

IN FOCUS

'I've always had this resilience'

After a turbulent childhood in the care system, Marvin Campbell turned his life around. He tells **Andy McNicoll** what changed and what services can learn from it...

Marvin Campbell sums up his experience of care in one word: "survival". After suffering neglect as a child, his early life was one of care proceedings, contact and assessments. He had almost 20 placements, including foster care, respite and two stints in residential children's homes where he learnt to become "very, very streetwise".

Marvin feels lucky to have had one "excellent" social worker for most of his time in care and some good carers. But missing growing up were two things he feels children desperately need – stability and unconditional love – and it took its toll.

"I was this angry, challenging child. I would become self-destructive. I'd be the nicest child for six months, then just blow up and placements would end. My behaviour was probably compounded by the fact I was a very hyperactive child going through things I couldn't really properly make sense of," he says.

Aged nine or ten, Marvin was sent to a specialist school for children with behavioural difficulties. He had "some fantastic teachers" but their focus was often more on managing behaviour than education. The kids weren't even offered the chance to sit top GCSE papers, so Marvin went to a local college to try for better grades.

"I still left with two Es and a C but I at least took it upon myself to try. I've always had this resilience, this drive. I won't give up."

During turbulent spells in and after care this drive kept Marvin going. He kept up with school or college and contributed to work with England's Children's Commissioner. Eventually, but only by chance, he found the stability he had been looking for.

By this point he'd left care and was homeless, relying on sofa surfing and hostels. One night a hostel told him they were full but referred him to Nightstop, a project where volunteers offer a bed to people in crisis.



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That's how Marvin met Pam, a Nightstop volunteer who changed his life.

"I went to Pam's through Nightstop a few times. One day I turned round to her and said 'can I stay?' She said 'of course you can'. I've now been there nine years. That stranger's complete kindness and love has turned my life around. She doesn't recognise that – she says I bring just as much to her – but she absolutely did."

Marvin says Pam opened his eyes to different possibilities in life, which raised his expectations of himself. She took him to college, where he enrolled on a business course that later took him to university.

It was far from easy. Marvin was initially "quite disruptive" at college. He dropped out for two years but an "absolutely wonderful" tutor helped him go back. In his third year at university he started struggling again. He says his internal script kept telling him: "You're not good enough for this." He started to self-sabotage. He'd been on course for a first-class degree but his average began to slip.

Marvin graduated with a 2:1 – a huge achievement, particularly given just six per cent of children in care go

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Marvin is now using his experiences of the care system to help drive change

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to university after school. While Marvin says he's still "gutted" at missing out on a first, he's also grateful Pam kept encouraging him through the highs and lows.

"When I tried to push her away she stuck by me. She hasn't done my work for me but she gave me a loving, safe home. She helped me believe in myself. No one had ever encouraged me to educate myself before. No one had given me that unconditional positive regard constantly."

After university, Marvin wanted to work for a major company, a big supermarket chain or consultancy firm. He wanted to make money so he could eventually invest in something to help children in care.

But when Marvin looked into graduate jobs he found he couldn't even apply for some because he lacked the GCSEs or A Levels needed. Suddenly it felt like the fight to get his degree counted for little. His childhood was again having a huge impact on his adult life.

Marvin is now working in social care, using his skills and his childhood experiences to drive change.

As a consultant for the North West Midlands Social Work Teaching Partnership, he's part of efforts to improve social work training. Asked what he'd change about the care system, Marvin says he wants much more emphasis placed on education. He fears too many "really, really bright" kids

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in care never get the support to show it. Linked to that, he says, is a need to address permanency and attachment.

"Only the educated are free, in a sense, particularly now we're facing this skills-based economy. You need the permanency which allows you to go to school and learn.

"If you're worrying about where you're living, your next placement, when your next contact visit is, then algebra feels insignificant. If you're constantly in that survival mindset, how can you learn?"

"If you're going to grow flowers you need to prepare the ground. You're going to get rid of all the weeds, prepare a safe place for the seeds to be planted and then water them and nurture them. That allows them to blossom. It's the same for children in care."

Marvin wants councils to be judged on the number of placements and professionals children have in their lives. He feels services also sometimes forget that "actually sitting down with the child, being readily available and going above and beyond" matters more than paperwork.

He says he'll never forget how his social worker would come out to see him on Boxing Day or take him out for food in the evening and he worries professionals are "too often penalised for doing that kind of thing" now.

"My social worker was there for me and she fought for me. I knew she cared and it made such a difference. Little things count – the birthday card, the Christmas card.

"Putting the pen and paper down for ten minutes and actually talking to that child about their life is huge. Just coming out every few weeks for a statutory visit? Social care is a lot more than that... it should be a lot more than that."

Marvin recognises social workers are under huge pressure. But he feels debate about the profession's role with children in care, from the child's perspective, is needed.

As an adult, he says, you can understand if a social worker has a massive caseload they won't always be available. You can grasp that their focus is statutory duties. But as a child you look at social workers like a parent or mentor. You want them to be available on the phone, to be there to fight for you, to chase up contact visits and your school.

"There's a need there we can't ignore. If those things can't be addressed by a social worker then we need to discuss if there's another medium. At the moment a lot of children in care feel social workers have failed them because they're not available, or they just arrive with forms. They don't really understand what the role of the social worker is."

Marvin says he's really looking forward to being part of efforts to change that. "I have a lot of ideas. There's a huge opportunity there to try and make a difference."

'Being available and going above and beyond matters more than paper work'

Marvin Campbell tweets at @marvinjcampbell. For updates on his work visit www.marvinjcampbell.com