

Hidden Voices: Sylvia's Story



I am writing this on a plane from Manchester to Switzerland where I attended a Swiss Governmental event in my role as a UK Young Ambassador, before travelling onto Glasgow to attend COP26 and whilst I was thinking of how to start this, it occurred to me that the last time I landed back at Manchester airport, my Dad had been sentenced whilst I was away and was now serving his second prison sentence. How I wish that my fourteen-year-old self could see my now 20 year old self.

The Prison World was one I barely, if ever, would've thought about before my Dad's first arrest and if it did ever cross my mind, I probably would've considered those within the system as lost causes and their families better off without them. My past ignorance is an opinion still shared by a majority and, I believe, is largely down to the secrecy and silence from those inside the criminal justice system. It is for this reason that I decide to wear my 'story' so openly on my sleeve, to try and open even a few eyes to the reality of those whose parent ends up within the system.

One of the most commonly asked questions by those who find out that my Dad served two sentences is 'do you mind me asking what he did?' and whilst the details of his crimes are actually of particular relevance in my case, due to their sensitive nature, this is not what I wish to discuss today. What my parent did or didn't do has got absolutely nothing to do with me, not least because it happened 30 years before I was even born, but this is a concept that people find particularly hard to grasp: the fact that I am able to separate the criminal and the parent. Unconditional love is not something that is often questioned but the minute criminality enters the conversation, there suddenly seems to be an assumption that a lifetime of nurture and love should suddenly be forgotten because of an event entirely separate from the parent-child relationship.

I do not believe that there is a right or wrong way to respond to parental imprisonment and my own approach has changed in the last 8 or so years but my initial response was one of intense loyalty, denial and defensiveness. Looking back now, I see a child unable to cope with the possibility of a future without her Dad in it who resorted back to tribal tactics as a method of trying to hold her family, life and reality together. Of course, this failed. My own love for my Dad couldn't change the opinions of others, and nor should it, but what I still cannot fathom was the punishment of me by others for my refusal to condemn and abandon the man who had raised me. I can comprehend judgemental comments by strangers on the internet, nasty comments by teenagers who weren't necessarily my friends or attacks from the media but what will always sting is the turning

of backs by friends we considered family, actual family members distancing themselves and the destructive actions of the authorities.

Whilst I could write an entire book about the behaviour of the social services and the damage that they caused me, I choose not to comment on behalf of other family members because that is not my story to tell, but what remains unbelievable to me is their lack of ability to deal with my case appropriately or with even the slightest bit of empathy. Upon our first meeting, it was decided that I had not been damaged, nor was at risk of being so, yet I continued to be interrogated for several years and, eventually, came to fear them more than the legal system itself. They didn't even have the correct terminology for our situation, referring only to the non-abusing parent and abusing parent when I had non-abusing parents, plural, and refused to adapt their language accordingly. Most significantly, their end goal was very clearly, to me, to try and make me pick them over my own Dad. Not only was this an entirely destructive aim but resulted in an already defensive teenage girl to raise her walls up even further to the point that I still struggle now to negotiate family life without often resorting to a defensive stance. The hostility of my first meeting with the social services is ingrained in my memory but, the absurdity of the following conversation is also:

Me, (aged 13, having been pulled out of a physics class during the first week of year 9 and being offered absolutely no explanation as to why a police man and two strangers wanted to talk to me about my home life): *Is my Mum ok?*

Social worker: *Yes, she's fine.*

Me: *Is my Dad ok?*

Social worker: *I can't tell you that.*

It doesn't take a genius to work out that something was going on with Dad. I managed to work out for myself, by pursuing a similar line of questions, that he had been arrested, taken to Scotland and that no one knew when I'd see him next. Now, I totally understand that they had to ascertain whether I was safe at home or not but to me, watching a child sob her heart out whilst she scabbled to pull out scraps of detail about how her life was disintegrating in front of her eyes whilst continuing with a ruthless set of questions is no way to go about things. I would welcome the chance to meet with authorities and discuss less destructive approaches because that is an interaction that will never leave me.

There is so much more I could write here and I still struggle with articulating my experiences articulately but something which has really shaped me and my approach to life is, as I sat on the sofa, hugging my knees to my chest and sobbing 'I can't do it, I can't live without him' on the day that we were told to prepare for a sentence of 8 years, I had a brain flash of:

'I'll just have to be exceptional. That's how I'll deal with this- I'll have to be exceptional and then it won't have defined me, it will have made me'.

In-between then and now, I have served a term as a youth MP for Leeds, achieved good enough (although in terms of 'pre-prison predictions', I underachieved) GCSE and A level grades to be awarded an academic scholarship at a Russell group University and been elected a UK young ambassador, representing the young people of the UK internationally. Alongside this, I have sat sewing dental floss into trousers to send into prison rather than revising for exams, lost friendships, cried more than I thought it possible to cry and mourned for the life that I once had, but my point is that the actions of your parents do not define you because they have nothing to do with you. So often, families involved in the criminal justice system and the trajectory of their children are depicted in a very particular way but, whilst the Government appears to give it absolutely no consideration, charities like Children Heard and Seen are working hard to reverse this and I will continue to shout about the power of owning your own narrative until no child feels that their story is predetermined by events entirely separate from their control.

I understand that many will read this and think me ignorant or fail to understand my argument that judging a child for the actions of their parents is cruel, but if even a few people are able to begin to understand my perspective then I consider this a job well done and if you are reading this and your parent is currently in prison, please believe me when I say it gets better. 14 year old me couldn't see a future beyond the horror and wouldn't believe the life I now lead. As my Mum says: this too shall pass.