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Foster Caring: Through-care and Aftercare.

Pol Nacha O'Mairthini

Pol Nacha O'Mairthini became a lone foster carer in 1991 and continued to care for teenagers up to 2000 when he retired to further his own career in social work. Nacha currently resides in the Orkney Islands off the North coast of Scotland where he manages a integrated family centre encompassing a residential children's unit for five young people, a foster care and adoption service and outreach family support service. He has co-written two books P.A.L. (Preparing for Adult Living) and Stepping Out. Nacha remains unmarried and may be open to offers and is dad to Rosie and Jim (Cats) Squaky and Squeaky (Geese) and Hinge and Bracket (Jacobs Sheep).

Introduction

Connections and Shared Interests

Fergus Hogan invited me to contribute to this volume during the 12th International Foster Care Organisation, Conference, which was held in Holland from the 15th –20th July 2001. I had only properly met Fergus the previous week but discovered during that week (it was a long week!) that we had a lot in common. Fergus and I both hail from the wee county of Louth, he went to school with some cousins of mine, and most importantly, we share a common admiration and belief in the role of foster caring in a modern caring society.

I moved to Scotland in 1990 following the then familiar route of emigration for many young Irish men. My love of foster caring began when I became a *single male foster carer in 1991*, (yes its true single males can become foster carers. Well, they can and have done in the UK for quite a while.) I was approved, as a foster carer, by my local council after a more than vigorous if not comprehensive 18-month long assessment period. It was hard but appropriate and during the time period I learned so much about myself, not all of which was good either.

The History Bit!

I chose to become a carer because of two boys I got to know very well at the time through my job as an assistant manager at an outdoor activity centre. I was working with all ages of children and young people on a daily basis, and felt I knew it all, oh God how wrong I was. I was the eldest of five children who were well fed and loved. Both my

parents worked very hard to provide for us and instilled a strong work ethic in all five of us. We had the usual childhood arguments and fights and to top it all I was the unbelievably 'wild-child.' Or as my Mother would say, well I can't say in print so use the imagination, but it was not very nice and at the time, 12 -16 years, I was not a very nice person. In fact I would go so far to say that if I were my parents back then I would have placed me in care! But they didn't, they stuck in there and my gratitude to them is unending. Those early adolescent experiences allowed me to relate very well to young people who were experiencing what we call now "challenging behaviours". I certainly had empathy by the bucket load.

I believed that my life and family experiences would benefit young people who may not have had the family life that I had growing up. I wanted to share my life with others for the benefit of others. Of course my family and in particular my mother, for a couple of years thought I was mad, and kept hinting that if I were to get married it would be easier and then I would have children of my own to look after. But through it all despite their dis-understanding of my motivation to care for other people's children they supported me. To be a foster carer you need the support of your family.

I could talk for hours about my experiences and anecdotes of caring, the ups and downs, the frustrations and anger, the pain and happiness. Foster caring for me has been a continuous learning curve that is unending. Each day brings new challenges. I valued a day when I did not have to deal with new issues for the young persons I cared for. A few years ago I recognised that the difficulties presented by the young people I was caring for far exceeded the knowledge I had at the time. Very often I felt out of my depth and frustrated that I was only able to contain the behaviours and emotions of young people. Sometimes I was unable to assist them in moving forward in their lives, yet I was aware at the same time that I was doing something right. I began to feel that I did not have a 'hook to hang my practice on' and felt that I was unable to develop my fostering skills. So I took the decision to return to college and find out more. I choose to do the Diploma in Social Work initially and then a BA and currently a Masters.

Recently I met a teacher from the secondary school I attended who was confounded as to how I managed to achieve what I have. In the eighties at secondary school I was classed as "not very bright" and more suited to practical applications. When I started studying again in the nineties I was a seasoned carer of five years. When I informed the young people I was caring for what I was doing at college, one of them turned to me and said, "that's all I need, its bad enough having to see a social worker, never mind living with one!" That statement gave me pause for thought I can tell you. However what I learned on my course gave me insight into my work as a carer, theories became tools,

which reinforced my direct work. I was developing skills that gave me the opportunity to assess and plan my own caring, and the quality of care I could offer a young person.

I have always advocated that foster carers in today's society require preparation and training which allows the carer the opportunity to look at caring techniques and skills, away from the needs of a particular child. It needs to be proactive rather than reactive, which will enable carers to offer quality care to children and young people. The fostering service needs the recognition of being a service that is regulated yet not over regulated. We should never forget that foster carers look after children in our own homes and this should not be removed by insensitive over regulation.

Fostering services for the millennium will require a multi-disciplinary pool of staff and carers, which reflect the diversity of needs and challenges, that children and young people present with. It is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit carers for all ranges of children and young people. The recruitment, assessment and approval process requires evidence-based methods of assessing the potential carer's skills, abilities and qualities for fostering. This process from my own experiences can be oppressive in its presentation and delivery, yet necessary to ensure it meets the needs of children. However the delivery of the service needs to be as non-oppressive as possible.

Fostering is a key service for looked after children and young people. Yet a recent report to the UK Health Select Committee[1] on looked after children points out that foster care lacks recognition and attention on a national basis. It also highlights that there is an acute shortage of foster carers in many areas, demographic and social pressures are working against the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Among some of the significant concerns for foster carers is that, they do not receive a pension, training is patchy and support from statutory bodies is weak. These concerns are similar throughout Europe and are not just common to the United Kingdom and Ireland.

We hear the term multi-disciplinary practice bandied around, what is it? I like to think of it as the provision, not only social work services supporting carers in their role with children and young people but also health, education and training and employment services. Any child or young person who has to be looked after in public care is by general definition, 'disadvantaged' and requires a multitude of services to promote their welfare and needs.

[1] Children and the Public Care System - HMSO 2000

We are in a period of recognition for the fostering services however let us not forget that the only 'experts' on foster care are the children and young people who are the receivers of the end service. They are the ones who have been through the care system and they need to be involved in the process of deciding what is a good carer. Children and young people often have the ability of offering common sense and a reflective analysis of the carers that they know or have lived with. Let us be open to user involvement in the decision making process.

Stepping Out and Moving On Project

Following my qualification as a social worker I went to work for National Foster Care Association in Scotland as Project Leader for the 'Stepping Out and Moving On Project' for Scotland. This was my dream job! As a foster carer I cared for mainly 13 - 18 year olds with a specific remit of preparing them for adult living. Easy task it was not, I discovered that all of the young people I cared for were desperate to escape the care system, similar to how I wanted to escape the school system at this age.

In Scotland young people upon reaching sixteen can request to be discharged from their care orders. It was common practice to let young people leave with little or no support offered. Some were lucky and received a setting up home grant, my experiences of this were negative and chucking a lump sum of money at a young person was a recipe for disaster. However, I certainly had the belief that this was an exciting and new opportunity for foster carers, young people, birth families, local authorities and the voluntary sector to proactively work in partnership in the transition from childhood to adulthood.

In the criteria for the UK National Standards in Foster Care[2], the standards acknowledge the role of foster carers in the preparation of young people for adult living. It states that foster carers should receive training, ongoing support and guidance to assist the young person preparing to leave foster care. This is a task that many foster carers at present undertake, on an informal basis, and in tandem with local authority social workers and independent living project workers. The National Standards document recognises that foster carers can and should have a role in this important aspect of a young person's development. Research has shown that many young people who leave foster care struggle to live as independent adults. As often as not they have the necessary skills in place to deal with everyday problems and events such as buying food, cooking, paying bills, claiming benefits. Very practical but how do you prepare a young person for the emotional loneliness they may feel.

[2] UK National Standard in Foster Care - NFCA 1999

Think back, to the first time you had a place to call your own, the exhilaration, excitement and happiness of going it alone. Can you recall the first crisis you had to cope with? Who did you turn to for advice and help? Your parents perhaps, or a trusted family member or friend. Did you have someone to help you out when times were hard? Who do young people who leave care turn to when they have left the protective network of social services?

Young people I have worked with feel that every time they call to see their social worker that she/he is too busy to assist and their pride won't allow them to say that times are hard. They may not be able to rely on the support of birth family members. The advice line or drop in centre feels cold and alien and they don't have a relationship with the person to whom they are speaking.

Foster carers are in a unique position in that they usually have intimate knowledge of the personality, likes and dislikes, habits and attitudes of the young people they have cared for. In most instances the carer and the young person have had the opportunity to develop a good working relationship with each other. Continuing on this theme, it would seem the perfect scenario that a young person's foster carer could support the young person in the latter stages of development into adulthood.

The 'Stepping Out and Moving On Project' aimed to reduce the instances of homelessness among young care leavers in Scotland through proactive involvement of young people and carers in determining the service the young person will require in adult living. Young people who committed themselves to the project could expect to develop self-esteem and belief in themselves, to develop the ability to build and maintain satisfactory relationships with carers, support workers, birth families, landlords, neighbours and employers. Most importantly the young person can expect to receive assistance in developing the skills and knowledge they will require for independent adulthood.

In Scotland a local authority has a duty to advise and befriend young people in Care, this provision extends to care leavers. It is covered under section 29 (1) (2) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995[3]. Of course the range of aftercare support is discretionary, however guidelines suggest that it could include advice and information. If the young person is between 19 and 21 years of age, they will have to apply to the local authority, requesting that the local authority provide them with the same service; Unless, the local authority judges, that the young person's welfare would suffer from such assistance. I have

[3] Children (Scotland) Act 1995 - HMSO 1994

always failed to understand how a young person who is reaching out for help could be refused because it would be detrimental to their welfare.

Further guidance to the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 stipulates that a young person should be fully involved in discussions and plans for their future. The young person needs to have choices made available to them. I believe that this planning should not start 12 or 6 weeks prior to the young person leaving 'looked after status.' It can and should be ongoing in the development process. Are we really so eager to see the young care leaver in independent living at 16, 17 or even 18 what is the hurry? The average age for a son or daughter leaving the parental home in Scotland is 24, so why are we trying to pack 7 years development difference into a twelve-week preparation programme. Guidance on the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 also suggests that a leaving/continuing care plan should be formulated with direct input from the young person. This should specify the type of help the young person will be receiving and from whom. Parents and foster carers should also be involved in devising the leaving/continuing care plan.

The Stepping Out and Moving On project aimed to address these issues in the following way; it provides the young person with an individual preparation package whilst they are in care. This will consist of an assessment of needs, to which the young person, birth family, foster family, local authority services and the young people's project will contribute. The project would provide the young person with information and training materials as is necessary, including the NFCA handbook 'Stepping Out'[4] which can include local information and a copy of the local authorities written information to 'Looked After' leavers.

Basically we aimed to utilise the skills and the resources of the young person and their carers, to insure that the young person is adequately prepared for adult living. We provided the young person with after care support from the project and their carer, which is flexible, clearly described in terms of availability and purpose and available up until the age of twenty-one.

The project works in partnership with local housing departments, housing associations and voluntary housing consortiums to provide a good standard of affordable accommodation that meets the young persons stated wishes in so far as is practicable in terms of locality, size and proximity to family, friends, work and leisure networks.

Our care leavers are members of our millennium generation; I do not want to see them

[4] Stepping Guide for Care Leavers -Nacha O'Mairthini & Ena Fry - NFCA 1998

as the receivers of the millennium criminal justice, mental health or social work services. My ambition is to see our care leavers as the responsible, educated and stable adults of the new millennium.

A young person who I cared for, on his own insistence was discharged from care shortly after his 16th birthday to live with extended family members. He received very little preparation for his discharge in the main due to his failure to co-operate with through-care workers. After a couple of weeks he became homeless when difficulties with his family arose. He came back to our hometown and moved into a homeless hostel. Unfortunately he did not like the rules of the establishment and failed to make his contribution from his state benefits and ended up in debt to the hostel, which had to terminate their agreement. He ended up going from one friend to another friend staying a couple of nights here and there, never being able to settle down for longer than a couple of weeks. The following year of his life mirrored the previous one with him living through long periods of homelessness never knowing for sure where he was going to spend the night. He turned to alcohol and drugs to try and obliterate his pain and loneliness. The last time I saw him he wanted to stay with me, I explained to him that I was unable to accommodate him but offered him advice on what he could do to help himself.

He decided that he would move down to England to try life down there. That was four years ago. I do not know if he is happy or unhappy, dead or alive. I don't like not knowing. What can I do? I reported him as a missing person and on doing this I was informed that over 2000 young people in the UK go missing each year. Who has responsibility for this lost and lonely 20-year-old?

This young person is one of many who have lost their way in life through an eagerness to escape the "in care" profile and stigma of a young person in care. I want him to be the last. We all need to work together to achieve this wish.

The project that I managed for NFCA was hugely successful in meeting its aims and objectives. The basis for this I believe was the holistic approach we took. By involving all stakeholders in the planning and implementation of a throughcare service we embraced the philosophy of a caring society. I have outlined below the highlights of the project and what we achieved. None of this could have been achieved without the full participation and involvement of the young people who made it work. I only provided the engine but they provided the drive.

Since December 1998 the project has worked with 346 young people who are

endeavouring to make the transition into adulthood. Each young person brings with them a fresh, individual sense of purpose and destiny, they are coming to terms with the changes in their lives and trying to set solid foundations for successful adult living. We offer young people the opportunity to grow, the chance to take risks and be supported in doing this with the knowledge that they will gain valuable experience, understanding and responsibility.

Each area that we work in requires individual needs to be met. In some areas we act as a provider of training services to young people, their carers, social workers, housing officers and education staff on the needs of young people preparing for adult living. In others we act as a consultant on the planning of young people's services particularly on 'Through-care and Aftercare' planning.

The table below identifies our main areas of work with young people since December 1998.

Work Undertaken	Female	Male	Total
Direct Referral for assistance and advice	**86**	**74**	**160**
Attendance at workshops in local authority areas (8 L.A.'s)	**61**	**43**	**104**
Development Forum (Training Participation).	**15**	**11**	**26**
Consultation of young people on throughcare and aftercare services	**38**	**19**	**57**

The project valued and upheld the belief that young people who have experienced the 'looked after' care system are the key to providing quality training and advice for foster carers, social workers, children's panel members (in Ireland the closest but inaccurate similarity would be Juvenile Courts), education and housing staff. In most of the areas where we worked we built solid working relationships with young people who acted as co-facilitators for workshops and training events. This system of co-facilitating allows the participants the opportunity to view the looked after system through the eyes of a user and reinforces the value of young people in providing training and advice.

Media Profiling of Foster Care

It is my belief that the project's greatest strength has been our ability to offer an open transparent service to all sections of the social services and housing communities in

Scotland. We endeavoured not to predetermine what we can do for our clients and service users and instead aimed to provide through consultation a holistic service involving partner organisations, young people and carers. The project participated in several media events, which has helped raise the profile of the project and of National Foster Care Association. In one early example I was invited to sit on the couch for the Esther Rantzen afternoon show on BBC television, which was highlighting the plight of young people leaving care. Unfortunately and much to my disappointment Esther was ill and Lori Turner was filling in. The taping of the show was going well and on the couch with me was Chris Akabuzi (the athlete with the big laugh.) Chris had been in care for most of his life with foster carers. I felt, that Lori Turner was not allowing me to get my points across and would move away from me mid sentence. After a few instances of this I changed strategy and while I was speaking I grabbed hold of the back of her skirt to prevent her from moving away, it worked but I got a right mouthful of abuse after the show, but that's celebrities for you! Other shows included the Scottish Television's 'Room at the Top,' which was focusing on young people's experiences of foster care. Michelle Orr (Young Person) and I appeared on the show to highlight the process of moving on from foster care. The piece was very well received and resulted in seventeen telephone calls to the station requesting further information about the project and what we could do to assist others. Further work involved young people from the project providing interviews to the Daily Record for a supplement featuring foster care recruitment and the difference it can make to young people's lives. Several young people from the project undertook interviews and features for the Scottish Mail, The Herald, Community Care Magazine and Fostercare Magazine.

In January 2001 sixteen young people from across Scotland took part in a training development weekend in Kilmarnock. This course focused for two days on the stress young people face while part of the care system. The preparation period was followed by a presentation to 50 foster carers and social workers. For all those in attendance the presentation was graphic, factual and humorous and based on the experiences of the young people.

Young people are the only experts when it comes to providing information and advice on what it is like to be part of the care system. Audiences respond to their input and the honesty of their presentation is heart rendering yet endearing and allows the audience a fuller appreciation of the challenges young people face.

Key Areas of Development

Scottish Through care and Aftercare Forum

Since the project's inception the project has made links with other key childcare organisations in Scotland. The main focus of this work has been the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, a voluntary organisation that has been founded to promote good practice in throughcare and aftercare in Scotland. Organisations involved include NCH Action for Children, Barnardos, Church of Scotland, Dean & Cauvin Trust, Glasgow Care Leavers Alliance, Residential Childcare Training Initiative and National Foster Care Association. In August 1999 the forum established a management committee, the project worker representing NFCA was duly elected as Secretariat for the Forum. This has resulted in NFCA being recognised as a Key Development partner in Throughcare and Aftercare services in Scotland. As a result a funding partnership of NFCA, Church of Scotland, NCH Action for Children and the Centre for Residential Childcare (now defunct) was formed with the aim of employing a development worker to further the work of the Forum and secure future funding. NFCA's contribution has been in kind, offering office space and some administration support for the first year.

Training for Trainers Young People

Several young people who have experienced being looked after and two youth who are birth family members of fostering families took part in a training course for trainers at our Glasgow office. The young people came from Moray, Aberdeenshire, Fife, Highland, Glasgow and North Lanarkshire. All of them passed the course with flying colours and had an extremely stimulating and hard working weekend. All of the young people took part in two 45-minute presentations that they researched and formulated. Both presentations reflected the work of the project. The first titled, 'The Role of Sons & Daughters in Fostering Families' and the second, 'The Needs and Desires of Young People Leaving Care.'

All of the young people have now been booked up to co-facilitate workshops, meetings and training another key area of participation.

Conference Work

Bridging the Gap (Sons & Daughters and Looked After Young People)

This conference was held in Glasgow over two days in September 1999. The conference brought together 36 young people from Rep.Ireland, Wales, England, Northern Ireland and Scotland who had been part of a fostering family. The conference explored the issues for the Sons and Daughters and those in placement with a family. The most striking thing that came from the conference was that it was very difficult to distinguish birth family members from those who had been in fostering placement.

The event was featured on Scottish Television, Evening Times and the Scotsman; Glasgow City Council kindly hosted a civic reception at the City Chambers. As a result of the conference it was decided that joint events should take place biennially with the venue changing to a different nation every two years. The Northern Ireland Foster Care Association will host the next conference in Spring 2002. The conference report also helped the project workers in compiling their report for the board on the participation of children and young people in the work of NFCA.

As a follow on from this conference the youth group were invited to present at the International Foster Care Organisation's European Conference in Cork Ireland during August 2000. Four young people from each nation attended. Our Irish hosts kindly arranged a three-day pre conference planning and activity holiday in Skibereen West Cork. The three days were organised by two foster carers Marie Cregan and Jill Kennedy who attended the Glasgow conference with their families. Many thanks for their kindness and assistance.

Looked After Children Training Conferences

The project and Karen McDiarmid (Youth Participant) took part in three one-day conferences across the country that highlighted the use of Looked After Children's Materials. At each conference the project facilitated two workshops that looked at the role of fostering services in preparing young people for adult living. As a result of the work undertaken at these conferences the Scottish Executive requested the project develop an information guide for young people between 15-18 years on Action and Assessment Records. This was done with the help of young people in Orkney, Fife and Shetland and is now used by all 32 local authorities in Scotland.

Children's Panel Members Training Conferences

The project was commissioned by Aberdeen University (training co-ordinators for North of Scotland) to undertake a series of workshops and full day events for children's panel members on the needs of young people leaving the 'looked after' system. In total the project presented to over 300 members over a series of dates. Feedback from the University of Aberdeen has been very positive. The project worker and a young person undertook each event.

Members of Children's Panel can be instrumental in ensuring that adult living preparation and appropriate supports are in place for the young person before they are discharged from orders thus meeting our aim of reducing the instances of homelessness among young care leavers.

I took a great personal pride in how young people I worked with promoted their own needs. We gave them the opportunity to have a voice and they used it well. Many of the

young people we trained in the early years of the project are now employed in the service area. Two are part of Scottish Parliamentary Committees and advise politicians and civil servants.

Conclusion

The crowning point of my involvement with young people and the project was the day we received the news that the project had been awarded 'The John Chant Award for Services to Young People' by Community Care Magazine, a social work publication in the UK. To everyone the award and the £8000 prize reinforced that we were getting it right. At the award ceremony two young people collected the award it was a proud moment for me. From being a foster carer who was unhappy about 'leaving care' provision in Scotland to making a change and redressing the status quo, albeit in a small way. The project I feel proved that although young people leaving care are needy and they will take risks that many judged to be inappropriate, we supported them through these risks just like a normal family household would do with their son or daughter. My own parents played a big part in this for me and never turned their back on me no matter how bad it got.

The model I developed for the project is a simple one and can be easily replicated in any country, local authority or voluntary organisation. We were fortunate in that we had a National Lottery Grant of £180,000 over three years to enable us to achieve our objectives, coupled with the back up of the National Foster Care Association UK with management administration. I would like to thank the NFCA for giving me permission to write this piece using information from the project. Recently the project was awarded a further £400,00 to progress the project over the next three years. This will allow the employment of a young person who has left care to work with the project and gain skills that they may have been otherwise denied.

I left the project in the spring of 2001 to undertake a new challenge. I accepted a new post in the Orkney Islands (they're the ones off the north coast of Scotland). I was challenged to manage and run a complete social services resource centre, this encompasses a residential childcare unit for up to four children or young people, a fostering and adoption service and a family centre/ outreach family support. It has been a challenge and I have a wonderful team assisting me. I have gone through a huge learning curve over the past six years from a concerned foster carer to now a social services manager. My aim is to create a centre of excellence but that story can wait for another day.