



# *Making recovery visible*

*In Sheffield we know that there are 100's if not 1000's of untold stories (often shared in closed groups) that the general population don't get to hear about. Sheffield Recovery Forum is STILL on a mission to change that.*

**Brett Smith**

## **What was life like for you at rock bottom?**

My rock bottom was the first time I found myself homeless and living on the streets, back in 2005. But my story starts years before that, back when I was a teenager and started experimenting with drugs. They were all around me where I grew up on Parson Cross, and before long I was addicted to heroin. There were years and years of addiction and prison time.

I contracted Hepatitis C in prison in 1999 through my drug use, but when I ended up on the streets that was a whole new level of chaos that I hadn't seen before. I shared drugs with someone who had just come out of hospital where he'd contracted MRSA, and I ended up catching it from him. It spread up to my shoulder and I developed an infection in my heart valves. When I went into hospital my veins were non-existent from drug use, so they had to put a central line in instead. I was actually discharging myself from hospital every day to score drugs then going back in. I should have died, I can see that now! When I left hospital my health continued to get worse, as I started to develop some illnesses associated with my Hep C diagnosis. I didn't care at that point, what I knew about treatment options back then put me off accessing any support as I knew I had to be off drugs, and I wasn't ready for that. My life up to this point was just a lot of crime and drugs. That was it basically. There was not much else.

## **What was the turning point for you?**

In 2008 I made my first real attempt to get off drugs. I just woke up one day and decided I'd had enough. I started doing really well, volunteering at the Archer Project, and worked towards my qualifications in Health & Social care. I was still recovering from MRSA at this point too, so my body was really weak.

In 2013 I relapsed and found myself back in prison. When I was released in 2016 I was sent to a shared house with other drug users. I stayed off them myself for about 9 months, but soon I was back selling drugs as I had done on and off before, and using drugs heavily myself again. I was surrounded by people I knew and people I'd grown up with and everyone was into drugs. It's not an excuse, it's just to say that because I went back into that environment, there was only going to be that outcome. Before long I developed blood clots in both legs and an infection in my spine which damaged the ligaments. My hip was crumbling, I had kidney infections, septicemia, the whole lot basically! I was back in the hospital and in a wheelchair because I could hardly walk. My nerves were shot and to walk was unbelievably painful.

### **What helped?**

When I came out in 2017 I said I had to get my own place, because if they had sent me back to the shared house I would have ended up dead. I shut myself away in my flat, isolated myself and weaned myself off everything, including all the prescription drugs they had me on. My depression was getting worse though and at times I felt like I was drowning. I had a few lapses, but my health started to improve. I felt a sniff of hope and jumped on it. I knew then that I could change my life. I stopped eating meat, started exercising and reduced my smoking. I'm over 40 now and have come to accept that despite what I think, I'm not actually made of Sheffield steel.

I'm not unbreakable, and I've got to start looking after myself properly. I've got to be honest and say that I felt that Sheffield services didn't do anything for me - I did this all on my own. I know their support works for some people, but not for me. The Hepatitis C Trust was a major source of help, especially their peer support programme which is amazing.

### **What is life like now? How are things different?**

My life has just started! All that came before, the drugs, the crime, the prison time - that wasn't living. My daughter is going to Uni now, she's 21 and has the whole world at her feet. I'm starting to make contact with her and try to rebuild a relationship.

I've lost 4 stones in weight this year, and I'm running 5k three times a week. My mindset is the best it's ever been. I'm focused in a way I never have been before. I'm involved with the Hepatitis C Trust now as a peer volunteer. I love getting involved in outreach, as I can talk to people on a level because I've been there myself. I know what it's like. I want to inspire people to know that anything is possible if you put your mind to it.

There are people who have been left behind and forgotten, I could have been one of those people. I just want to give people hope that they can change their lives. I want people to exceed, I want them to outdo me and go on to achieve even more than I have done.

Nothing would make me happier.