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Obituary

Ian Dickson

1950 - 2022

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Sometime in 2014, I was reading an article in *The Big Issue* that was discussing an announcement made on the 14th of December in 2013 by the government, that children who were living in foster care would be allowed and supported to remain with their foster carers until they were 21 years of age. This policy became known as 'staying put' and it infuriated me. What about young people growing up in children's homes, how can they be so cruelly excluded from this, I thought to myself. I wanted to know more, and I wanted to see if anyone else



was outraged by this plan and the hierarchy being created through it. With some online research I became aware of Every Child Leaving Care Matters (ECLCM), 'a campaign group, without funding or political affiliations with any other group, formed to stop Government discrimination against children in residential care who want support to 21, the same as those in foster care' (ECLCM). This group, made up of many care experienced people, shared my outrage and they were doing something about it, they were collecting signatures for a petition. I signed the petition, I followed the campaign on Twitter, and I also followed the founding members of this group, with Ian Dickson being one of them.

Like many friendships in the age of digital technology, I got to know Ian through Twitter. As someone who was researching care experience from both a past and present-day perspective, Ian's presence on Twitter, his voice, the clarity with which he spoke, intrigued and inspired me. Over the years, we continued to communicate about all things care experience. We both believed that the 'system' of care for children and young people could not change until older care leavers were consulted and listened to. We both shared the view that to improve the present and future of care, we need to look to the past and learn from it. This stemmed from our autobiographies, Ian as a care experienced person and me, as a researcher and daughter of a care experienced mother. As I shared snippets of my mum's care experience, Ian shared his, and parts of his experience of care were very similar to my mum's, despite experiencing the 'system' at different times. In our conversations over Twitter, we wondered whether there could be a space for this type of conversation with older care leavers and what would come from such conversations.

In 'A ladder to the stars' Article 39's director, Carlyne Willow, and Ian, 'held a series of conversations over Zoom to record his reflections on growing up in care, and how he has devoted his adult life to making sure children are loved, valued and can fulfil their dreams' (Willow, 2022 n.p). These conversations took place between January and July 2022. I am so appreciative that Carlyne was able to capture on record Ian's important story and part of his legacy in this way. This is a story that everyone, especially those who work in children's social care, should be required to read.

Born in Manchester in 1950, Ian spent 16 years in care during the 1950s and 1960s. He once explained that he 'experienced good and bad residential and foster care and spent some time as homeless' (Ian, The Care Experienced Conference 2019a). Ian was, as he said, 'discharged from care in 1968' with no educational qualifications (Ian, The Care Experienced Conference 2019a). He worked at a chemical company, where he was encouraged by his managers to enrol in a further education college which 'rekindled his love of learning', and he eventually gained his O-levels (Ian, in conversation with Willow, 2022). He trained to become a social worker at the University of Manchester in 1973, earning his Certificate of Qualification in Social Work. During his years working in social care, he filled a variety of roles, including social worker, residential service

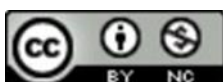


manager, and inspector. He focused mostly on working with adolescent young people in and leaving care, and those in custody. Ian was one of the first care experienced social workers to openly talk about his experiences on his social work course and throughout his career. He was in a unique position of having both lived and worked within the 'care system'. He told Carolynne that he saw his care experience 'as a medal not a wound' (Ian, in conversation with Willow, 2022). Ian has inspired and continues to inspire other generations of care experienced social workers and his legacy continues with the work of the Association of Care Experienced Social Workers (ACESCW), formed in June 2021 (Dickson and Starr, 2021). Melville-Wiseman (2022, p. 1) writes of Ian's role in forming the Association:

...we [the ACESCW] are immensely grateful for his pioneering work that has led us to where we are today. It is a national organisation made up of a diverse group of people with different outlooks, perspectives, and priorities, but all of whom have the shared experience of care as children and young people.

After his retirement in 2010, Ian did not forget or move away from trying to make things better for children and young people growing up in care. His work was far from over. I feel so lucky and privileged to have met Ian and stood alongside him on his campaign to 'challenge the injustices and improve the quality of care we offer children in state care and the support we offer to them once they leave care' (Ian, The Care Experienced Conference, 2019a). In 2017, seven months pregnant with my first child, I exited Warrington train station to meet Ian. This was the first time we were meeting in person. At his home, where I met Ian's wife Sue and their cat Honey, is where we continued our previous conversations and pondered whether there could be a gathering (we didn't have the words for it then) that could bring together care experienced people of all ages. We started to make plans. I said the event could be something small, but Ian was adamant it needed to be big. This was the first time I was at the receiving end of Ian's firm determination! We decided it could take place at Liverpool Hope University, where I worked at the time, and I knew they would be happy to support and host it. But then I went on parental leave and that is when Ian drove the idea forward, reached out and contacted people, fundraised, organised a committee and created something that was beyond what I could ever have hoped or imagined.

On April 26th, 2019, The Care Experienced Conference took place at Liverpool Hope University. It was one of the first conferences for care experienced people of all ages, as Ian said: 'in all our diversity...to share their experience and views of how the care system can be improved in the future' (The Care Experienced Conference 2019a). The conference brought together 141 care experienced people between the ages of 14 and 82 as well as professionals working in children's social care. Some of the professionals, were also care experienced. But as Ian emphasised, the professionals were invited to do nothing but *listen*. The



day consisted of small group discussions, workshops, an opening lecture and displays of art by care experienced artists, including our late, dear friend, Yusuf Paul McCormack (a fellow member of the organising committee).

The following day Ian, as chair of the organising committee for the conference, appeared on BBC Breakfast with Carrie Wilson-Harrop (a fellow member of the organising committee), to discuss the conference, where the presenters were shocked to learn that an event like this had not taken place before. As the weeks passed the organising committee wrote a conference report (The Care Experienced Conference, 2019c) and a research report (The Care Experienced Conference, 2019d), summarising the experiences and priorities delegates shared at the conference, and 'the reports were shared with central government, Ofsted, the Children's Commissioner and others involved in the care of children' (Willow, 2022). The experiences and priorities were also disseminated as a set of top 10 messages (The Care Experienced Conference, 2019b) (see figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1

Figure 2



The Care Experienced Conference

TOP 10 MESSAGES

- 1 We need more love in the care system, including displays of positive physical affection.
- 2 We want to be seen as individuals worthy of respect much more than we are.
- 3 Relationships are critically important to us.
- 4 Instability and loss of continuity in our lives is made worse through no fault of ours by pressure in the care system.
- 5 Mental health and well-being are our biggest worries and the most important and urgent things that have to improve.

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TOP 10 MESSAGES

- 6 The impacts of the care experience do not end at 18, or 21, or even 25.
- 7 Our sense of who we are is important. Our family, heritage and history are uniquely ours and must be protected.
- 8 Having our say is essential.
- 9 We have legal rights and entitlements and we are not always being told what they are.
- 10 Nobody knows more about what it means to be in care than we do.

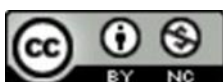
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Additionally, a 'pledge' was developed from the top 10 messages to enable its recommendations to be implemented in policy and practice (The Care Experienced Conference 2019a). In November 2019, some of the committee members attended an event in Manchester, the *Greater Manchester: Doing Things Differently for Care Leavers conference*. Ian, along with Dr Cat Hugman (a fellow organising committee member), gave a presentation. The delegates listened intently as Ian spoke about his care experience and key findings from The Care Experienced Conference. In attendance was the Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham, who signed the pledge at the event, which was eventually adopted by all ten Greater Manchester authorities and went on to inform the Greater Manchester Care Leaver Guarantee and the Local Offer (Marshall 2019). This was particularly meaningful for Ian, who was born in the city and had spent most of his life living, working and studying there. Other regions subsequently followed suit and have adopted the pledge to improve their support for children in their care, including The Liverpool City Region and North Yorkshire and Coram (O'Sullivan, 2021).

There is one thing that I particularly admired about Ian, and that was that he *never* held back in publicly voicing his concerns and disappointments and holding people in positions of power to account. He never let anyone off the hook with nonsense or self-importance. In October 2019, Ian and others from the conference organising committee presented the two conference reports to the then education minister, who, in the words of Ian on Twitter, 'did absolutely nothing at all to address their recommendations. A complete waste of space'. Ian disliked politicians paying lip service; especially those who in contrast to their public announcements and displays did absolutely nothing to address the lack of care for children and young people. Ian was very outspoken about his dissatisfaction with the Care Review. At first, I think we all, including Ian, saw the review as an opportunity for change, as a marker of hope, but soon came to see the betrayal of care experienced people during the process and particularly at its conclusion. But Ian was not alone in his hopes for improving the lives of children and young people in care. Ian has inspired and motivated others to speak out, and on the 16th of January 2023, MP for South Shields, Emma Lewell-Buck (who attended the Care Experienced Conference) made the following statement to the government in the chamber of the House of Commons:

On New Year's Eve, the care community lost a highly respected dear friend and true advocate. Ian Dickson spent his entire life making a difference to children in care and urging Governments to listen to them. The care review does not have all the answers, so will the Minister please implement the recommendations of the pioneering care experienced conference, in which Ian played a leading role? (UK Parliament, 2023)



As I look to the future, I hope I will have Ian's courage, transparency, and the wisdom with which he spoke, and will carry on asking the difficult questions, the questions I know Ian would ask.

As well as our shared interest in the history of care, Ian and I also shared the importance of family in our lives. We shared news about our families, and this is something we often discussed over private messages where I would send photos and updates on my two young children. Ian would share glimpses into his family life with us too, such as the lovely memories of his late wife Pam or displaying how proud he was of his daughter and grandchildren. He was so very grateful, and felt very lucky, that Sue, his wife, stood by his side and campaigned alongside him.

Like so many others, I am grateful to Ian for so much, for dedicating his life to create positive change for the care experienced community and for the legacy he has left behind. On a personal level, as an early career researcher setting out on my journey into academia, he consistently showed me support and encouragement when many others didn't. But above all, Ian was devoted to his family; his wife Sue, his daughter Karen and his four grandchildren. All of us who were privileged to know, campaign, and work with him greatly miss an inspiring and wonderful friend and a genuine advocate for the care experienced community.

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