with empathy, patience and understanding.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Gareth x

Paul (2011)

I was established in 1977, born in Mexico up until the age of 2, then I moved to America with my family, because my father wanted to be close to his brother. We landed at a airport called O'Hare in 1979 in a state called Chicago, Illinois. We lived in a town called Cabrine Green which was not a nice area because it was full of drugs and violence, the type you see on the news, were people are getting shot for no reason beyond your imagination or thoughts. I mean people got killed sitting in their homes doing nothing but living their everyday normal lives. My father was a Police Officer; he had some trouble or should I say he got mixed up with the wrong people. A few years into the job he shot a Police Officer he had some troubles with, on the streets of Chicago, my mum and I was with him at the time. My dad got shot in the arm and went down and I picked up the weapon and fired upon that person who attempted to hurt my family, and later when I turned 18, I was sent to prison to serve my time which was almost 15 years. I got my education, got released but did not find a job so I did the next thing and that was selling drugs. I mean I didn't want to do it but I had to so that I could provide for my family. I'm not proud of what I did, but it had to be done. A few years later I got arrested for speeding and later found out I didn't belong here, and they couldn't send me back to Mexico where I was born. So I got deported to England, were my dad suggested that they send me because he wanted me to know were he was from.

I'm 33 years old and I live alone and have been since, for the last 3 years, for some people it's easy and for others its hard. Six months before my release, I felt sick and was rushed to the hospital. I was later told that I had a large tumour and that it had to be removed, so they sent me back to the hospital with hands and feet shackled. I was later told that I had to have surgery. A week later I was told I was being released. I was told many things and one of them was that I would get to see my family before I got sent away but they never kept their promise. I later arrived in London and lived in a town called Hammersmith where I spent a few weeks until I found an uncle that I had never met before. He took me in and gave me a flat of my own and was told not to worry about anything. A few months later I decided to move out of my own place because I didn't feel safe. I moved from place to place. I later had pains in my back which I thought for so many months that it was back pain, but ended up being bowel cancer. I went to the hospital to see what was happening to me and they told me the next morning that I had cancer for the second time. A doctor saw my case and decided to help me so he did and has from day one and thanks to him I'm still alive.

A year later I met a woman who swept me off my feet. We later had a child. I still lived in London and she lived in Stevenage which I later came to stay with her for good but that didn't go as planned. She and I got to know each other better and I hated the fact that I will never see my child before or after she is born. So I left her and became homeless for a few weeks. Shortly after I got a place in the Haven and I have been here since then. If it wasn't for Stevenage Borough Council I wouldn't be where I am today.

Rob (2011)

I came to The Haven as a broken empty shell, having lost my home, my job, my girlfriend of 8 years, my daughter, my family & friends. Alcohol & Drugs had stripped me of every last sense of worth I owned and left me riddled with fear, guilt, confusion & frightening consequences of my **using. In a desperate attempt to seek help, I headed to my Doctor's, knocking a policeman down** in blackout & my life as I thought I knew it ended. Everything changed on that day as I ventured into a new world of homelessness, unemployment, probation, court requirements, bringing myself with me saturated with suicidal attempts, #desperation & despair.

I was advised to visit the Living Room by an empathetic Judge who, when #sentencing me for a desperate conviction, realised that my biggest challenge (& retribution) was to overcome the power of my drug & alcohol addiction. I had no choice, I had nowhere else to go, my options were to sit in a park & forget the world with Jack Daniels, White Lightning & Special K, or walk for 2 hours to Stevenage to get well. Through the concern of the CEO there, I was offered a place at The Haven which felt like Buckingham Palace compared to where I was sleeping. I have never been so excited to move into a Homeless Shelter in my life. It also gave me the opportunity to attend the Living Room five days a week, attend countless probationary & court requirements & as I was not allowed to see my daughter at the time, I made my weekends bearable by attacking the Garden.

I was seven stone wet when I walked in & thanks to Frankie's insistence of fresh hearty home cooked food, I soon started to fill out. I was constantly plied with chocolate, Barbara's puddings & three meals a day, something which I had not been accustomed to for years. I was given somewhere where I could base myself & very soon I was able to find my way around Stevenage. **The Haven's ideal location placed me at the centre of my new world & I was able to get to the places** where I needed to be, treatment centres, probation, new friends & fellowship meetings. The homely nature of the Haven gave me somewhere to live where I could be proud of. It really felt like home & I was always willing to socialise & mix with my fellow residents. I have made friends for life who will always be close to me for a long time to come.

The staff made my time here extremely worthwhile. Ten months is a long time to live in other **people's space & I will be extremely grateful for the help that I received. I was able to structure** my life & realise solutions to the new challenges & issues that I now faced. Key workers, support staff & management all allowed me to work out how I could deal with my future & encouraged me to use the facilities at the Haven to my best advantage. I embarked on a college course which was fully supported by The Haven. I was offered books, paper & materials as well as the privacy **of one of the counselling sheds to conduct my 'homework.'**

Despite everything the Haven has done for me in the facilitation of my housing needs, by far the best thing that I received was the care & love that the staff have to offer. I was amazed by how many of the staff showed an interest in my life, my challenges & my gradual achievements. To Cath & Karen I will always be in debt for the countless chats at the back of the office. Many tears have been shed over how difficult & painful my life had become & to have someone empathise with that pain has been priceless. I will always be grateful to Tanya for the way that she almost taught me to take my first baby steps into my new flat, ensuring that I was comfortable & confident with taking responsibility for myself.

...continued

...continued...Rob (2011)

Today, I live in my own flat, which has become my own Haven. I have opened my doors to my friends who are also in recovery & I enjoy the privilege of looking after myself. The best thing **about my flat is that I don't share it with 17 other people. The stillness & unbearable quiet was something that took me a while to get use to. I have just finished an introduction to counselling & I am hoping to study a master's degree at the University of Hertfordshire in September.** This will lead into the ideal job for someone like me in the world of addiction. Hopefully my experiences, education & training will exist to help other people who find themselves in the same situation that I once was. I would like to think that I can pass on some empathy that I was once given, & some hope, because I know there is a way out.

Finally, there's my relationship with my family. I see my daughter at least every two weeks & I phone her everyday regardless of whether she wants to talk to me or not. I have had to learn that a 5 year olds agenda is quite busy & sometimes it doesn't include her father. My ex-girlfriend is still graciously my ex-girlfriend, but she has once again become my best friend. We talk, we communicate & we laugh & joke.

And the policeman. The man who was dragged into my chaotic world, the man who brought about a seismic change to my life, is fine. I have had the opportunity to say sorry but most importantly thank him for stopping me in the way that he did. I would have killed someone. He **didn't recognise me at first & was overwhelmed by the change in me. I told him how the Living Room & the Haven have helped me reconstruct my life & left him with some Living Room literature in case anyone else should 'bump' into him.**



I Am So Grateful (2010)

To

x Karen x x Neil x x Vicki x
x Les x x Frankie x x Cath x x Josie x
x Lloyd x x Pete x x Martine x x Barbara x
x Barbara H x x Nina x x Martin x
x Maggie x x Zoe x x Megan x
x Greg x x Greg M x x Maureen x
x Michael x x Pauleen x x Karen A x
x Ashlea x x Tanya x

There's nothing I can say to show how much I appreciate what everyone has done for me.

I will say wherever I end up in the future, I know I wouldn't have got there without the help and support of everyone here first.

For this I am so grateful.

So Thankyou

Lots o Love

♥ G ♥

47 Years Young (2010)

At 47 years young I never expected to find myself homeless and on the street. Before coming to the Haven I slept in the park, under the subway, in the train station, I sofa surfed, in fact I slept wherever I could. During this time I had suicidal thoughts and I attempted suicide. A referral was made and I was offered a bed at the Haven.

During my time at the Haven I have received a lot of support from the staff and other residents. In fact there is a great camaraderie amongst the residents, which has helped to alter my perspective. The staff have helped me to move forward, they have given me support to access MIND counseling and I am leaving the Haven looking forward to a place of my own with a new sense of self worth, self esteem, self respect and self confidence.

Zara (2011)

When I got kicked out of my family home, I had nowhere **to live and my best friend's mum took me in. Then I got help – that's why I moved into the Haven – to get help.** I had to wait in Stevenage before I could get on the Stevenage housing register and start bidding. I was in the Haven for 9 months before I got a flat.

I still get help from the Haven if I need it. I had 2 weeks lunch and dinner for free. The staff are good to me and nice. Before I moved in to the Haven I did not get on with my dad, but now I get on with my dad and step-mum. I have found a nice boyfriend that I have been with for 5 months and I am happy with him. I was really sad before I moved into the Haven but I got happy and made friends there. One friend helped me when I was at the Haven. Haven is fun and good times.

Self Harming (2010)

When I started it was at the age of 19. It started when I was living at Marymead - it was a hostel. I was not getting on with my boyfriend. We were always fighting, shouting at each other. It started to do my head in. He always played mind games with me getting stuff in my head. I couldn't cope with it. I was getting angry everyday. I wanted to feel pain to something and I guess it started from there really. I picked up a blade and started cutting my arms. I didn't want to be alive. I wanted to die, end my life. I couldn't go on with what I had been through. It was too painful to think of life. I couldn't be bothered with life. I thought 'cut my arms up and bleed to death'. I was planning how I wanted to die - I know that's bad but I couldn't help how I felt - if something, it is in my head - I can't cut it out of my head.

It's how it was but now I'm getting the help which I need - mental health CATT team and now moving in the Haven has changed me. They have helped me out so much and I would like to say a big thank you to all the staff and management.



Homeless, Sofa Surfing, Living in a Car (2009)

The Haven is very appropriately named and definitely lives up to the definition.

In the few weeks I was living at the Haven it was a refuge for me. I came from being homeless, sofa surfing, living in a car, with what felt like my whole life in bags at various locations. I was very lost emotionally following the death of 4 family members in 4 months (June –September 2009). I was very unsettled with feelings of not belonging anywhere or to anyone.

When I received a call from the council to say there was a space at the Haven, I went and checked it out the same day. I was quite apprehensive between getting the phone call and the actual visit about living in a hostel because I feared it may be a cold and impersonal environment that would make me feel even more alone.

I arrived and stood at the end of the path for a moment and thought: 'this doesn't look scary – it looks like a home'. When I went to the door, rang the bell, all I remember is being greeted with a smile.

Everyone was nice to me. The staff made me feel at ease straight away, treating me like someone who deserved care and to be listened to. I moved in the same night and my fellow house mates made me feel just as welcome.

At the Haven I felt at home.... I will never forget the time I spent there. Becoming settled there has made me better able to manage the next transitional period in my life which is moving into my first home.

I will always be grateful for all the genuine care, consideration and support I received and continue to receive from the Haven – especially from the staff. I am blessed to have had this experience.

Thank you!!

NFA - No Fixed Abode (2009)

I came to live at the Haven hostel on the 9th February 2009. I had been released from prison just 3 days before - on release I was NFA homeless. I managed to get an interview through DIP (Drug Intervention Programme). My DIP keyworker sat in with me in the meeting/interview along with Frankie & Vicky from the Haven as the interviewers. Both staff were extremely nice and friendly and also showed support when I told them I was a recovering addict and was completely turning my back on drugs and crime. I was accepted into the hostel and was moved in immediately. I settled in quite well and found out personally that the staff were terrific, so helpful in many aspects of life.

I progressed with my recovery with the help of WDP Drugline, Narcotics Anonymous and CDAT and obviously the staff here and my family.

I also took part in the hostel's helpful course 'It's Your Move'. I found it very useful and beneficial. The staff who led it Cath, Karen, Les, Lloyd and others were excellent.

Now I am still moving forward with my life and my recovery. I am training at the gym 5 times a week - I got membership via DIP - but I do know the hostel offer a discounted gym pass which I think is great because I would still be able to afford to train even if I lost my free membership.

I am now focusing on moving on and getting accommodation with help from my keyworkers Pete and Karen who are wicked and also Tania and Ashlea who also are helpful - **there's not a lot they can't help with!**

Anyway I'm finishing here - all I can say is Thank you to all staff at the Haven especially Sue, Barbara and Frankie who have understood my circumstances and shown support.

So again thank you to: Pete, Karen, Cath, Owen, Vicky, Greg, Lloyd, Phil, Zoe, Les, Tania, Ashlea, Karen, Sue, Babs, Barbara, Frankie, Josie, Nina and the cooks and cleaners Yvonne, Pauline, Maggie, Maureen, **Babs and all the others I haven't mentioned sorry!!!**

Get well soon Nina!!!!

Off The Rails (2009)

Hello Everyone,

Well first of all my name is Andy and I'm 25 years old.

Just to start, at the beginning of the year I split up with my then, fiancé. We have a little boy together, he is now 19 months old.

When we split up, it was very hard to deal with knowing that I wouldn't be able to see my son as much as I would have liked to.

The split caused me to kind of go off the rails, to put it bluntly. I found myself a lot less motivated. I was then jobless, homeless and in a way, feeling sorry for myself.

The alcohol did not help at all. It was my easy way out I suppose. This led to out-of-control drinking. I wasn't alcoholic, I just binge-drinked, which then led me getting into trouble with the police. Nothing to be proud of!

Before the 4th of August 2009 I was sofa surfing, I didn't know where I was going in life, I was mixed up.

Then I came to the Haven. I was given a bed, I was out on the housing list and I'm currently bidding for one-bedroom property.

I go to gym 4 times a week and I've started City & Guilds Plumbing course which will take two years.

(Look how much my life is changing within a matter of 6 weeks - amazing!) And none of this would have happened without the lovely staff at the Haven.

My only advice is that if you are willing to help yourself, then the staff are more than willing to help you as well.



Hanging Basket without a Ladder

Into hospital for repair
Through falling off a plastic chair

An injured arm put in a sling
Richard's got a broken wing.

Richard's got a broken wing

He cannot dance, he cannot sing
But I think he never could
And I think he never should.

2009

Weight Lifting (2009)

The moment I knocked on the door of the Haven reality kicked in. It felt uncomfortable and unknown to me. I had never expected to be in this position and I was afraid of the unknown which was staring me in the face.

The large creaky door opened and I took in a deep breath, not knowing who I was about to face.

To my relief the door opened and I was welcomed in with smiles and comfort.

Immediately I felt a large weight lifting away from me. Everyone looked happy and everyone was so friendly.

It took no time at all to feel relaxed and a part of a group of unfortunate people who for one reason or another happened to be here. Staff and residents all accepted, understood, and supported me and each other.

As I settled in I was given a huge amount of support which in turn has made my confidence boom. I was very low when I arrived and never thought I could be this happy again - but I am and I'm so grateful.

If it hadn't been for the staff and residents at Stevenage Haven I dread to think what or where I would be today - so I thank you all for bringing me back to myself again. Xx

A Different Leaf (2009)

Before I came to Stevenage Haven I was sleeping rough for a few nights so when I came to Stevenage Haven I looked very down, upset and rough so they said go have a shower and get refreshed.

The Stevenage Haven are a very helpful place. They give you lots of support. They're there when you need a chat or if you are having problems. Since I have been in the Haven I have turned a different leaf over. They have helped me with drugs and alcohol. The Stevenage Haven is just like some big family - everyone is there to look after one another. If you respect the Haven they give you lots of respect back and support.

Kay - A Tribute

by Barbara Howard, Project Director

I have already acknowledged how clients of Stevenage Haven have also assisted in achieving improvements to the operational services and have been as instrumental in motivating other clients as staff have. **However, I would personally like to tell a resident's story at the same time of paying tribute to a resident who came to us on 12th July 2007.**

She had lost her home and family contact mainly through alcohol problems but with the help and support of Stevenage Haven she endeavoured to address these problems. With her dry sense of humour and her wish to get back on track with her life, she gradually made progress. Her cooking skills certainly made her a wonderful help in the kitchen and she assisted with the lunches and evening meals. Her cakes were phenomenal and were a welcome addition particularly at staff meetings which sometimes do need a lift! She also volunteered and assisted with fundraising activities and encouraged her fellow residents to do the same. After seven months she moved to Haven 2, our second stage housing, whereupon her talents of home making were welcomed by the other clients living in the house. Nevertheless, she would make regular visits back to the hostel to help with anything that needed assistance and her Saturday fry-ups were certainly worth waiting for!

However, it is fair to say that it was not all easy going for her and she did sometimes have lapses. Undoubtedly, with the death of her mother sometimes made her very low and vulnerable particularly as she had been unable to see her mother to allow her to say how sorry she was about her past failings. However, true to form, she would inevitably pick herself up and dust herself down and try to move forward with determination. After four months at Haven 2 she was then fortunate enough to move into her own splendid flat in Letchworth where she lived for 10 months. As far as Stevenage Haven was concerned this really was what the organisation was all about, seeing someone so low with so many issues, move on with their own life.

Unfortunately, through a tragic accident at her flat, she died on 17th April 2009 at the age of just 46. We were all devastated at this news and she will always be remembered fondly by all those that knew and supported her at Stevenage Haven. The one comfort that I am quite certain about is that she will have by now achieved one of her dearest wishes by being reunited and making peace with her mother again. God Bless Kay.



TAKE MY HAND

Are you troubled, burdened, blue?

Take my hand.

I've been troubled, burdened, too,

I understand,

Where you've fallen, once I fell...

Oh, I know these pitfalls well...

Let me help the clouds dispel...

Take my hand.

Others helped when I was weak,

Took my hand,

Helped me face towards the peak,

Helped me stand,

What they did, now let me do...

Pass that kindness on to you

Someday you'll help others too..

Take my hand.



I Became Bankrupt (2008)

I am one of 5 girls, the eldest. I was raised with my parents on a farm in Devon. In the late 80's there was a recession and as a result of that my parents lost their farm. My father didn't cope with that at all well, he lost his farm and his businesses and in 1992 he committed suicide. I was extremely close to my Dad but I didn't deal with his death well – in fact I didn't deal with it – I just buried my grief and sadness. I kind of just drifted around college and school and things like that but really had lost my focus in life, probably hand in hand with smoking, smoking cannabis, taking drugs and drinking heavily. Although it wasn't on a daily basis it was certainly a big part of my life. I didn't think there was anything wrong with that as a lot of my friends also used to do the same thing. Plus I've always worked so some would say I was a functioning addict. That was my life for probably about 15 years if I'm honest.

In 2006 I met a guy and moved from Devon to Stevenage to be with him leaving behind a full time job, family friends, kick boxing, gym etc. I seemed to think that this was a good move. However in the relationship we were heavily into taking cocaine – I was taking valium and I was also smoking skunk and because I wasn't working I was very down and depressed though I tried to keep myself afloat with voluntary work a couple of days a week and part time courses and seeking work. I was just on a real roller coaster ride full of ups and downs all the time.

It was July 2007 I hit my rock bottom. My father's death surfaced and I realised I hadn't been dealing with it and that I had been hiding behind all these addictions. My relationship broke down and as a result of that I became homeless and for 3 weeks in July and beginning of August I stayed at the Sanctuary. I didn't feel safe there as I was the only female staying in an emergency bed in the pool room area. I tried on a daily basis to get myself into the Haven while I was travelling over daily to Stevenage to attend a day treatment centre, the Living Room, who were helping me with my addictions. In August I moved into the Haven and with them I undertook alternative therapies such as Reflexology and Reiki by Vikki, counselling which I still now have as an ex-resident and I undertook the Arts & Craft sessions which now as an ex-resident I facilitate that so that's all good. I found the Haven to be a very clean and friendly environment – I had my own bed sharing with 3 other girls in my own dorm. The staff were very friendly, helpful and encouraging which was great and there was the garden which I absolutely loved. Along with attending the Living Room on a daily basis I also attended fellowship such as NA, AA and OA which I still attend today.

In December 2007 I became bankrupt. I spent Christmas with family back in Devon.

In January 2008 I moved into my own home in Stevenage which is unbelievable really in how far I have come in such a short period of time -just a few months. I have been doing voluntary work with a lady called Isabel – I still do that today as well and I thoroughly enjoy that. Earlier this year I took part in the Team Relay at the Edinburgh Marathon – that was good – I thoroughly enjoyed that too. My life has got better and better. My future looks hopeful and I'm very optimistic about that. In September I'm hoping to undertake either an Art or a Holistic course on a full time basis – I'm not very sure what that will hold. But yes I'm really looking forward to my future. I have a lot of gratitude for the Haven, for the staff and everyone who has helped me along my journey.

And that's it – The End so far.

I Then Slept Rough for About A Month (2008)

“Before I came to Stevenage Haven, I had been clean from crack cocaine but a frequent user of cannabis. Due to an unstable relationship with my partner and becoming a new dad who was working hard to support my family, I felt that I really wasn't doing very well. My partner and daughter would go and stay with a relative every other weekend and I would look forward to them going - so I could buy cocaine to make into crack and then smoking it in my skunk joints. This went on for about a year. My behaviour towards my family was deteriorating and this resulted in me being violent towards my ex-partner. I walked out as I knew what was happening - I was going back to my old ways from years ago.

I then slept rough for about a month while trying to get into hostel accommodation in Hertfordshire. I was drinking, smoking and taking cocaine. I felt suicidal knowing what I was doing to myself and to others. Then I was accepted into Stevenage Haven where staff and residents helped me feel strong. My key-worker, Vicky suggested the new supported lodgings scheme that Stevenage Haven were setting up. I then met with the Supported Lodgings Workers and was shown around some different houses that I could move into with a supported lodgings landlord with the promise of help and support from my Supported Lodgings Worker, Zoe. I chose a landlady and moved in October 2007. With the help and support from Stevenage Haven and the Supported Lodgings Worker I tried to get my life back on track.

Unfortunately, I went through a bad patch and started to resume my destructive relationship with my ex-partner and ignoring my support network and I began to miss appointments and refusing help. My ex-partner then out of the blue told me to leave and stay away. I realised that I had messed up and began to work with my Supported Lodgings Worker again and she didn't give up on me, even though I had messed up. I am now attending some programmes and will be enrolling into college shortly. I hope to become a volunteer soon as I want to help other people who have been in my situation. I really thank my Supported Lodgings Worker who has supported me and made things a lot easier for me and I realise that there are nice people out there who care. I am now planning to move on into Haven 3-6, to my own little place where I can have regular access to my little girl and things are looking up for me. I can now see light at the end of the tunnel”.

Visions

I fumble at your soul
As a player at the keys
Before they drop full music Oh
I'll stun you by degrees
Prepare your brittle nature
For the ethereal blow
By fainter hammers – further heard
Then nearer - then so slow
Your breath has time to straighten
Your brain - to bubble cool
Deals – one – imperial – thunderbolt
That scalps your naked soul.

When winds take forests in their pause
The universe – is still –

My Second Stay At SH Saved My Life (2008)

I became homeless in July 2004 at the age of 18. This also coincided with my first day of a new training course - my Dad who I had been living with threw me out. We were not getting on at all. I wasn't talking to my family. I was also addicted to drugs, using crack cocaine every day and smoking weed every day.

I spoke to a lady at my training course who arranged for Herts Young Homeless Group to help assist me in trying to access emergency accommodation. Fortunately for me that day I was referred and accepted at Stevenage Haven.

I did not take advantage of all the services and advice offered to me and was asked to leave and I did not abide by Stevenage Haven rules - I had been at SH approximately 1 month.

When I entered SH I had made a promise to myself that I would try and get myself off class A drugs.

After a month at SH I spent time on the streets and staying at another shelter. During this time I did manage to wean myself off Class A drugs - December 19th 2004 although I still smoked weed I had succeeded in 6 months to reach my goal.

My father allowed me to move back in with him and I continued to sort my life out. I found a job that I held for 19 months. Unfortunately my job ended. My life had hit rock bottom. I had not only lost my job, my home again, my self esteem, I even lost the will to live and actually did attempt suicide.

Luck was on my side. SH accepted me back 2 years after my last stay although that stay had resulted in me losing my bed there, SH were prepared to give me that second chance I desperately needed.

This time I took advantage of all the help, support and advice that was on offer. I found my counselling sessions extremely helpful. I continued with my personal studies and made every effort to abide by SH guidelines. The staff at SH were very supportive as and when I needed it. I listened to their advice and did what was necessary.

During this stay I formed a very serious relationship with another resident. I am pleased to say that this relationship is still going strong, so much so that when I was offered SBC accommodation, a lovely one bedroom flat, we decided to move in together.

I am back in full time work, as is my partner so this is a double success.

I would never have dreamed that this could happen to me, with how my life had been.

I still have a friend that I meet, from my first stay at Stevenage Haven, he is now a good friend.

Both me and my partner still visit SH to see staff and update them on how we are both doing. I would say that my second stay at SH saved my life and gave me a new one.

My Partner And I Still Visit the Haven (2008)

I broke up with my boyfriend following another violent incident and approached Herts Young Homeless Group in Hitchin for help. They referred me to Stevenage Haven. Luckily for me there was a space and I was accepted. When I arrived I was really nervous and was met by Les who booked me in. He made me feel welcome and put my nerves at ease.

The first night couldn't sleep properly, it took me a while to get used to the new surroundings. Having said that it didn't take me long to settle in, a couple of days I'd say. I found the staff helpful, supportive and also quite comical at times, they would often make me laugh when I was feeling down.

I was given a Keyworking Team who were really understanding and supportive of my needs. Because of my age my move on options were limited. Once I had been at the Haven for a couple of months I felt ready for work and found myself a part time job as a bar maid.

After 2 months I met another resident and we became friends. He was actively bidding with Stevenage Homes and was successful and got a flat. We continued to see each other after he moved out.

Karen, my main key worker worked really hard on my behalf and made numerous telephone calls to sort out my benefits and my housing, she also referred me for housing at Haven 2.

If successful at interview, I would have been accepted for Haven 2 but I decided I would move in with my partner.

I stayed at the Haven for approximately 4 months.

Both my partner and I still visit the Haven and are grateful for the continued support we receive. I am still in full time work and am happy to say we are both happy and working.



Why

Indifference to suffering
Pretending it's not there,
Bereavement causing grief
The total loss despair

Understand these problems
And talk upon reflect,
Help each other maybe
Instead of showing neglect,

A man is lying bleeding
A bullet dug in deep
Reminiscing, thinking
Slowly meeting sleep,

What was it I was doing
Why was it I was here,
I know him the enemy
Another bullet fear,

Two then here are bleeding
Their life does ebb away,
Looking at each other
What was it they did say,

Why is it I have killed you
Why is it you've killed me,
Whose argument is this anyway
I really didn't see.

C.W.D's Story (2008)

After a two and a half year relapse, fuelled by bouts of depression and an extensive amount of Class 'A' drugs and alcohol, my life collapsed around me. Everything girl friends, mates and the worst part was my housing.

I was in a 2 year contracted flat. When the council offered me two flats to view, my life was so overwhelming I was unable to get things together to just go and view these properties. So the council deemed that as my not wanting a permanent place so they took me off their list.

My contract ran out and I found myself homeless. This lasted for about 8 months occasionally being able to stay at certain mates when it had been raining.

I had just under 300 miles to travel with no money or food but one day I decided enough was enough. So I got my guitar, a few clothes, and bits, grabbed my bike and left. I managed to get half way home before I dumped my bike and guitar. It was all too energy consuming and I just wanted to reach Stevenage, my home. I managed to get money out of my account and get a train home.

I didn't get the welcoming home I wished for, but with the help of some old friends who put me up until, finally, I got into the Sanctuary, from there it was a week until I moved into the Haven.

I didn't have much faith or trust in anyone but was grateful to the Haven for the opportunity to eat regularly and have a roof over my head, whilst I began to regain my life, as the Haven offered me counselling and support. I was there for 7 months, still with so little trust, but getting better all the time.

I'm also accessing outside agencies to stay clean of drugs, which has now been almost 8 months, and with all the help from the Haven, I'm bidding for a place, hopefully soon, as I'm temporarily with Griffin Homes. I'll have my own flat once again. I'm also waiting to start an IT course at college soon.

There is light at the end of the tunnel and it's there for everyone, if they are prepared to put the effort in.

No Pain, No Gain!! Go for it. I am. C.W.D.

At the Age of 16 I Became Homeless (2008)

I am now 19 years old, but at the age of 16 I became homeless. It was then that I was put forward for a bed at Stevenage Haven by Herts Young Homeless Group. This was almost 3 years ago now. I stayed at the Haven for about 6 months but was asked to leave because of my behaviour, which at the time, I thought was unfair.

After leaving the Haven I moved to Blackpool, where I lived for about 6 months. I eventually met someone and moved in with her, we were living with her mum; I was now back in Stevenage. In September 2007 I was housed with my girlfriend by Stevenage Borough Council. The relationship broke down in April 2008 and I found myself homeless again. I spent time sofa surfing with friends but was again offered a bed at Stevenage Haven even though I had previously been asked to leave. I was glad to accept the bed. Within one week of moving back I was offered a room of my own in another supported hostel in Stevenage. This was more permanent accommodation and I moved 3 weeks ago.

I still visit Stevenage Haven as I do spend long periods on my own at the new hostel. I visit to use the computers, have a meal sometimes but also to visit the staff and the residents. I am now looking for work and hopefully I will have a flat of my own in the future. I really would like to thank everyone at the Haven for their help, support and advice.

After My Release From Jail (2008)

I moved into the Haven in late September of 2007 after my release from jail. I surprisingly settled in quite quickly as all the staff, residents and volunteers made me feel really at home.

I suppose I was a bit nervous when I first moved in as the range of people you meet in places such as the Haven is vast. However after chatting to a few people I realised that most people are just at difficult stages in their lives and that they are usually quite chattable about their experiences.

There was always a good atmosphere around the place and you get to enjoy spending time there.

I lived here for about 4 months in total before I was helped by staff to go down the right channels! I got on the Housing Register again and sorted out my points and then bided with my points on the SBC website.

I have lived in my flat for a few months now but regularly come back to the Haven to see Tania (my Resettlement Worker) who helps me sort out any problems I have with sustaining my tenancy. This helps a lot if you find it hard to cope with the stresses of independent living or if you just need someone to chat to.

Short & Sweet (2008)

Before I came to Haven I was staying with my Nan after having an accident at work. When I came to haven they gave me support when I need it, a bed, food and bedding. They were fantastic. After 3 months I got transferred to Griffin Homes (shared house). I stayed there for 6 months then I had a referral to Haven 2 which was fully furnished. After 6 months I intend to go to Haven 3.

Thank you Haven.

Me and My Mum Clashed (2007)

Me and my mum clashed. We were too alike, got under each others feet too much. My mum moved away and I didn't like where she moved so I moved back and stayed with a friend when I was 17, then moved back to my mum's flat and then back here into a caravan outside my friend's house. I thought I can't do this so I moved to Symonds Green into the bin shed at my mum's boyfriend's flat for 2 to 3 weeks - it was at the bottom of the stairs where I had everything I needed and it was like my own bedroom. I told them I'm not living with my mum I'm sleeping in there. I went to Stevenage Borough Council and then Herts Young Homeless Group and then got referred to a night shelter – the Haven was full. I went there and with one look on the outside said no thanks and went back to my bin shed. After a few days I was referred to the Haven at which I then met a lot of people who pointed me in the right direction. A lot of people made an impact on my life and made me open my eyes on lot of things. I felt I was wanted again and people made me feel I was at home.

After a few months I moved on to a supported house in Hitchin – I thought it would get me away from trouble in Stevenage but I hadn't realised Hitchin had more trouble. When I moved in they said they would help me with all my problems and get me new furniture but that has taken them a year to do. At first there was me and one resident in the house and that was alright. They moved in two other residents - they're a nightmare and make the house a total mess. I've just had enough. I've always been independent and don't want to live in someone else's mess. I want out of there as soon as possible. I come into the Haven most days and walk from Hitchin. I want to get a bedsit or flat in Stevenage and get myself stable, have my own space and then get into college.



My Choice

Every day's a struggle
Every day's a fight,
Too many drugs inside me
To add to my plight

I'm sick of this existence
Just living day to day,
Only supplying my habit
This is not the way,

There's wonders all around me
So much love within arms reach
It's time for me to grow up
I know life's not a peach

I see two paths in front of me
One easy and one hard,
I'm walking down the rocky one
It's time to play my card,

It's now I show my loved ones
I'm not a hopeless case,
My mum and dad and everyone
I've finally seen my space,

No more false euphoria
They're better here for me,
And now it's time to wake up
And really truly see,

So forgive my indiscretions
And take a closer look
They're more to me than drink and drugs
And the heroin I cook.

After Being Evicted (2007)

After being evicted from my parents' house and a short stay in hospital, I was referred to the Haven. I was terrified as I had no idea what to expect. I had never been in this position before. As soon as the door was opened I was made to feel welcome. Neil registered me, showed me around and introduced me to the residents who also made me very welcome.

After a few days I had settled in and had started making friends, some of whom are ex-residents. I met my key workers Pete, Janis and now Karen who have been very supportive. I have had many personal problems since coming to the Haven, the latest one being my mother had died. Every single person here is giving me all the support that they can, which I will never forget.

At the age of 44 I am beginning to feel that I am getting a life, one that I should have had a long time ago, one where I feel cared about and supported.

Thank you to all the staff, residents and ex-residents for all that you are doing for me. I know where I would be without you and that doesn't bare thinking about.

My Life Was Turned Upside Down (2007)

Before I came to the Haven my life was turned upside down. I was kicked out of my mother's home as we never got on. I was on a lot of drugs and turned to heavier drugs because I felt so alone and had nowhere to go. After a few months I was surviving on other people to let me use their sofas as a bed. I turned to crime to support my habit and pay for sofas for the night. In the end I ended up being put in a hostel in Bedford. I turned to the drugs more as I was far away from friends and family. So my probation officer helped me get into the Haven. I was so scared to come in another hostel but I really needed to sort myself out.

When I came into the Haven it looked so nice and respectable, totally different to what I expected. I met the staff and they were all very nice and comforting and made me fit in after the first night. I realised this was where I needed to be. I got a lot of support for all my problems. I cut down on the drugs and did not do crime.

A year down the line I have stopped all crime and most of my drug habits, with the help of James Taylor the drugs supporter! He helped me realise I was a better person than I made out to be. I loved living with all the residents as they never judged me or anyone else. They were very supportive and helped me along the line. Now I have been housed at Griffin Homes by the Haven. I still come back to the Haven to help and support the new residents that are in the same position I was in. I can't thank the staff enough for all the help they gave me but I can help in other little ways but I know the staff appreciate every little thing. I would move back in any day given the chance. I have passed my Maths and English exams since leaving the Haven and haven't touched drugs for a year now. I only thank the Haven for this as all the staff helped me change.

A Haven

There's many different reasons

And no two answers the same,
Finding yourself homeless
is a really bitter shame,

Some lost, alone and helpless
Some families in one go,
In the cold and shelterless
Still there is a place I know,

A Haven waits to hear from you
People working out a way,
To give reason for tomorrow
And bring sunlight to our day,

I thank you each and everyone
For helping when I'm lost,
You are marvellous caring people,
Who kept away the frost,

This Haven is a wonder
With staff who really care,
A home for stranded people
Without you I despair.

I Lived In West London (2007)

I was born 40 years ago in West London - Ealing. I lived in W London nearly all my life.

When I was 14 the school decided that we should go our own ways so my Father started taking me to work with him. Dad was a ground worker so I naturally followed that course of work. It was while I was young that I started going to watch Chelsea play at home and I have supported them ever since. Although drinking and football went hand in hand I was not one of the bovver boys from the terraces.

When I was 18 I went to work for the Guinness Brewery in W London. The work was shift work and the money was marvellous - I was taking home over £320 a week when I was 23 years old.

However, the building industry was notorious for drinking especially on Fridays, and I was already drinking heavy when I went to Guinness. The foreman was a friend of the family so he covered me when I was late or missed a shift. After ten years the brewery shut down and I was made redundant. I got a payout of £30,000! That was in February, by May it had all gone on drink and drugs! The only good thing to come out of that is that I have a Guinness pension due to me when I retire. It's just as well I cannot get my hands on it - I would have drunk that as well!

I then went back to ground working, and took training and City & Guilds in the Use of Lifting Machines - mostly transporters and cranes. I was still drinking heavy, so about ten years ago I went to rehab. I came out of there and was dry for three years.

When I came out of rehab I moved to Weston-super-Mare and worked for a chap who had about 60 flats and a large number of caravans. We got on really well and he let me have one of the flats to live in. I started doing his maintenance and he taught me many jobs to help keep his business going.

However after three years I went back to London for the day, bumped into some mates had a drink and that was that! I never went back to Somerset and got back into my drinking ways again. I started work at Terminal Three, Heathrow airport, but after the job finished I was made redundant. My employers were reluctant to offer me a new job because I was drinking so much sometimes I only worked 3 or 4 days a week - I was unreliable.

I was living in a flat owned by my sister and she wanted to sell it and move up to Letchworth. She told me many times she was selling it and I had to move on, but I took no notice. So I then found myself homeless. I drank all day and at nights went to the Heathrow underground station and slept in there. How did I fund this drinking? Let's say I was getting up to all sorts of mischief!

I asked my sister if I could come up and live with her but she was reluctant for me to do that, so she found me a bed in the North Herts Sanctuary. I was still drinking heavy and it was quite chaotic in there. While there I met a lady from Drugline who wanted to help me. She suggested I move to The Haven because it was open more hours and could offer more stability and help.

I now see Drugline every day, reflexology, acupuncture, one to one counselling etc; I go swimming most days at Stevenage Pool as I get a reduced rate through the Haven, and I am on a Viewpoint course for 8 weeks.

Improve Your Life And Help Yourself! (2006)

On the 29th of September 2005 I moved into the Haven hostel. I discovered within a matter of weeks that I needed a great deal of help and support. I'd been through several bad relationships and could not get along with my family. I didn't hang around friends and I'd been to prison for violence.

It was time to change and improve my self. The worst thing was I wasn't seeing my son. So things needed to change for me for the better. So one day I came into the Haven and found myself really upset because of an ex. The Social Services were making my life hell because they wouldn't let me see my son. So I put myself through anger management and counselling. I discovered that my past was part of the reason. I also had several conversations with the Haven staff. They helped me gain my housing points and helped to get me to see my son. They also gave me the opportunity to accept myself.

The combination of help and support provided me with the belief that I could get better. It also gained me my one bedroom flat. I made friends, discovered myself in a different way. Even reunited with an old friend. I now find it easier to be myself and find that I know what's what.

It's been hard and a strain, even frustrating at times. In the long run I could have never got this far without the Haven. Trinder has been blinding and continues to be someone I hold a lot of trust and respect for due to her patience and understanding. But more so with her blunt straight to the point attitude.

Greg with his sense of humour and ability to see where I was coming from. His kind and open nature towards people and that laugh and expression when he laughs. Janet with her warmth and subtlety which has been great with no end. Sue and her logical mind and financial expertise which at times made me think.

Babs (she knows which one I am on about) and Vikki for their spiritual guidance and seeing so much in me. Even some of the conversations with volunteers. There's too much to say and I'll never be able to show enough gratitude to everyone. They've been like a family to me.

To whom ever reads this, words cannot express how the Haven and its staff help and support. Therefore I would like to say if you need help and are living there you could not be in a better place in my opinion to improve your life and help yourself – take it from me. The Haven is perfectly named for it is a Haven.

A New Resident's Story (2006)

Tony, A 21 year old man originally from Lincolnshire is a new resident at the Haven who shares his story.

I lived in Lincolnshire with my family until I was 15. I moved into a flat with my girlfriend at the time. We lived together for six years in various different locations. The last place we lived was in Kent. The relationship broke down rendering me homeless. I was on the streets in Kent for four weeks, sleeping in shop doorways and living on my wits. I was walking through the town centre and bumped into a friend I hadn't seen for years. I told him how I came to be homeless. He understood completely as he was once in my position. To my delight he offered to take me back to Stevenage where he allowed me to sleep on his sofa until I sorted myself out. He told me all about the hostel that had helped him so much. I went to the council and asked for help and to my surprise I was placed in the same hostel as my friend. "The Haven"

I arrived at The Haven on Tuesday the 8 August. I was greeted by the staff and residents. After I was greeted I had a few days to settle in. I get on with the staff and residents. I have a lot of help from all the staff with sorting out my benefits and I hope to achieve to get my own place with the support and help from the staff. At the minute I am taking each day as it comes.

Tsunami 2004 (2006)

I have been going to Thailand for my holidays for some 15 years now. I love it out there, the climate is nice, the people are friendly, and it's cheap to go to, lots of ex pats. And I have a pal out there in Phuket and I helped him some years ago to build a hotel out there.

When I heard about the tsunami - Boxing Day 2004 — I was a bit worried about him so tried to ring. However it was about a week before I got through. He said that because his hotel was a little way in land the only damage was to the ground floor. He asked if I could go over and help him put it all right, so I eventually got a plane out there in the early January.

As I said his hotel only had damage to the ground floor, but I stayed three months altogether, not only completing the hotel but helping out with the locals. Everyone mucked in, tourists, locals, holidaymakers, ex-pats etc.

The press and TV in England did not show too many graphic photographs, but the Thai papers did. There were hundreds of bodies everywhere, just piled up where the wave had left them. My mates hotel had six in the bar area alone. When I got there most of the bodies had been removed, but while we were working to repair the locals houses we often found bits of bodies.

When I returned to England I went back to helping another pal to finish off a house he was building. When that was done I had to move out of the house, and found myself homeless. I went to the council and they found me a bed here at the Haven.

Whilst here I do not like being idle, and have done some gardening, minor repairs to the building and laying the back patio.

I Lost Everything (2006)

Dave, an ex-resident of the Haven, now 38 years old, shares his story.

I had it all once, two bedroom flat, job, car, loving partner and two beautiful daughters. Life was good then.

Unfortunately in 1997, we lost a baby and things took a drastic turn for the worse. Already a regular drug user, I turned to heroin as I found it the only thing that would take away the pain. Little did I know, it wouldn't only take away the pain, but the rest of my life would soon follow. Slowly but surely I lost everything as I fell deeper and deeper into the arms of addiction. Eventually my partner gave up on me, I'd lost my job and car and ended up stealing to feed my habit. I still had my flat but that became a drugs den for all junkies to use.

I woke up one morning and decided enough was enough. I packed two bags of clothes, had what was to be my last hit and set off on the train to see my brother in Bournemouth. I slept in his conservatory. The first two weeks was a living hell, though I was determined to come off heroin and methadone. The only problem was my brother was a heavy drinker, so I joined him, swapping one for the other.

Somehow I managed to get a job and car. Though still drinking my life seemed to be getting back on track. How wrong could I be?

The drink was taking hold and I felt no way about driving under the influence. This was to be my downfall. My father passed away and my brother and I had a really bad fall out ending with me being thrown out.

I packed the car with all my belongings. My nephew decided he wanted to come with me, it was his eighteenth birthday. I had already been drinking and set off to Hitchin.

We had a bottle of spirit in the car, which we shared. I was lucky I didn't kill us both, or anyone else for that matter as I drove over a roundabout and smashed into a tree.

I lost everything I owned and was left with only the blood stained clothes on my back.

My ex partner let me stay for a few days until I was placed in the Haven.

I was lost, alone and in fear when I moved in. All that was to change as I settled in. The support I received from the staff was amazing. They were none judgemental and seemed to genuinely care about my individual needs. They pointed me in the right direction to deal with my drugs and alcohol problem as well as supporting me in house.

The activities they provided were just what I needed to make me feel a part of society once more. They gave me self-confidence and made me feel a valid and worthwhile person. I can't express in words how the Haven, staff and volunteers, have influenced my life. Even today, over a year after I left, they are still there to support me.

Today though, I try to give a little back and get involved wherever possible.

I would never be able to give to the Haven as much as they've given me. I hope that soon I will be accepted as a volunteer.

I Have A Feeling

I have a feeling,
For me that is strange,
Spiritual healing,
As I rearrange,
The person I thought,
Could never be taught,
Believing my soul,
Had already been brought,
To a place, a prison,
No means of escape,
Now I'm released,
I can rewind the tape,
To the beginning of something,
So special and new,
No longer waiting,
To be told what to do,
Make my own choices,
Now that I have them,
To expel the voices,
The Lord is my omen.

Amen

P674 OPP

Homeless For The First Time At 42! (2006)

Joan, a 46 year old woman who lived in Stevenage for 16 years before she came homeless shares her story.

Some 15 years ago my life was on track. I had a good job and invested in a house of my own. My partner moved in 3 years later and we decided it was a good idea to put his name on the deeds so we could share the mortgage. Things were fine for some 12 years until my partner decide to walk out and leave me with full responsibility for the re-payments. Threatened with re-possession I was forced to sell.

I became homeless and for the next 3 years or so moved from pillar to post, sleeping on friends' couches and anywhere I could lay my head.

Moving from town to town had taken its toll. I wasn't getting any younger and decided I needed help. I returned to Stevenage in the hope the council would re-house me. Only to be told I had to be here for 6 months before they would consider me as I had been out of town. They placed me in the Sanctuary in Hitchin. It was just another place to sleep and I was losing hope, until, thank God I was referred to the Haven 3 weeks later. My key workers are excellent and give me the encouragement and motivation I need to seek, not only accommodation, but employment as well.

The staff are very friendly and extremely helpful. I am currently still at the Haven though for the first time in years I feel I belong and am filled with hope for the future.



In And Out Of Women's Refuges (2005)

Throughout the last few years I have been in and out of women's refuges.

About three years ago I was in a violent relationship. My partner tried to kill me a couple of times and Social Services placed me and my daughter in a refuge. I was rehoused in Peterborough. He found me. I went to my friend's as my ex-boyfriend found me. I was put into a refuge and rehoused in Haverhill, my home town. My house was targeted by vandals. Police and Council tried to help me but I felt it wasn't a good environment to bring my daughter up. I put her in care so I knew she was safe.

Eventually I moved into a hostel in Ipswich. My daughter was adopted because of the type of housing I had at the time. I had the opportunity to move to Yeovil, Somerset.

Eventually I began a new relationship. This ended up being another abusive relationship. I was being locked in the bedsit all the time and not allowed out. I was allowed to the doctors. I told the doctor my situation and she gave me the phone number of the local women's refuge. When I could I phoned the number and three hours later I was being taken to a women's refuge in Dorset. Three days later I was transferred to the women's refuge in Stevenage. I stayed there. I had a fire in my room and the fire brigade and police came. The next morning the staff asked me what had happened. I told them it was an accidental fire. The women's refuge evicted me and told me to go to the council. The council wasn't very helpful. I started sleeping rough. I was told by a friend who was living at the Haven that a bed was available. I went to the Council. The housing officer told me that they had sent a copy of the police report to the Manager of the Haven. I was accepted for a bed.

I was so nervous about living there as there was a lot of men living there. My friend convinced me to go as I wanted to stay where I was I was so scared I could be hurt. The staff helped me with my confidence and tried to help me look for private rented accommodation. They helped me contact my family and helped me through a bereavement. Even though I couldn't be helped in other ways such as housing I've been brought closer to my family. The volunteers have been brilliant in taking time to listen to me. I am leaving in a couple of weeks. I am leaving stronger, which is thanks to the staff and volunteers of the Haven.

Liz's Story - Part 1 (2005)

Going back to the way my life used to be I could hardly believe how far I have come. My life was a mess. I started off at the age of twelve doing drugs and as I got older the drugs increased and became a real problem. I eventually got on to taking heroin of which I took for eight years, two of which I was injecting. Surrounding the drug problems were a whole load of other bad things going on in my life. I ended up in prison eight times. Sometimes I was thankful to be in a cell. In between going in and out of prison I found myself homeless, living in squats, sofa surfing and sleeping rough.

When I was homeless I felt scared most of the time but kept a brave face. I did have two flats of my own, which I lost through going to prison and because of the lifestyle I was leading. I had a number of relationships with family, friends and partners ruined or lost to drugs. I felt that everything that came into my path, I ruined. I felt lost and lonely. Even when I felt happy it wasn't real, it was drug induced. I had no real emotion because I was always 'out of it'. My brother died in an accident, at this stage I couldn't take anymore and just wanted to be with him. This is when I tried to overdose.

I was beginning to lose people close to me to their drug addiction. I had a nervous breakdown and after all this I began to use a mixture of hard drugs for a period of about four years. I got in trouble with the police again and decided to do a Drug Treatment Order but carried on taking the drugs and if it wasn't drugs it was me trying to replace it with drink, which does not work.

I then decided to go into detox. This was in June of this year and I feel this was my defining moment where I was at rock bottom and began to pick myself up. I was in detox for three weeks. In some ways this was the worst time of my life but in others the best. I experienced sickness, shakes and I was put on anti-psychotic pills. Although I saw people in there in a worse state than myself and in a way that encouraged me that I had one last chance, as I could end up like them and I should grab it with both hands.

After detox I moved back into a flat with my ex-partner who was also using drugs and living the life style as I had done for so many years but now it was time for me to make a decision of my own and get out. I knew I had to get out of the vicious circle to be strong for myself and get on the road to my recovery. I didn't fall backwards this time I made another leap forwards.

This is when my counsellor took me to the Haven. I was so scared when I got off the train I had visions of a soup kitchen, like in Oliver but I couldn't have been more wrong.

Three members of staff who were very welcoming greeted me. It was still strange for quite a while but slowly I began to integrate with the other residents. I got my confidence back and was over the moon when for the first time in so long I had successfully completed something.

...continued

...Liz's Story– Part 1 (2005) continued

I finished my Drug Treatment Order. I was really proud of myself. I began to find myself and realise what my personality was like again. I attended Narcotics Anonymous meetings and a particular convention they held proved to me that it could be done. Probation put me in touch with something called In-Credit. Here I aimed to build self-esteem, work on graphic design and cooking.

Since I have been there I passed a mock basic skills test by ninety percent and am sitting the real exam this December. I am also attending an IT course every week at In- Credit for two hours and am still working on my maths skills. By this time I felt I was going from strength to strength, I used to hate myself and I was **beginning to realize that actually I wasn't that bad.**

One other thing hanging over me still was the fact that I had not had any contact with my family for several years because of the lifestyle I had been leading. I had been trying to pluck up the courage to tell them how well I was doing for months but still hadn't done so. Then one day last month I received a letter from Missing Persons to say my family were trying to trace me. This was absolutely amazing I couldn't believe it. I got straight in touch and before I knew it I was visiting my parents at their home, this visit went well for once.

My sister then came to visit me and I have also been up to her home and seen her husband and my niece and nephew. Seeing them again I realized now, how much hurt I had caused them. I had never seen this before. They were so proud of me and I was proud of myself. This was the best Christmas present I could have received and also gave, for them to see that I am well. I didn't ever think I would be crying tears of happiness, but I was and I couldn't stop. I also was able to come to terms with my brother's death and talk about to my family. I now feel my brother is around me spiritually and this helps me get through each day.

I was checked at the doctors and my health was all clear. I just felt so lucky to be given another chance at life and I wasn't about to mess it up.

I feel that the Haven has provided a safe place for me to begin to help myself. I have so much support here and there is always a member of staff to talk to. Now I have to leave the bad things behind and concentrate on the future, I have no chance otherwise. I also feel able to support other residents going through some of the things I went through, I have been there and know what they are going through, that is how strong I have become. Also I do not judge people on drugs, as many people do. I feel I am still judged when going into shops, etc but I feel pleased that I can walk up and pay for the item now.

I have hobbies now and enjoy doing simple things, such as cooking, going to the cinema, listening to music and doing my own washing. I hope to get back into doing some artwork in the future. The therapies such as, Reiki and Indian Head Massage have really helped me, all provided at the Haven. I now have the choice to relax. Looking back comparing this Christmas to last I feel it will be so much different because firstly I will be sober and I can spend it with staff and residents in the Haven who have helped me along the way and I also have my family around me. Lastly I would like to say a big thank you to all the staff, residents and ex-residents at the Haven that have helped this far.

Liz's Story - Part 2 (2007)

This is the second part of my story.

Since 2004 my life has changed beyond my wildest dreams, at that time I was not in contact with any of my family, they had no idea if I was dead or alive, in my mind I thought that they didn't care if I was dead or alive.

No one could imagine my surprise when I received a letter from missing person's to say that my family did not care about my drug use, they just wanted to know that I was alive.

With support from everyone around me I sat in the lounge at the Haven overwhelmed with emotion at the prospect of speaking to my Mum after four years and would you believe that after all this time her phone was engaged! But I persisted until I reached her, I heard her shocked voice and my dad shouting in the background "is she in the nick".

It was nice to tell them for once that not only was I not in nick but I was ok and had been clean from crack and heroin for six weeks. As much as my parents wanted to believe me, they had heard it so many times before but were just glad that I was alive.

Since then I have visited them on numerous occasions and they have visited me in my new flat, where I have lived drug free for over a year.

I now feel that my parents trust me and I also realise how my drug usage affected them and all the people that loved me.

I try every day to work on myself as I wouldn't want to go back as I believe I would have ended up dead. I have a close loving relationship with my family that I thought could never be.

I have completed a college course on graphic design and will be starting a counselling course in January. I have also built on my self-esteem and have many friends that love and care about me today. I still attend support groups, in which I have become involved in helping others.

I am now a volunteer at the Haven, ready to help the next me that comes through the door.

As A Child My Life Was Quite Traumatic (2005)

My name is Andrew. I'm 36 and one of four boys. As a child my life was quite traumatic. When I was six years old my mother abandoned us by placing all four of us on a plane to Holland where my alcoholic father was working on the building sites. She didn't come with us as the window cleaner had taken her heart. My dad, a carpenter, placed us all in schools which we stayed in for two years. My mother came to Holland and begged my father to come back to England so they could get back together and work things out. But on our arrival my father was given divorce papers. We moved in with my Nan for about a year. I went to school and had hand me downs from my two brothers. These were scruffy and I was bullied by all the children in my year.

When I left school at sixteen my father told me to leave our house and stand on my own two feet. I was taken in by an ex-girl friend of my fathers and I got a job as a lifeguard. I found a friend, place to shut off and get away from everything which was a fruit machine arcade. After three years as a lifeguard I was sacked for poor attendance due to fruit machines. But in those three years I had met a girl called Sara. Sara got pregnant and we moved into North Road Hostel. Carlie my daughter was born and we moved to Jessop Road. Sara became pregnant and when Chris was born in the flat at Jessop Road I went to the Council and we got a three bedroom house in Bedwell. All the time I was still playing the fruit machines. Our relationship broke down due to my gambling addiction and my girlfriend found a new lover. Yet again I felt abandoned by a woman. I made the biggest decision in my life, to leave, sign the house over, and never to interfere in Carlie and Chris's upbringing so they could be brought up in a family which is stable, which it still is today.

I stayed single for eight years. I played the fruit machines and accounted that I had put £122,000 in them over eight years. I moved around a lot in this time and didn't have any relationships. In 2001 I met Mary. She was different, compassionate and caring. I fell in love and we got married. My addiction had become much less and I seemed to be overcoming my problem. After six month's marriage Mary returned from work and said she had met a man and had feelings for him and as she had feelings for him she could not have feelings for me. Our marriage ended. I moved out. I lived in my car for 3 months, drunk excessively, got addicted to drugs and my gambling addiction came back. After breaking down and going to my doctors I was referred to an addiction clinic. I attended the clinic for about a month then they referred me to the Haven. The Haven saved my life. I'm still a resident at the Haven and still attend the addiction clinic today. I believe if it wasn't for these two places handed to me by God I would not be alive today.

Oh What A Day (2005)

I stared at my surroundings and wondered how the hell I landed in this situation. What have I done? One moment of madness, all gone. I stared out across the fields watching the mist settle on the grass like a silk sheet. The sun was slowly breaking the sky with its rays of warmth. Well I wish the rays would hurry up and shine on me.

It was freezing, blasts of icy air assaulted my body. No matter what I covered up one icy blast managed to find an uncovered part of my body. I had to move my legs as they started to get cramped. I turned my body so I could stretch my legs to relieve the pain.

I heard a noise coming from behind me and quickly curled up into a ball, which was difficult considering I wasn't exactly what they call on the small side. I noticed two blokes walking towards King George's park and was relieved that they didn't notice a strange figure hunched beneath a children's slide.

I have been huddled beneath this shelter for nearly 5 hours now. I was really pissed off and depressed and had no money, job, home or partner when two days ago I had all those things, but in one fell swoop I lost it all because I couldn't cope. A tear started welling up in a corner of my eye. I rub it away. I can't have these moments of sadness. I have got to be strong for myself from now on.

It was still cold, the icy wind was still playing it's own tune, creating whispers through the trees. The mist was starting to settle leaving a carpet of dew upon the grass glistening like diamonds.

I pulled my rolling tobacco out of my pocket and proceeded to roll one which was hard as my hands were shaking. I wish I knew what time it was I thought to myself as I lit my roll-up and blew the smoke out.

The sun was starting to rise straining against the chilly night. About time I started getting some circulation into my body I thought. I slowly untangled myself from under the slide. I slowly stood up and felt the gratifying crack of bones, bringing relief. My legs felt stiff so I started stomping each foot up and down. When I started feeling my legs again I started walking towards the town centre.

I looked about. I noticed that Stevenage hadn't changed from the time I was a kid, to my right was Bowes Lyons. I smiled thinking of times of old, a kid whizzing around on roller skates. I walked through the duck pond looking at a couple of squirrels burrowing into the ground for buried delights. It was so peaceful that my troubles seemed to disappear for a brief moment because my problems were quite severe as I definitely didn't want another night out on the streets.

I walked through the town looking through shop windows wishing. I got to the clock tower and noticed it was seven thirty. Another hour then off to the council to see if they had any spaces at Stevenage Haven and the name fits. It has been my haven off and on now for 5 years and I found it to be a nice retreat to concentrate on your troubles even though you can live with up to 17 people. But you get fed, a bed to sleep in and sometimes good company. I just hoped they had vacancies because I couldn't do another night on the streets.

I walked towards Tesco's to get a drink, also to waste some time. My legs still ache and my body started to shake. It came on all of a sudden as if my body was thawing; my teeth started chattering like a set of castanets. I leant against a wall to steady myself and to try and calm the shakes down.

After five minutes or so my body stopped its private dance and allowed me the faculties to move. I started to walk towards Tesco's. I walked in and felt like I was on show. It's strange but every time I've slept on the street no matter if I was clean I still felt people looked at me as if I was dirty though they couldn't know that I'd slept on the street.

...continued

Oh What A Day (2005) continued....

I bought myself a pint of milk because that was all I could buy with what money I had left. I walked up towards the council offices and decided to wait. There was the hustle and bustle of buses breaking the once silent town. It always amazed me how quick things can change, one minute silent the next mayhem, people scurrying around each with their own thoughts, in automatic mode going to work, not a care in the world.

I felt angry and jealous of these fellow humans, how dare they have stable lives, why can't I have a stable life, job and home? Angry and jealous of what they had because I know what it was like because I had it all and then walked away from it in one minute of madness.

I stood outside the council office and waited, rolling a cigarette and getting a dirty look from some old biddy who thought the smoke was going to kill her. She didn't have to worry about the smoke because she had an invisible cloud of perfume surrounding her. She must have splashed on a full bottle the smell was intense.

I apologised and received a grunt for my troubles. Stevenage hasn't changed I thought to myself. I looked towards the doors as I heard someone coming through. I was eager to get in as I wanted to find out where I stood for a place at the Haven. With fingers crossed I went in.

I walked up to the counter and asked the woman at reception if she could put me in touch with someone at the Haven. The woman was very helpful which made a nice change from the dirty looks I was getting this morning.

She told me to come back at 9.30 as the woman who dealt with placements wasn't there. She would be able to tell me if there were any spaces or not. She said that she would put my name forward. I said thank you and left.

I walked out into the sunshine feeling a bit deflated. Part of me wanted to be told "yes there is a space", what would I have to do if they didn't? All these thoughts racing through my mind, bouncing off the walls in my head.

I walked through town oblivious to people stepping aside as I was in deep thought. I brushed past a couple of people apologising in passing.

"Calm down Ian" I said, "Sit down and chill". I walk towards the clock fountain and felt a soft spray of water touch my face which was a refreshing relief. I sat down and rolled another cigarette smoking a lot I thought. I looked up at the clock and noticed it was 9.15. God time flew. I stood up and felt a bit less stressed. I walk back to the council office to find out my fate. I walked in and the woman at reception informed me that the woman involved will be down to talk to me soon and would I mind taking a seat and waiting.

And boy it was the hardest ten minutes I've had for some time, my mind racing: no-space, space, no-space, space. My heart was beating faster and faster with every aching minute. Be calm everything will be okay.

"Ian" I heard my name called. My heart launched itself into my throat and a strangled "yes" was my reply.

This is it. I am going to be sleeping under the stars hoping it doesn't rain. Please let me feel a soft pillow, a hot meal and hopefully friendly company.

Please, please, please my mind screamed. I wish I could read people's minds at least I knew where I stood. The woman came towards me with a comforting smile. My heart raced faster. I could feel perspiration forming upon my brow. Here it is, the answer I'm dreading please.

"Well pleased to say there is a place". HALLELUYAH!

She told me I had to be at the Haven at 5 to book in. Brilliant I got somewhere to sleep, somewhere to eat and company.

I know I would get a welcoming smile, support and care I need. Most of all it's my private HAVEN.

Borstal by 16 (2005)

My mum and dad split up when I was 5 years old in 1976. I was sent to Boarding School at 13 years after being kicked out of senior school. I was allowed to come home at weekends to my mums and dad for holidays.

When I was at boarding school I started to drink and take drugs, cannabis. I was only 13. When I was 16 I knocked my dad out for how he had treated my mum. He used to beat my mum up. I was 5 when I put a carving knife to my dad's throat because that's what he'd done to my mum.

I left boarding school at 15 and was in borstal by 16 – Feltham Young Offenders Institution where I was able to take more drugs.

When I was 17 my dad died and that cut me right up. At his funeral I carried his coffin, I didn't get on with my step mum who didn't want me to do it at all. I did this for my dad because it would be the last thing I would ever do for him. I still loved my dad but I didn't like the way he treated women. After my dad had been buried a police officer came into the pub. My dad did not get on with this officer. He asked me where my dad was. I told him I had just buried him and he laughed – I threw him through the optics in the bar and beat him up. For this I got 6 months in jail. I was 17 at this time.

My mum did visit me in prison. I told her she could only visit if she brought drugs and drinks. She became very upset so I told her not to come again. She didn't visit me then until near the end of my sentence.

In jail I became involved with the wrong crowd. I was heavily involved in drugs money laundering and learning more tricks of the trade. I thought they were my family. I realise now they weren't.

I was released from jail and lived then with my grandparents in Surrey. This was 1989. I was then jailed fro ABH and GBH against some guy I threatened to kill with a knife and a baseball bat. I was fully under control of drugs at this time – I was robbing and stealing off my own family and friends just to feed my addiction to drugs and drink. I did 18 months in Brixham prison known as the Fraggie Rock, the hardest prison I'd ever been in.

From prison I returned to my mum and step dad in Hertford where I had to live by their rules. I needed to earn their trust, it wasn't easy. I spent more time in Woodhill and the Mount for petty thefts and non-payment of fines. I did work for a company called Aztec maintenance work. One of the people I worked with was Greg who now works at Stevenage Haven where I presently live. At this time I was busy in work, still being Jack the lad doing drugs and drink and women.

My mum moved to Lowestoft in 1991. I visited her a couple of times and relationships with my stepfather improved as they had never been good. I have 2 step brothers, a half sister, real sister and foster sister. I'm still very close to two of my sisters.

I spent time working on the roads, managing to hold down a full time job, my drinking had increased but my drug taking I'd cut back. I'd visit raves every weekend. I used cocaine, speed, ecstasy, ketamin, grass/hash. I even did magic mushroom and popped anything I could lay my hands on to get high!

During this time I still got into trouble, mainly theft, was put on probation and did community service. It's now 1994. I'd met a young lady in 93. I was with her for 2 years. The relationship was on / off and finally ended in 1995.

...continued

Borstal by 16 (2005) continued....

I then met my son's mother who already had a young baby. I took her on as my own and I moved up to Lowestoft to be with them and near my mum.

My boy Ian was born on 20th December 1996. I had a good relationship with my partner we were a real family we had a home, BMW in the drive and RS Turbo, an Astra van and F2750 Yamaha motorbike. I had it all but this was through making money from drugs.

In 1997 my world fell about, like a load of crumbly rocks falling in down on me. I found her in bed with one of my best mates so I smashed him up. I got 18 months on remand in Norwich. I spent 6 months in Napier Road bail hostel and Bogus House bail hostel in Norwich. In 1997 whilst I was in Norwich on remand I was talking to my partner (fiancée) on the phone when she told me she couldn't carry no more, the chap she had the affair with had left her.

I asked her not to do anything stupid as I couldn't help her whilst in prison – she said she couldn't promise that. When the phone call was ended by a screw abruptly he threw me back in my cell. I told him if anything happens to my girl I'll kill you and I meant it. I was unable to sleep this night – pains in my chest, then I heard riot gear being worn and screws telling me to step away from the door. It was the Governor needing to tell me that she had died, but I told him first that she was dead. I went for the screw that had thrown me in the cell that night. I was kicked down a stair well and was beaten by at least 10 maybe 20 officers.

Before I reacted the Governor told me what my partner had done. She'd taken an overdose of anti-depressants, sleeping tablets and a bottle of vodka. She was 21 years old. She'd killed herself with a 3 year old and a 1 year old son in the house, and it was my children that found her. My daughter was able to open the back patio doors and went to the neighbours when she couldn't wake her mum. I never attended her funeral as her mum and step dad didn't want me there – I did have the children that day.

The children now live with her mum. I haven't been back to jail since this tragic event. I do still see my boy every two weeks but am unable to have rights to see the daughter. Ian is now 8 years old. He's a bright lad and I want a better future than myself.

I have constant reminders of my time spent in and out of jail. I have two knife wounds, one in my left shoulder, one in my right arm and have a pin and bolt in my left wrist/hand – the mental and emotional scars – I was still abusing my body with drink and drugs though.

It's 2005 and my life is changing from what it was. Sleeping on sofas, cars, doorways, begging, taking drugs and I had become an alcoholic.

I have been given a chance at life. I was referred to Stevenage Haven, a homeless shelter. To my surprise, Greg, an old work colleague was a member of staff. Since living at Stevenage Haven all the staff have been a great help and support to me. I visit an AA meeting every day if I can. I now have my own sponsor. I receive regular counselling and have therapeutic treatments. I'm back in control of my life again.

It's not been easy. It's a long road to travel, but I'm taking it one step at a time, day by day.

I believe that I'm being guided by something spiritual.

Journey (2005)

Where to begin? I suppose it has to be the day I moved from Stevenage to Deal in Kent (which is near the port of Dover) back in September 2001. Before I relay to you my journey that led me to the Haven, I must point out that this is in no way an exhaustive account of all the contributing factors that led me here but will certainly include all the major ones that did so, within the last four years. There have been many incidents prior to this but I think recent times have seen the culmination of years and years of a troubled life.

I had been working for a major food manufacturing company in Biggleswade as a Quality Assurance Manager (QAM), which in summary, is a food safety and legality position. My Company approached me and offered me the position as QAM for the yet to be built manufacturing plant in Kent. The new plant was, and still is, the most sophisticated prepared salads factory in Europe, costing well in excess of £25m to build. Not only was it an honour to be asked to head up what is considered the most difficult department in food manufacturing, and for a Company Flagship factory, but it was also testament to all the hours of hard work and effort that I had relentlessly given. I jumped at the chance and after much planning I moved to Kent to stay in a hotel until I could find a place to live. My girlfriend of seven years, Sue, was delighted with my progress but was also fearful that this was the beginning of the end of our relationship.

Once I had settled into my hotel (which was 50 yards from the beach) I began to concentrate on the job in hand. However, there were several people from the same Company staying in the hotel and the only thing to do in the evening, other than staying in your room, was to head for the hotel bar or the nearest pub. As the Company were paying for us to be there it was invariably the hotel bar we ended up in. All our food and drink was being paid for and naturally there was a degree of over indulgence, mostly, I have to admit, on my part. My bar bill for one week came to £525!! I thought I would be in serious trouble for this oversight but to my amazement it was not even mentioned. I had always been a fairly heavy drinker but **this was like giving a child a set of keys to Toys 'R' Us!!**

Things continued like this for some time and at weekends I would return to Stevenage to see Sue, my family and my friends, or occasionally Sue would come to Kent.

Then in November of 2001 the first real devastating event happened. It was a Friday and I was waiting for my new company car to be delivered. I was all set to return to Stevenage for the weekend. I had been hearing on the radio and from colleagues that a major accident had occurred on the M25 and the hold up in all directions was **at least seven hours**. "Oh bother," I thought (if you can believe that!). I phoned Sue and said I would stay in Kent on Friday but would leave first thing Saturday morning. After much gentle persuasion Sue agreed that this was the best thing to do.

My new car arrived. A lovely burgundy Renault Laguna with 19 miles on the clock. A brand new car. After work I decided to have a few drinks and then retire for an early night. Long drive ahead and all that. My sensible streak was in control.

After a few drinks my sensible streak had had enough and walked out on me and in walked my self-destruct streak (who bought several more drinks!).

Sue phoned me, very upset that I was not coming home. I decided that the hold up on the M25 would be bearable by now so I packed my bags and got into my new

...continued

Journey (2005) continued....

car and set off for Stevenage. I had gone no more than ten miles when it happened. I was doing about 60mph when out of nowhere a bend came up that I had not anticipated. The truth is I had driven on that particular stretch of road a hundred times before but never in a pissed state. Too late!! The bend was in front of me. I slammed on the brakes but the car just continued straight ahead in a skidding motion. All I could see in front of me was a massive roundabout, the type that has black and white brickwork around it, and a fairly large island with trees in the middle. When I came to a halt there were trees in my new car!! Both air bags had been activated. A tree stump had come right through the bottom of the car and I had a few leaves and branches on my lap. Everything seemed to stand still for a moment until it had dawned on me what had happened.

My first thought once the dust had settled was "oh Jesus, what have I done?" I got out of the car to assess the rest of the damage. I could not believe it. Not one part of the car had escaped without damage. I shrugged my shoulders and decided to get out of there before any one saw me (my self destruct streak in all its glory).

I went to get my bag (and my treasured bottle of wine which was on the passenger side floor). As I stood up I saw the blue lights flashing and two Policemen coming towards me. They had been sitting in their patrol car not 50 yards from the scene, having a McDonalds. I suddenly felt hungry.

I spent the night in the cells and when I returned to the scene in the morning I looked at the mileage on the car. It read 28miles. Short life for such a nice car!

I received a two-year ban, a £500 fine and one year's community service for that night that I allowed alcohol to get the upper hand.

I was also severely reprimanded by my employers. The last employee to act in a similar fashion was dismissed. I received a written warning. I hope the last employee never finds that out, and I'm sure the senior executives must have started to question their decision.

Sue finally found a job in Kent and timed her move to coincide with the moving in date of the house that I had purchased. I won't go into reasons why the house was purchased solely in my name. This is about my journey and it would be unfair of me to include anybody else's details.

Things seemed to be going well for Sue and me. Alcohol, as ever, played far too big a role in my life. I was continuing to drink excessively and occasionally would use Cocaine as well. Sue did both too but not to the degree that I did. After a time I felt that things weren't right between Sue and me and after much soul searching decided that I wanted to split up. I think women are far more perceptive about relationships than men are because Sue had said that she felt this was the beginning of the end for us. She was right and to this day I will never understand how she knew.

So began the second devastating experience. Me and Sue splitting up. Seven years is a long time and we were, by this time, engaged. Sue moved back to Stevenage and got her old job back as an accountant. She behaved like such a lady through it all that I felt like a horrible nasty bastard. She never once got angry. I wish she had done, if only to help justify my actions but she never did.

...continued

Journey (2005) continued....

I was so low that I thought a holiday on my own would be a good way to cheer myself up. I searched Teletext and finally booked a week long holiday. I choose San Antonio in Ibiza!! Smart move. I woke up on my second day in Ibiza miles from my hotel, lying in the dirt, facing a wall with over £300 in my wallet. What a way to start a cheer-you-up holiday. How I wasn't robbed is beyond me. By day three, I was ready to come home, feeling I had made a mistake. I called home and my sister Ann informed me that my Dad had had a mild stroke. She insisted that there was little I could do and I should stay in Ibiza and try to enjoy the rest of my holiday. I relented and stayed in Ibiza. I found out where the 'Lucky Boys' (dealers) operated and suffice is to say that I spent over £1500 in one week. On my own!! When I returned to England I really started to hit the bottle and my work began to suffer. I was so wrapped up in 'me and my problems' that I became a different person. I had been diagnosed with depression many years ago and now it was back with a vengeance.

Depression = Alcohol? Alcohol = Depression? I really don't know. They just blurred into one. 'Despair'.

I was now living in the house in Kent on my own and really began to understand loneliness and what it can do to a person. After a great deal of thought I felt I had made the wrong decision and contacted Sue and asked would she come back. After many tearful conversations and meetings she agreed. Sue moved back and things went really well. But only for a while. As time passed I began to realise the real reason why I had asked Sue to come back. I feared loneliness. I told Sue that I was wrong and did think splitting up was best. I was putting Sue through the same heart-ache as last time. I felt a hundred times worse than before. It was the hardest thing I have ever had to go through. To hurt someone that much and not mean it. Once again Sue moved back to Stevenage and, once again, behaved like a lady throughout. To this day she is still one of the most remarkable people I have ever known. I did not feel that way about myself. A deep self-loathing started to manifest itself (which had always been lurking around anyway) and that could only lead to one thing. The bottle.

Sue had been gone for a week or so when I was sitting at my desk at work one day when my phone rang. It was Sue. "Have you spoken to any of your family recently" she asked. "No. I am not really in the mood to talk to anyone after the last couple of weeks" was my reply. Sue started to cry and pleaded with me to phone my family. I knew something was very wrong but nothing could have prepared me for what was to follow. I phoned my sister Jeanette. She was crying as she told me that my Dad had suddenly died last night. I do not need to go into detail about the effect that that had on my family and me. In two weeks I had lost two people I loved very much, for very different reasons. Needless to say this was another life changing experience.

We buried Dad and I returned to Kent, alone, to try and continue as normally as possible. Things got progressively worse drink and depression wise. I was drinking more than ever and slowly but surely was slipping into a much deeper depression than I had ever experienced. Then I had what some might call a reprieve. I met a woman called Tash. We went out together for 6 months or so and it was great. I started to feel like myself again. Confident, on track, good at my job and the owner of a lovely home of which I was very proud. Tash and I decided to take a holiday so we

...continued

Journey (2005) continued....

booked a week in Tunisia. We set off when the time came but had to fly from Manchester due to reasons beyond our control. Deal to Manchester is a seven-hour drive but it did not matter because we were on holiday. The holiday was great and the time came to head back home to reality. At the airport I started to feel quite ill. Tash thought I was putting it on but as my condition worsened she became increasingly more concerned. Our flight had been delayed and by now I was very ill. Tash found the airport medics and they decided I had contracted a stomach bug. 'No shit Sherlock!' I thought. They insisted on injecting me with liquid paracetamol before they would allow me to fly. By now my temperature had risen to 104°F. We arrived at Manchester and had to drive for seven hours back to Deal. It turned out I had Salmonella poisoning. Lots of people get food poisoning but in my chosen career it is extremely serious. I had six weeks off work waiting for results that would decide whether I was a carrier or not. If the results had been positive, then the career that I had spent ten years building up would be over in an instant.

The results were negative but the overall outcome was not. Tash left because I had again slipped into self-pity, which resulted in the usual misuse of the 'good stuff'. My workload had increased ten fold in what was an already extremely stressful job.

Then, a devastating blow. I had been working on an exclusive project, which had never been attempted by any fresh produce company due to its complex nature. I spent six months on the project and finally cracked it. The launch date for the product was imminent. I was drinking heavily one Saturday night when the following day I was called in to work unexpectedly to assist with the final stages of preparation for the launch. I had been through the process a thousand times with the relevant managers. The NPD Manager (who was new and a right bitch!!), called me in because she had 'a problem'. When she explained what her problem was I totally flipped and called her a name, which I will not reprint. Lots of factory operatives were present and heard everything. In my profession, you do not speak to an Executive member of staff the way I did, let alone in front of factory ops. She scuttled off, crying, and phoned my manager. I was drunk and should not have been on site. Needless to say I was suspended and eventually dismissed for gross misconduct. The career I had worked so diligently at was over and it had nothing to do with food poisoning. It was my own doing and it was caused by alcohol abuse.

Again, I was alone in the house and jobless. New depths of depression set in which became all consuming. I was at my lowest point ever. It was then that I first attempted to harm myself. I took some pills. Not enough to do any real damage. I think if a person really decides on suicide then they will carry it through. Some say it was a cry for help, which I don't disagree with. Stupid thing is I went to the hospital alone and did not tell anyone. I could not even make a cry for help successfully.

I had to find another job. So I did. I was driving again and was put in touch with a fruit grower in Canterbury. They had no vacancies so I presented them with my CV and left. The following day they asked me to attend an interview. I was told that they did not want to miss the opportunity of an interview after seeing my CV. A good CV can work wonders!! I attended the interview and was offered a position as QA Manager. They had been planning to recruit a QA Manager at some point and my CV had reached them at an opportune moment. I started work and felt good considering so many set backs I had experienced lately.

Unsurprisingly, the euphoria did not last. I went to a party one Friday at work and got

...continued

Journey (2005) continued....

hammered. I mean really hammered. I stayed overnight and carried on drinking the next morning. Drunk, I decided to drive home but after two hundred yards or so realised I was incapable of driving so I pulled into a lay by. I pulled in through a no entry sign, coasted along the kerb and stalled. I climbed in the back seat and lay down to sleep it off I was awakened by a Policeman tapping loudly on the window. Someone had seen me entering a no entry sign and hit the kerb. Nicked again. This time I spent all weekend in the cells because I was rather cheeky to the Charge Sergeant. I went to court on the Monday and was banned immediately until the hearing. I had been driving again for only about seven weeks.

This time I knew I was in real trouble. I was found guilty of being four times over the legal limit and sentencing was postponed for a pre sentence report. I was facing a custodial sentence and was advised by my Brief to pack some essentials because a custodial sentence was a real possibility. After seeing a Psychiatrist and a probation officer a lengthy pre sentence report was compiled. The report kept me out of prison because it clearly stated that prison would not be the right place for me. I was given **a further four year ban, £600 fine and one year's probation.** It was the second scariest day of my life. I am what you might call a law-abiding citizen and here I was, facing prison. Thank God it didn't happen. Oh, and naturally I lost my job again.

I can't begin to explain how low I was feeling. I was heavily in debt, with no job, no car, away from my family and no partner. And of course, I was drinking heavily. And using Cocaine.

I spoke to an old colleague who offered me a job in Oxfordshire as a QAM (I have been very fortunate in finding work.) I had to move very quickly from Kent to Oxfordshire. I managed it in two weeks. My house in Kent had a loft conversion but the previous owner had not obtained planning permission for it. This left me with a real problem. I could not let my house out through an agent unless I made **renovations to the loft conversion.** 'Yeah, right' I thought. I was struggling to pay the bloody mortgage on my own, let alone spend thousands on renovations. I had to let it out on a private basis. Big risk but no choice.

I had a friend look after my house until he eventually found some people to move in.

I moved into a beautiful apartment overlooking a fantastic lake in a town called Whitney and started work in my new job. I knew only one person in Oxfordshire and he lived several miles away in another town, was married and had four children, so he was not allowed out to play as often as I would have liked. The Company I was working for was tiny. About forty employees. I had been used to working in factories with six hundred plus employees. As a consequence I had little or no social life so I would return to my apartment each evening alone. I had a few halfhearted flings with women but I was very lonely and uncomfortable. I continued to drink too much but I was not using Cocaine. The drinking became worse. I would go on binges at weekends that could last four or five days. I was really letting my friend at work down and myself. By now I was a wreck. I was not coping well with any aspect of my life. I started to receive letters from creditors chasing debts. Lots of debts. I had managed to secure a job for my friend in Kent who was due to move into the spare room in the apartment. He moved up and started work. He lasted two weeks. I came home **and found a letter saying he missed home. He couldn't even tell me face to face.** Derek is still a good friend but I wish he could have let me know he was going back to Kent without just taking off.

...continued

Journey (2005) continued....

It was around this time that I began to notice some strange markings start to appear on my body. At first they were confined to just my knees and elbows but as time passed they slowly became more widespread. I did not know what they were and never really gave them much thought.

I continued with my probation (because I had to) and started to see a counsellor. She was absolutely stunning and I found it difficult to concentrate on the sessions (she really was beautiful). I stopped seeing her for that reason.

Then I had what I can only describe as the most frightening night of my life. I was on a bender. When I decided enough was enough and stopped drinking I experienced **for the first time, and hopefully the last, Delirium Tremors**. I can't find words to fully explain the fear I felt that night but I genuinely believed I was dying. I could not talk properly. I was having waking nightmares so graphic and evil that I phoned a taxi and went to the emergency ward. It was closed. I came home and phoned an emergency Doctor who managed to get me through the night. In the morning, having missed another day at work I started to clear up. This was a Tuesday morning and I had started drinking on Saturday evening. I counted the bottles. 13 bottles of wine, 2 bottles of Jack Daniels and a bottle of Whisky. Was I trying to kill myself?? Probably.

By now the marks on my body had become more of a problem so I decided to seek medical advice. It turned out to be Psoriasis. And it was serious. My whole body from neck to toe was completely covered in what appeared to be white / silvery scaly dry skin. I was sent to a skin specialist who confirmed it was a moderate to severe case. I felt like a freak. I remember several times standing in front of the mirror and crying at my appearance. Not out of pity but out of frustration. It was hugely uncomfortable and I had to cover myself in cream from head to foot twice a day which I loathed.

It was then that I decided I had to return to Stevenage to be near my family and friends.

I gave my notice to my employer and moved back to Stevenage with the help of a woman I had met on one of my visits home.

I moved in with my sister Ann, her husband Tommy, their baby daughter and of course my Mum. I will talk some more about my family a little later because each and every one of them have been incredible.

My relationship with my new girlfriend started to flourish (so I thought) much to the consternation of family and friends. I moved into her house and took a job in a warehouse. It was a soul destroying experience and one which I detested. But I needed an income. The creditors were barking at my heels and to top it all the tenants in my house had trashed it and left without paying rent, leaving me in serious trouble. The upshot was that my house that I loved was being repossessed.

After seeing a Chinese Herbalist about my Psoriasis, I was prescribed a concoction of twigs and mushrooms and the like which was to be made into a tea and drunk twice a day. I drank it, twice a day for two months, and felt physically sick every time I did so but my Psoriasis slowly began to abate. At last, something was working.

We continued our relationship. The three of us. Myself, my new girlfriend and alcohol. I received a call from an agent I had used previously asking me would I attend an interview for a Technical Managers position in Nazeing, Essex. I had nothing

...continued

Journey (2005) continued....

to lose so attended the interview and was offered the job immediately.

My CV seemed to have worked its magic once again!

I started my new job which was the fifth job in four years. Things were going well. Then in March 2005 an event took place with which I have yet to come to terms with and am not sure if I ever will.

My girlfriend and I had been drinking quite heavily one weekend and one thing led to another and an argument ensued. I do not want to go into detail about what followed except to say that there was a violent confrontation between us which resulted in the Police being called to a domestic incident. Nicked again!! This time the Police had guns. Why?? I was handcuffed and put in the squad car to be carted off to the station to face the music. I asked the police, whilst I was in the back of the squad car, why they were armed. The reply was that they were the only unit available. 'Ok' I thought, so I asked if I could have a look at one of their guns. I don't think it went down too well but I was scared, ashamed, and in pain. I thought it might help to break the tension. It didn't.

I appeared at Court to face two charges of common assault and one of criminal damage. It is the first time in my life that I have been charged with a violent crime. It is also the last time I will ever be charged with violence. I was advised to plead not guilty and am awaiting the case to be heard in September.

I was now homeless. My sister Jo and her husband Gary let me stay with them until I found a place to rent.

I managed to hold on to my job in Nazeing and found a place to rent in Hertford. I lasted two months before the net finally closed in. I lost my job again through alcohol and was once again alone, in a flat, in Hertford. I could not pay my rent so I had to give my notice to the landlord. I was now officially homeless. My brother in law Gary picked me up from Hertford on 26th May 2005 and, with my sister Jo, we headed to the big blue door that is The Haven.

I had gone from owning my own home, having a fantastic job, a great relationship and enough money to enjoy life, to having nothing, losing my Father and am in the process of declaring myself bankrupt. I have lost all that is important to me through my inability to control my use of alcohol. Since moving to Kent four years ago mine has been something of a peripatetic existence. I have had 9 different addresses and have moved my personal belongings over 20 times, eight times in one year alone. I am so tired of it.

Alcohol has been the carrot — and I the Donkey. In more ways than one.

It is at this point that I would like to add some things that must be said.

Firstly, my Family. I have tested my Family most of my adult life to the point where many others would have turned their backs. They have all been close I'm sure. I now truly understand the meaning of unconditional love and cannot begin to explain the love I feel for all of them. All of them!

Secondly, The Haven. Through all that has happened so far I still consider myself fortunate. Fortunate that I did not kill anyone when I had the crash in Kent. I still thank God for that. Fortunate that I have a family that are irreplaceable. Fortunate that I am still alive. And fortunate that I am now at The Haven. To be surrounded by so many good people who care so much is a circumstance that few people in this

...continued

Journey (2005) continued....

life can say they have been privy to. The Haven staff work miracles on what must be a daily basis.

People handle life situations in different ways. The situations and events I have experienced over my life to date may seem, to some, rather trivial. They may, to others, seem to be hugely difficult to rise above. Regardless of other peoples perceptions they are all contributing factors that have led me to where I am today and I do not wish things had been different. This path must have reason to it and I'm sure that in time it will become very clear to me exactly what that reason is.

I will not waste any more time dwelling on the past. I cannot change it. I can but learn from it. My journey will have a second stage but as yet that has not even begun to unfold.

Finally, I would like to share some lyrics to a song that I sing in my head on a daily basis.

"I'm gonna clear out my head. I'm gonna get my self straight. I know it's never to late, to make a brand new start" Brand New Start — Paul Weller

The Journey Continues: A Year Of Love And Support (2006)

I moved into the Haven on 26th May 2005. I remember how I felt on the journey from Hertford to the Haven. My whole world had come crashing down around me and was in pieces. I genuinely did not know what to do or what to expect. I was moving into a hostel for the homeless. I still reel today when I think back to that moment in my life when the realisation of my situation finally sunk in. I had been through some rough times but this was a new and very different feeling. It would be an understatement to say that I was merely scared. It was much more than that. I was truly lost. I knocked on the door of the Haven and was greeted by a woman called Sue. Sue let me in and I was introduced to Andy. My sister was not allowed inside, which only added to the isolation and fear I was feeling. I remember sitting in the office with Andy whilst we went through all the formalities and paperwork. I was in a daze. Andy and Sue have been of tremendous support, and they were both quite aware that I was not functioning very effectively. I could not really take in everything Andy was saying. I just kept thinking how has my life come to this?

I didn't settle into The Haven very easily. I was very withdrawn and didn't mix well with the other residents. It was nothing to do with them. It was me. I was so wrapped up in self pity that I didn't have time for anyone else.

As time progressed I started to relax a little. The staff made me feel very cared for and the residents started to talk a bit more freely to me. I started to see a counsellor and a drug and alcohol support worker and things started to seem better. I have never really had a big drug problem so they were easy to put down but the alcohol is really quite another matter. For the first time in my life I really began to consider the possibility that I might actually be an alcoholic. I started going to AA but never really gave it any real effort.

I had a court date looming in September for an incident with my then girlfriend and I felt physically sick every time I thought of it. So I tried not to but it was really hard. I was also in the process of bankruptcy and as a result my house repossession was imminent. All this was down to excessive alcohol abuse. I felt smothered and could not see any way out of a dreadful situation. So I started, like most alcoholics would, to

...continued

The Journey Continues: A Year Of Love And Support (2006) continued....

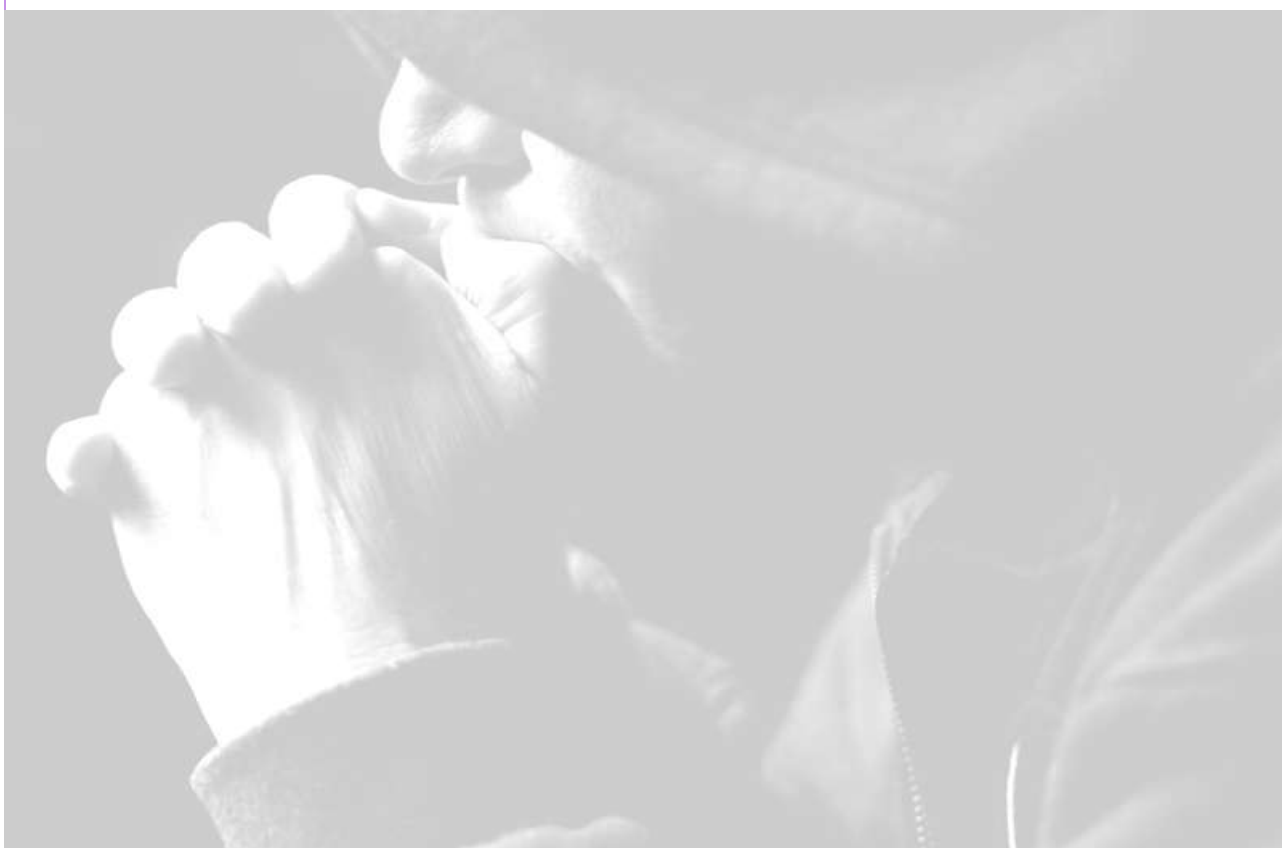
drink heavily. I remember being at a friends bar-b-q and as I helped with the cooking (I say helped. I did it all.) he presented me with a litre and a half of Vodka which I was to send to my neighbour in Kent for his help looking after all my furniture. Needless to say I didn't send it. I am an alcoholic with no money so why would I send it? That really was my selfish way of thinking. The court case came and went. I felt like a massive weight had been lifted. I was fined, had to pay damages and was given a years probation. I asked that the Court make part of the probation order to meet regularly with an alcohol counsellor which they were more than happy to do.

I was given the opportunity by The Haven to move into a pilot scheme move on accommodation which was the best news I had had in ages. I had also managed to stop drinking and moved into a lovely three bedroom maisonette. It is close to my family and is extremely comfortable. I get on very well with the two other residents.

I had not had a drink for 3 months but it was now Christmas and I suffered a serious relapse. I was so disgusted with myself. It was then that I really started to consider AA seriously. I went to meetings every night and went to The Living Room on a daily basis for 2 months. I began to feel that I had beaten the alcohol and I became almost arrogant about recovery. I went to my sisters 40th at the end of March and started to drink again. I relapsed for 7 days solid. I drank enough to kill a person. It nearly killed me and I was rushed to hospital suffering with hallucinations and exhaustion. I spent 5 days in hospital being nursed back to health.

When I came out of hospital I vowed never to drink again and upped my meetings. I got a sponsor and started back on the road to recovery. I continued to see all the support workers and health professionals and have been making excellent progress. I think that being temporarily housed in the maisonette has greatly helped me come to terms with alcoholism. I have relapsed a few times but never to the degree I did in March. I can only continue to work hard at recovery and utilise all the love and support that I have had around me in the last year.

(Eamonn's recovery has continued following a voluntary spell in residential rehab whilst a Haven 2 resident. He has subsequently moved onto Havens 3-6 and has been free of alcohol problems for 18 months now - August 2008).



Ecstasy

Since the day I was born I took a tragic fall,
I made mistakes when I had it all,
Threw it all away for a drug I thought was magical,
I'm talking bout crack, which eats u up like a cannibal,
It hacks u up like a savage tool,
All your ambitions and goals get left deceased,
If I didn't quit when I did,
I'd be in a box with rest in peace,
It's like the devil has blessed these streets,
If u don't know what I'm on about u best
Believe, you'll get left with grief,
Depression and addiction is no good recipe,
But now that I'm off it I look for the best in me,
Feeling like cloud nine,
Now found the true meaning of ECSTASY!!!!

The Winter Of My Discontent (2002-4)

Many years ago, there lived a man whose life was shadowed by a very dark cloud, "every day was a rainy day" he could only dream of bright days ahead, though that seemed a little optimistic and sometimes even very far-fetched. The cloud that covered him was the very same thing that he thought was keeping him safe from harm, like when he felt powerless to overcome obstacles or was disillusioned with events, current affairs and things that even in a democracy were never going to be achieved.

Disheartened and even disillusioned, he turned to drugs as a means of escapism, where life's monotonous bullshit was a thing of the past, or at least that's the way it seemed, (though time would prove very different). In the first few years of his drug use, things seemed okay, he made many new friends and they really made him feel at ease, also they did not seem to judge or stereotype (and for once he fitted in, and took to it obviously, "like a duck to water"). So with all his problems fading into the back-ground, he was drawn into a life of drugs and was very much a party animal. Over the years his inhibitions went and soon his morals and values would be called upon in the same way (and that's when the problematic lifestyle of drug addiction starts) as you rely on drugs to get you through the day and whatever the cost, as when your resources have dwindled or have been squandered, then the next stop is crime (and you have to thieve to be a functional person) as life without your daily fix is just too unbearable to even think about, let alone become a reality.

Back then reality was perceived as how things were and that meant I hardly had any say over what was going on, I had to accept it, or deal with it the best way I knew how, and yes "no prize's for guessing" that meant using drugs to cover myself in cotton wool, which I thought (a false perception) was protecting me and I now know that "REALITY" is a perception, (the way you see things) and not necessary the way it looks like at the time. After many years of going nowhere except for prison or on a government correctional program, I was going round in circles like a gold-fish in a bowl and with no or little purpose in life, decided enough was enough and drastic action was needed, to crawl out of this abysmal hole I was in, and get a life, get a room, get a job and basically get it together fast, no messing and hopefully not too much stressing either. So as things went, I managed to get a D.T.T.O court order and have methadone prescribed, which stopped me stealing and allowed me to gradually detox myself and have money to pay rent and be able to hold down accommodation. After adhering to the program I was offered a bed at the Haven in Stevenage and since then my life has flourished in a very positive way and life is great!

On The Streets (2002-4)

This isn't my first bout of homelessness. In the past 15 years I have been homeless for 10 of them. In 1990 I had gone into a hostel for "about 3 weeks" and I actually ended up staying for 3 years. So I was more than a bit dubious about going into another hostel scenario.

Due to "relationship breakdown" I had left my family home. In the weeks prior to my entry at the Haven I had slept on peoples settees, in the car, at the Library, and by the vent shafts at the retail park. My health was deteriorating. The lifestyle I was living was beginning to disorientate me. I had been isolating for several years, (not always through choice) and now circumstances forced me into the "Outside World" for 24/7. But I was still isolated.

I was surprised how much energy my new lifestyle sapped from me. When I arrived at the Haven I hadn't slept for longer than 2 or 3 hours at a time for several months. I was exhausted and my morale was pretty low. I had lost about 4" off my waistband and around a stone and a half of weight.

I don't know what I expected before I arrived at the Haven. I did know that the Council had spent around £300K on refurbishments. A friend had told me on my way to the SBC Customer Centre, Danestrete for my daily 9.00am appointment. After a few more adventures and 3 nights at the "Sanctuary" Night Shelter in Hitchin I got a bed at the Haven.

The staff were helpful and friendly and made me quite welcome and the other residents began to communicate with me with conversation, music and Art. The bed is comfortable but smallish and after 3 rough nights I settled down to my first really good sleep in ages.

Regular food and sleep have improved my health and one month on I feel very much better. Although the hostel regime can be quite wearing the support offered to me has been useful. Due to staff restrictions though there been problems with the actual delivery. The Alternative Therapies and the opportunity to do some gardening in a splendid setting have been my favourites.

After initial problems with SBC my housing application has been accepted but onto the homelessness list. This means I will be offered 'Temporary Accommodation' and must take the very only offer I will get. To turn it down will make me 'intentionally homeless' and I will be doomed. At one stage it seems I had over 100 housing points and would have some choice through the bidding scheme. But that only applies to the 'Housing' list and not the 'homelessness list'. Some people get a choice others don't. I am still quite lucky through as in the age group 16-25 placements are scarce and a long stay in hostels etc. is quite usual.

Having stayed in other Hostels/Shelters I would say 'The Haven' is pretty good but arbitrary and inconsistent decision making has led to dissent with several residents. The potential benefit of the Haven is the support and links to other agencies. The real benefit of the place is the group of residents who have supported each other and making some 'blinding' new friends.

Living Life On Life's Terms (2002-4)

I was put into the direction of the haven by a project called the living room. I'm a 23 year old female and had been living at my fathers address. Prior to that I lived in a violent relationship with my three children. My children were taken into care, I became depressed and started to drink heavily. I was told I was never to see my three children again. They are seven, three and one. I drank to oblivion and lost my flat, when I moved to my dads I still couldn't stop drinking – I was in a downwards spiral, he asked me to leave because he couldn't handle my drinking and now I can understand why. It was doing for me what I wanted and that was to forget the past and the sorrow of losing my lads.

The Living Room (breaking the cycle of addiction) taught me how to live again and to live life on life's terms. I follow a twelve step program and I go to alcoholics anonymous meetings 3 times a week.

I told the Living Room I was going to be homeless and they got me in the Haven that same day. When I arrived at the Haven I found it very welcoming. I was honest with the staff and told them my situation. I was worried about telling them about my drink problem but when I did they were totally supportive, they even have there own AA meeting which is help on Thursdays. I have a key working session every two weeks when I tell them my plans over the next two weeks and they give me advice. The staff are lovely, especially Janet and Vickie, I feel like I don't have to hide anything, I can be totally honest. The staff also provide counselling, and other activities like snooker, pool, arts and crafts, and therapies such as Rieke and Indian head massages, acupuncture and cookery lessons, there is always something to do.

With the help and support of the staff here and the staff at the Living Room I have stayed off the Alcohol and have got an appointment at the solicitors to get my children back – and hopefully in a sober future be re-housed with my children, now that I have had counselling and therapies I have sorted my head out and got rid of a lot of the depression and its all thanks to the Living room and the Haven.

I Had Lost Everything (2002-4)

In my life I have always been employed and had a very good living. When my father and mother died in an accident I was left with my sister. We helped each other a lot I miss her very much. When I was 21 years old I met a lovely woman, who I fell deeply in love with, I worked so hard to make sure she had the best things in life.

I have always kept very fit and help out disabled people with swimming and keep fit. I have done a lot of yacht sailing in my time and love all water sports. Everything was going well until my health started to let me down. I started to get black outs and fits as well as very high blood pressure.

After I was rushed to hospital a few times I lost my good job and car. The black outs kept coming and the woman I loved stopped seeing me. This really did hurt me a lot, she meant so much to me, I got into such a bad state. I had no money, no family, no car, and no one I could go and see. I had lost everything.

This is the time when I decided to take my own life. I went down to Fairlands Lake and just wanted to kill myself. Lucky for me an old lady stopped me, and got the police who took me to hospital. Now I am here, thank you Haven from my heart.

My Recovery Spring Boarded (2002-4)

I am writing to say a big thank you for all the help and support I have received at the Stevenage Haven homeless hostel.

I have been a heroin addict for six years and have been in recovery for only six months prior to moving to the Haven. I had got clean at my brothers' in Bournemouth and whilst I was away my flat in Hitchin became overrun with junkies which were my using friends.

Unfortunately I lost my father in May and my brother and I fell out. I was still drinking at the time and deciding to come back to Hitchin I crashed my car and was done for drink driving which I really regret.

Reluctant to go back to the flat (which I relinquished) my only option was to stay at my ex-partners house with my two children. We hadn't got along for a long time and it wasn't good for myself, my ex-partner or my girls, plus the fact being where I was very dangerous for me as all my using friends and dealers lived around there. After a couple of extremely uncomfortable months I was put on probation where I expressed my fears and they introduced me to the Haven.

The staff and residence were very welcoming and helpful. My recovery spring boarded from there and I managed to also put down the drink thanks to the support of peers, staff and associated activities at the Haven I have new hope and have been accepted onto a housing association and will hopefully be moving soon.

A New Life For Myself (2002-4)

After 18 months of living rough and suffering from deep depression and alcoholism I went to Stevenage Borough Council to apply for housing. They referred me to the Haven Hostel for the homeless.

Whilst I was homeless I wasn't eating or sleeping properly and my personal hygiene deteriorated to a very low level.

On the 2nd March 2004 I moved I moved into the Haven. When I first walked in I was amazed to see how clean and very well decorated it was. The staff made me feel at ease. I had a comfortable bed and a warm place to live. I had three meals a day and started to feel much healthier. I cannot thank the staff enough for their help and guidance. They helped me with my personal problems and any benefit questions I had.

The Council gave me a bed/sitting room and I moved in on 26th April 2004 with the help of Haven Staff. With the help I have had I can now start to make a new life for myself.

The Haven Staff will always be in my thoughts.

My Life (2002-4)

My life started to go wrong when I was fifteen when my father hit me and I was put into a children's home. Then at seventeen I went into foster care for a few months till I was eighteen. Then I had to learn how to look after myself in a bed-sit. I found it very hard at first because I wasn't very good at looking after my money and was so hungry sometimes all I had to eat is what I had left in my cupboards. Sometimes I just ate handfuls of sugar to take away the hunger. I didn't know if there was anyone who cared or could help me. I have moved to lots of different places while I was working. Then I moved into a friend's flat because I couldn't find any where to go quick enough.

He offered me to stay with him for a while. Then I had to leave my job because of an injury I had some years before and it was getting worse because of the sort of work I was doing and my friend let me stay as long as he could because he was getting custody of his daughter so he had to ask me to find somewhere else in a month which I had a lot of difficulty finding somewhere because I tried ringing a lot of private landlords and they wouldn't have people on benefits so I went to the council to say I was going to be homeless. Soon I was shitting myself because I had an image of myself sleeping on the streets begging for money just so I could feed myself. I was already on the housing list for about a year but I didn't have enough points to get a place of my own. I felt like the world was just falling down around me and no one else cared. It was getting closer to the date I had to move out then the council said I could move to a night shelter for the homeless. All my fears were becoming true. At least I was lucky enough not to be sleeping rough on the streets.

I moved into the shelter. I felt like I didn't belong there. I didn't hardly get any sleep on my first night. The staff was quite nice to me which made things a bit easier for me. I had to walk the streets from 8.30am till 7pm. I just didn't know what to do with myself. I stayed there for a week then I asked at the council if there was any hostels in Stevenage because I was studying at the college there so I could find a job that wasn't that physical. They told me the same day there was a bed at the Haven. I was expecting the Haven to be the same as the other hostel I stayed in so I didn't panic too much. When they opened the door I was greeted with a smile and said my name. That made me happy. I have met some great people there and the staff were very friendly. It felt like just like a very big family and it was more like home. I got involved making the foundations for the therapy room which I enjoyed helping out which made me feel a part of the team. I wish to thank all the staff at the Haven for the help I got to get me back on the right track

A Haven

The place to be if you're homeless,
If you feel that you're wasting but going unnoticed,
And the worst of your emotions is too much to cope with
So go to the Haven they won't leave u hopeless,
They'll help you through your struggles,
Help you through troubles,
Help u get out of societies muzzles,
Coz the society we live in just cares about money,
So if you've got nothing you're left in the deep end,
Got no money can't go out at weekend,
Struggling with cravings no way to beat them,
Levels too high it's hard to keep them at bay,
So come to the Haven and have a good day,
They take all the bullshit and keep it away,
And for as long as you're there they'll keep it at bay,
Nothing will change they'll always exchange,
All of your crap for jokes and laughs,
I never knew I could calm so fast,
Moving in it's the first step,
Only looking forwards not back at regrets,
So to all of u people listening to me,
The Haven is just the place to be,
Young and old, dumb and bold,
Come to the Haven let fun unfold!!!!

A Small But Beautiful Tattoo (2002-4)

My phone beeped twice, I had a text message, it said "Pick all your stuff up by 12 o'clock, or it will be out on the street." My heart dropped and I swear it missed 2 beats. I was waiting for this to happen. I was scared and worried sick. At the time I was staying with my mum's friend, as I laid there that night, thinking how sad my parents are.

The stupid thing was it was all over me having a small but beautiful tattoo saying Nan and mother in Chinese.

The stepdad, the leader, He ruled the whole family as well as the house, when I lived there it was like we were all puppets and my stepdad was the puppet master.

My mum, I don't know if she loves him, or is just to scared of losing him.

I always did wonder!

As the days passed, things got worse. My mum's friend kicked me out, I had nowhere to go. Luckily that day I had a meeting with "Herts Young Homeless Group" and spoke to Matt. After the minutes turned into an hour, I just sat there and listened, feeling my eyes starting to water, from tears, as I was so hurt. Slowly starting to fill as if there was no hope, and I would be sleeping in my car again. The whole time I was not thinking of me, but how to explain to my 12 year old little brother, that his sister had no home.

All I heard was "Stevenage" come from Matt's mouth, "what about the Haven?" Matt's voice changed, as if it was the best idea, he had ever come up with. I just said OK, not to sure what he was talking about. He told me the Haven was a dorm, mixed but with 4 girls living in one room. Of course, being me, I thought of the worse. I kept thinking of these girls with gold and bling bling covering their whole bodies, with mean and hard facial expressions, doing drugs in the room, and smelling like a pub.

When I was in my car my heart raced. After 1½ hours of trying to find the place I arrived. The big blue door, which stood out against all the other houses. As I entered I felt sick, and was very nervous. Now thinking back I can't believe I did! Everyone made me feel so welcome, after all I was not the first. I've made a lot of good friends, playing chess and joining in with all the activities. Now when I look back I was so lucky. Its horrible to say, but you don't find out who your real friends are until something like this happens. Mine are the ones that have wiped my tears, made me laugh and nearly cry. The one's that give me hugs and lay with me when watching TV, and even the ones that saved my bottom when my car broke down. There is only one place you will find these people, in the Haven. The staff are brilliant and I'm going to miss them so much, and I'm really sad I have to leave. Thank you "The Haven" for everything.

A Small but Beautiful Tattoo continued (2008)

Some of you may remember me, and some of you may not. I was a resident of the Stevenage Haven over 4 years ago now, even though it still feels like yesterday, when I pulled up outside. A lot has happened to me in the past 4 years, some good experience and some I wish I could forget. I ended up at the Haven due to a silly row about a tattoo I had with my family.

So what am I up to now, you may ask? Well I moved to east coast with my son about 2.5 years ago and I am now the manager of a Health and Beauty salon based in a small tourist town. This is a big part of my life now as it was a part of my life which I had over 4 years ago, but could never let go.

It is the Haven.

The salon which I work in has the same name and same blue door which the Stevenage Haven had. As if it had never let me go and was always a part of me. I believe to this day if it was not for the Stevenage Haven I would not be the woman I am today, because of the people that was there for me, supporting me and guiding me in the right direction.

- **Frankie** - for giving me the strength, to do anything my heart desired.
- **Vicky** - for the Holistic Treatments and to always make you smile.
- **Barbara** - for the cakes that found my hips but also warmed my heart.
- **Brian** - for showing me who I was, and for making me believe in myself.
- **All the other staff that I will never forget for making me smile.**

I have learnt that everything happens for a reason and for some reason I ended up at the Stevenage Haven, the same reason I ended up at The Haven Health and Beauty Centre.

It doesn't matter where my life takes me, those people will always be with, and because of them I am stronger and now doing well for myself. I find it hard to believe that 4 years ago I had nothing now I have a business and I own my own house 10 minutes from the beach.

I miss the Haven so much and have so much respect for every member of staff, and I want to say thank you and to tell you all that, ***Not all guardian angels are up in Heaven.'***

I Got Ill With Depression (2002-4)

After being married for twelve years, fathering three wonderful children, getting separated, living in digs, renting a great flat (that my landlady got repossessed, and so I was forced to leave), I found myself living with my brother, his partner and my young niece and nephew. Whilst living at my brothers I got ill with depression and it took me a while to realise that the main cause was where I was living and so moved out.

After sleeping on sofas' and the streets for several weeks, and still managing to hold down a full time job, I ended up in hospital very ill and not having a clue where I was going to go next. I had no-one, nothing and nowhere.

The day I came out of hospital changed my life and turned me around. That was the day that a nice lady from Stevenage Borough Council's housing department phoned up The Haven to ask if they had a spare bed for me, very luckily for me they did have! That evening I found myself ringing the doorbell of Chris Foster House in Ditchmore Lane for the very first time, thirty eight years old, never been in a so called hostel before, and the stories about these "places" I'd been told were playing on my mind – I was scared stiff!!

How very wrong to make assumptions about The Haven I was! I was greeted at the door by Frankie and immediately felt welcome and at home, one by one all my reservations and doubts just vanished. From that first day, 14th June 2004, every single day of my life has got better and better.

I've helped build a greenhouse with Greg, cooked with Frankie, had Reiki with Vicki, acupuncture with Trisha, attended book group with Janet and that's just the start. I've even played pool or snooker with Neil every Monday!

But the most important thing of all is all the brilliant support and help I've received from all the wonderful staff. That may sound very patronising and creepy but its not intended to in any way. I have nothing but gratitude and respect for all the people who work for and at the Haven, not just for helping me but for all the residents.

One day in The Haven I was introduced to a lady called Lorraine who works for connexions. I mentioned to her that I've always wanted to be a nurse, specialising in Diabetes, as I'm diabetic myself. She just happened to have a leaflet about a nursing cadet scheme – what a spot of luck! I have now started nurse training and am at Barnfield College in Luton doing a GNVQ course, I even have my uniform and start at the Lister Hospital on November 1st.

That's it – what a lot I've got to be grateful to the Haven for – I have a completely new life and will hopefully be moving "Haven 2" in the near future. Thank you Haven – from the bottom of my heart.

Scared And Worried (2002-4)

I walked up the path to the Haven so scared and worried. I stood for a minute before knocking. Then to my surprise I was greeted with a smile and felt like it was home. I thought it would be like a prison, cold. Within the first hour I found the residents were all welcoming and friendly and the staff were friendly and funny. This made me feel safe and like everyone else, like I knew the residents before, instead of feeling like a gooseberry and being treated like one. It's strange to think but this is how I feel if I go out with a group of people I don't know. I'm not myself. But here, I don't feel I get judged, I can be ME. I have never had that feeling with the places I have stayed previously – my family home, private accommodation.

I feel more accepted and I feel that I can accept and tolerate people more. I really expected drugs to be forced in my face and my belongings to be stolen, and to be frowned upon. Drugs were not pushed in my face. Yes personal belongings do occasionally go walk about, but you just have to be careful where you leave things, and it's like that anywhere, workplace, school, not just a hostel.

The staff have been great. They have really helped me, they listen and I feel they listen and then they try to point you in the right direction or explain something from a different angle. And I feel a better person, and to me if I feel better in myself that's the first step to moving on, as then I can find the confidence to work and then get a place of my own. I have been here 4 months now and I'm 18 years old.

My Route To Homelessness (2002-4)

I am a young male at a age of 17. I was kicked out of my family house at 16. I have been to a few hostels but when I was told I was being referred to the Haven.

I had heard a lot of bad news about it but when I moved in it felt weird but the day after I started to fit in and all the bad news was rubbish. I was kicked out twice and moved on once now I am back so they do believe in second and third chances.

When I was kicked out of my family house it hit me hard, but all I can say is thank God for Hostels

Sleeping Rough And Sofa Surfing (2002-4)

The last house I lived in was in Hitchin with my mum and brothers and sister. I got chucked out by my mum because I was tired to cover for someone at work. I guess she thought I was being lazy or selfish or something. I went straight to a mates house and got smashed. He asked if I wanted to stay over and I ended staying for about 3-4 weeks. My mate spent most of the time under the influence of something or other. After a while I got into a bit of an argument with his Mum and I was out on my arse again. I spent the next week - 10 days sleeping rough in fields and bushes broken by occasionally by a night on someone's sofa.

I forgot to mention I lost my job in all this. Towards the end of my stay at the mates house I allegedly 'stole' a piece of bread to eat on my break. This led to a dispute between me and my boss (who happened to be selling the company within a week) there, after work she gave me the sack.

One day a friend who had been homeless about a year ago told me about a woman on Letchworth Council who had helped him out. I went to see her and she called my mate to say she had found somewhere for me to stay. I thought it would just be for one night but that was worth it for me.

I came to Stevenage Haven I think in the first week of June. The first person I saw was Greg who signed me in and told me the way it was run. There were only a few residents about and as they trickled back I got to know a few of them. I thought I settled in quite quickly but it took a little longer to realise this place was really my home for a while.

Over the next few months I have had an unlimited source of help with benefits, personal problems, work problems, cutting down the amount of shite I put myself in and most importantly finding a place to live more permanently.

Overall I think I brought some of my crap on myself but I'm lucky to have had help. The family which put me up, gave me food and a sofa to sleep on and the Haven. I feel much clearer and happier now and it finally seems like the cogs are turning with a shared house interview next Monday.



Stevenage Haven
5 Ditchmore Lane, Stevenage, Hertfordshire, SG1 3LJ

Tel.: 01438 354884

Fax: 01438 340155

E-mail: info@stevenagehaven.org.uk

www.stevenagehaven.org.uk

Patron: Barbara Follett

Company limited by guarantee: registration number 3366848
Registered charity number 1064495. Registered office: as above.

Photographs are for illustration purposes only and are posed by models.
Some names in stories have been changed to protect the anonymity of Clients.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed in any way to the production of this booklet.