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I am talking today from the place of a former homeless person. In doing so, I am also aware that I am representing homeless and vulnerable people across the country and as such, I hope that I can do this well.

I would describe myself as a man with a long-standing alcohol problem and this issue was a major cause of strain on my wife and family. In 1994, largely due to this issue, my marriage fell apart and my family moved out of the family home. I began to drink very heavily and within about 6 months, I was evicted from my home for failing to pay the rent. I would like to emphasize that although I had alcohol, drug and mental health issues not all homeless people do, but despite not having them are still marginalised as if they did.

I slept rough for a few nights then got into a bed and breakfast. Due to my excessive drinking and not paying rent, I lost my accommodation several times over and eventually ended up living rough on the streets of Edinburgh for about 18 months.

Whilst on the streets I became more and more marginalised from society, I felt looked down upon and was often the subject of critical and damaging statements and allegations. Slowly through time I began to believe that I was “a waste of space”. The belief that I was not part of society now and never would be, took root and during that time I fell further into alcoholism, drug addiction and developed mental health problems.

To fund my addictions I begged, suffered physical assaults and equally damaging insults and abuse –slowly I became more and more suicidal.

In 1996 whilst on the streets, I took ill and went to the homeless doctor. He was very clear in that he felt I needed hospitalisation and stated to me, that in his view, if I did go to hospital I would likely die within 7 days.

I was admitted into an acute psychiatric ward in the Royal Edinburgh Hospital and also spent some time in the Alcohol Problems Clinic, diagnosed as addicted to alcohol and depressed with suicidal tendencies.

When I was being discharged, I applied to go into Bethany House, which was a hostel run by Bethany Christian Trust. I was accepted there and stayed for over 3 months. It was a successful stay, I stayed sober and I was very appreciative of the sense of community that was there.

I appreciated the way in which the staff really saw you as a person, not just as a ‘project’ or ‘something to be fixed’ – I was made to feel a person again and valued. I was often asked for my views on the running of the service and what I felt staff could do better to support me and other homeless people. This level of being listened to, inclusion and

involvement gave me a sense that perhaps I could find a meaningful life again and contribute to society in some shape or form.

I was also very moved by the amount of people that were volunteers there and not paid staff. There was ministers that came in with teams from their church to play pool and chat with you and there was one volunteer who did a week of nightshift every second week. This helped me see and understand that their motivation for being there was not for money, but because they genuinely cared for people and those of us who had fallen into to hard and difficult times. These volunteers played a key role in me beginning to understand that not all society felt I was, "a waste of space".

Later I went into Bethany Christian Centre which was a specialist unit for men with addiction problems. I experienced the same thing and through my time there receiving counselling, group work and a structured 12 step programme to work through, I began to deal with the underlying causes of my addictive personality. Three of the staff were former residents and addicts – they were great role models and a real source of inspiration helping me see that a new future was possible.

One of my main challenges was finding meaningful employment. I knew with my past it would be very difficult for an employer to take me on and I somehow needed to work to a place of being employable again. I felt that one way to do that was by taking on voluntary work. Fortunately for me at that time it did not matter too much if the was paid or not.

In 1997 I moved into a new flat in Leith and soon after began to work as a volunteer with Bethany. The main factors that enabled me to sustain my recovery and go on to become an employee with in Bethany were as follow;

- House
 - I was allocated a good flat in Leith which I really enjoyed staying in and the décor was great.
- Sense of Belonging
 - Having build healthy meaningful relationship with people both within Bethany and out-with Bethany, gave me emotional security and the sense I was part of a relationally focused community.
- Meaning and Purpose
 - Being given the opportunity of becoming a volunteer with Bethany and contributing to the helping of other people gave a sense of positive meaning and purpose to my life. This was very important to me.

These 3 factors together, I believe were the critical factors to enabling me to positively grow and become truly interdependent. I have now worked for Bethany in a number of roles and at a variety of levels of responsibility.

When I was the Manager of Bethany House I was given the remit to help people after they left Homeless Services to sustain their accommodation. All I did was, over an 18 month period get 6 people who were moving out of Bethany House to new accommodation and working together with them we build the full Passing the Baton concept.

I asked these 6 people what they would like to be called. I said to them, "I'm going to have to call you something, what do you want to be called – clients, customers, service users?" And they said, "Members". That said it all to me – they wanted to belong to something, feel part of something and be able to contribute to something – this is vital.

To date we have supported 67 people across Edinburgh, Fife, West Lothian and Aberdeen and can evidence a 98% success rate for settling people and enabling them to sustain their accommodation. It is a Volunteer driven project and 6 of our Volunteers are former Members.

Two of them have won awards at the Scottish Parliament for their services to communities; some of them have been on radio and even television, done talks and presentations at Schools, Universities, and Conferences and ran work-shops at Seminars.

In Passing the Baton we have Regional and National Steering Groups and our Members are part of those groups.

I believe one of the main reasons why we have seen this project secure these outcomes, is because people who were formerly homeless, marginalised and excluded were empowered to become involved in designing, developing and delivering the service - this will always be at the core of Passing the Baton.

One of the members once said to me, "You can't expect the excluded to include them self. Those that are on the inside much reach out to those that are not". I believe it is the responsibility of those that are on the inside of society to reach out to those that are not – it is not the responsibility of the marginalised to try and force their way in.

To effectively tackle homelessness and the associated marginalisation and exclusion of vulnerable people in Scotland through homelessness, we must learn how to better create structures and systems that empower them to - become part of the change. I am greatly encouraged by SHIEN and the Scottish Government in how SU Involvement is being taken forward.