

A Parent's Story 11:

Adrian



Before everything, our child, James, was the centre of our lives. We revolved around him. Both working full time, my wife would be there in the morning to get him ready for school and see him off and I would aim to be there for him in the evenings.

Nothing has changed in the sense that he is still the centre of our world, but one moving part has been forcibly removed, throwing everything off kilter and out of balance.

My wife was sentenced to 2 years and 8 months for fraud and perverting the course of justice. She had signed a will that proved to be fraudulent for a family friend of several decades. None of our counsel expected her to get a custodial sentence and we were grievously unprepared. I didn't even attend the final day in court as I was so sure that, even if a guilty verdict were reached, it was likely to be a suspended sentence. As the guilty verdict was read out, the judge advised that he was bound to apply a custodial sentence on the Tuesday, when the sentencing hearing was due.

The guilty verdict was on a Friday. The bank holiday weekend that followed was the most difficult weekend of my life. We knew it would be a custodial, but we didn't know how long for and we had no idea how to tell our son, 13 at the time, such devastating news, the extent to which was still unknown. It was difficult to know how to spend that weekend. It was so strange because the world was carrying on around us but we were in suspended animation, our movements and thoughts depressed by a sense of disbelief and impending doom.

We told James on the Monday that when mum went to court on Tuesday that she wouldn't be coming back. There were a lot of tears. There was also a lot of frustration. James was thrown into the same uncertainty we all were in and was grappling for answers and certainty that we just couldn't provide.

The worst thing was coming back home from sentencing on the Tuesday. He was upstairs in his room and I remember I had to walk in and tell him that not only would he not see his mum for a long time, but it was likely that the rest of his life would be tipped upside down too. In retrospect, I perhaps should have sheltered him from the grim reality of losing a second income, but in the moment I was so panicked myself that I told him that we might not be able to stay at home. We were both completely broken and the future looked so bleak and unmanageable.

My mental health deteriorated rapidly. There was just so much to deal with, I was so overwhelmed. I pulled myself through though. I knew I had to carry on for James and

that was the only option. I remember thinking 'you cannot break now, you have to be there for him'.

I immediately went into survival mode. It was strange, I have arthritis in my back, but in the three months that followed my wife's imprisonment I had no pain in my back at all. It was as though my body knew it had to support me and James through this time.

The first thing I set about doing was making hundreds of lists; I still have them. There were so many things to sort out and even the smallest thing, like cancelling a phone contract, meant wading through weeks of bureaucracy. It took a long time to get power of attorney, something I wasn't expecting to have to do and around a few weeks before the mortgage was due I remember going into the bank out of sheer desperation, telling them I was at crisis point and despite hours on the phone I still didn't know what to do. A very kind lady sat me down, helped me make all the right phone calls and begin to sort out the access to my wife's account. I still remember feeling so lucky to have met one person willing to help when all I'd faced so far were brick walls or being passed from pillar to post.

I found it incredibly difficult to find any answers to my situation; it was never straight forward. If I had a query, it took piecing together bits of information from different sources or websites, before I had any semblance of an answer. I remember signing up to prison newsletters, forums, scouring social media, but not having much luck. My wife was given an information pack when she went into prison, but me and James weren't, and it took so much effort to understand the basics of how to contact her or send her money. I remember wishing there was a number to phone, or just someone to tell us how to apply for leave or just sort out the basics.

I work near Bullingdon prison and I remember the day after my wife had been sentenced, as I pulled into my office, I saw a prison transit van drive past. Just seeing that van and imagining her inside was so difficult for me. I couldn't even look at layouts of the prison, that's something I've only been able to manage since she was transferred to an open prison. It's a horrible feeling to picture someone you love so much in such an uncomfortable environment and there being nothing you could do to change it. I couldn't just ride over on a white horse and take her home. I felt so powerless.

Managing relationships was also incredibly difficult. I remember feeling very isolated. Her sister was very upset when she went to prison, and whilst I could understand her dismay, it felt so difficult to relate to her suffering when I was trying to keep a roof over mine and James' head, look after James and manage the abrupt separation between me and my wife. I felt completely overwhelmed and as though no one could relate, even close family members. My sister-in-law was missing her sister, of course, but my entire life had been turned upside down and I was constantly fighting to keep my head above water. It was a very lonely time.

Trying to maintain my relationship with my wife was also very complex. We were both in completely different situations and while I was on the outside, trying my best to manage as best I could, she was inside, with a completely different set of emotions and concerns. There was a lot of paranoia, she was understandably very fragile and concerned about me and James managing without her. I have always tried my best to alleviate her fears, but it was often quite difficult. I had to keep reminding myself to be as supportive as possible, because the risk of miscommunication over a daily phone call is high and I didn't want to upset her.

James' attendance at school was getting worse and worse. I began to worry that he was getting so behind that he might not manage the rest of the year. It felt like a vicious cycle; he'd been through so much so I wanted to give him the time to come to terms with things and recover, but I didn't want him to take so much time that he'd struggle to get back on track. The more school he missed, the more he felt anxious about going in and I was at a loss to know what to do.

Thankfully the school referred us to Children Heard and Seen and Charlotte and Alex became involved with our family. Immediately there was someone to talk to about the minutiae of managing the prison system and Alex started weekly sessions with James. Through this James has been able to receive intervention and support at the right time, and his attendance is nearly back to normal.

I also remember Alex phoning me one day and after speaking about her last session with James, asking how I was. It was such a shocking question because it wasn't something I had considered until then. I was so concerned about James and managing financially that I hadn't stopped to think about how I was doing. It was such a simple thing to say, but I remember it really affecting me. I've attended the parental support groups in the evenings, and being able to talk about my situation to people that understand and aren't judgemental felt like a weight off my shoulders. I hadn't really spoken to anyone in the same situation before and it was heartening to receive support, advice and compassion. It was also useful to recognise that I had been through a lot and I needed to take care of myself too.

I'm so grateful to Children Heard and Seen for, above all else, making James feel normal. It is by no means the end of our struggles. I've recently been subject to a large legal aid bill, ironically the exact same amount of money that my mother gave us shortly before she passed to help us get set up in life. When you're married to someone who is convicted, all your assets are considered joint with the defendant and you're liable to pay their defence costs. Even though this is extremely stressful, knowing that Children Heard and Seen are there to support, even after release, is a comfort. If I can take anything from this situation, it's knowing that when it comes down to it, family is really all that's important and you should never take them for granted.