

APPENDIX 2- Domestic Abuse Family Advocate's Story

My name is Donna and I am a Domestic Abuse Family Advocate. It's difficult to put into words what this job means to me, for you to understand its important to know where I came from. My whole life was chaos from childhood right until the age of 49, without too much detail I had a number of "labels" pinned to me, physical abuse survivor, addict, domestic abuse victim. My life was a world in which chaos thrived and despite being a mother to my beautiful children the pain and the trauma always won. I didn't have a good relationship with my children, they were in foster care and I believed that this was all the fault of social workers, I hated them, I blamed them, they spent their whole childhood in the hands of a corporate parent whilst I continued within the world of chaos which I could not and would not take responsibility for any part I had to play.

When I was 49, a friend, someone who had been in my world of chaos asked me to listen one day, just listen and to give him a chance. He took me to an NA meeting, narcotics anonymous, and from that day my life started to change. I spent a long time learning I was more than my labels, and for the first time I could see things more clearly. Now I am not pretending that this was an easy road for me to walk down. It's ten years later as I write this and I am still learning about myself all of the time.

When I joined We Can Talk about Domestic Abuse team I couldn't believe it, I couldn't imagine for one second when living in the chaos, that person becoming someone who would eventually help people through the social care processes. Being part of a team implementing change with others, being accepted for my past and being asked to use my experience to help others, it blows my mind still now. I lived my life being unacceptable and here I am being accepted and promoting change in others.

I thought I understood social care processes having lived through them with my own children, but when you go through it yourself you can only see it from your own side. This experience of being an advocate has awakened me to how the children are at risk and the impact on them, to understand it is not the social worker mainly making the decisions as they have their own processes to follow. I can also see the amount of help that is offered before it gets to the point children are removed.

This is the first time ever women who have suffered from domestic abuse have had advocacy in children social care, and for me to be that person who can sit with another woman and tell her it's okay I have been there, I understand, but this is what we need to do to keep you and your children safe, well I don't think people will grasp how much of a big thing that is to me, it's an honour.

But I haven't just worked with women individually, we created a service user group for our women, The Voice Group. I was that woman who wasn't being heard, so to be part of a group who by sharing experiences will shape the provision for future women is amazing, for women to come and share their voice and for statutory services to be listening to their voice is amazing. To be asked to take part in the domestic abuse alliance, sitting with people in positions of power, listening to me. It has taught me that I am enough, my experiences are important, my work is

important. I want women to know, you are not alone, you can do this, there is a life waiting for you.