

Hidden Voices:

Kerry's Story



When I was seventeen, both of my parents were arrested. My Dad was sentenced to just under 6 years and my Mum three years. As a direct result, I had to leave the family home. I also dropped out of school as they were arrested a couple days before my A level coursework deadline which I inevitably missed.

At first, I stayed with other family but that didn't work out. For a while, I crashed with friends, with anyone who would let me stay. I never let on how desperate I was. I remember asking one friend if I could stay and her mum snatched the phone:

"Sorry Kerry, we don't want to get involved especially with everything that's going on with your parents".

It was the first time I had come face to face with the social stigma of having parents in prison. It definitely was not my last though. It was small things that washed you with the shame. It was the post office lady who gave me a disgusted look every time I posted a letter to my parents. It was going to the doctors for the first time and asking where my parents were. It was the constant questions from everyone. It used to overwhelm me. In the end I started to lie and make up stories just so I wouldn't have to explain to someone all over again.

It wasn't long until places I could stay wore thin, I mean you can only invite yourself so many times, right?! I stayed with my good friend Liv and her family who really took me under their wing. So off I went down the council. It was clear as soon as I sat down in the office there was not much help for me. I remember literally begging to put in care, at least it would be a home of some sort. The woman apologised and said because I was over sixteen, I was too old for the care system. But too young to be classed as an adult. They were unable to help me find somewhere to live as I was staying at Liv's and technically not homeless. I remember sitting there confused. If I wasn't eligible for help... then who was? I was stuck in a no man's land of broken systems.

It is weird though - I am twenty-six years old now and that feeling of hopelessness in that council office still sits in the pit of my stomach. It's like I can still feel the scratching fabric of the chair, the stuffiness of the office, and the lump in my throat. Even after everything I

have achieved, and how far I've come, and both parents are out of prison I often still feel like that lost seventeen-year-old girl.

I always blamed myself for not looking for the support I needed, but in reality it wasn't really there in the first place. Even when my parents were arrested, there were no safeguarding, none of the police officers seem to care what happened to me. No one asked whether I was okay, whether I needed help. The fact I was seventeen seemed to be enough for the various systems. I was left to my own devices and it's only now I look back I realise how vulnerable I really was. The affects of this time stayed with me years after. I struggled with abandonment issues, constantly seeking reassurance and love in the wrong places leading to various unhealthy relationships. For years, I was insecure, full of self-doubt and was constantly self-sabotaging. Even now I struggle with anxiety and worry that something awful is going to happen.

The thing is, I was one of the lucky ones. I had people who cared. I had good friends and Liv's mum Carley took it upon herself to help me. She found me room to rent, helped me sign on and eventually got me a job. I owe it all to her, she was there for me when most people were not. I then joined the local college to retake my A levels.

In 2015, I became the first person in my family to go to university and went on to study English with Creative Writing at University of Kent.

In my first year, I had a meeting with my tutor about a short story I had submitted. He criticised everything for the whole time. It wasn't until I was leaving, he said that he loved my dialogue and whether I had considered scriptwriting before.

Not going to lie, I thought the only writing jobs you could get was as a novelist or in journalism. However, his words proved to be my catalyst and it changed my direction in life. A couple years later I found myself on the Writing for Performance Masters course at University of Leeds. It was then, I began exploring my own experiences in my writing.

I often saw theatre plays, TV series, books about experiences of being in prison which is so valid but I was yet to see anything about what it is like for young people and families on the outside. So I decided to do it myself and that is where my play 'Kailey' has come about.

I was awarded funding from Bradford Producing Hub, Live Theatre and Arts Council England to develop the play further. I've worked with such talented creatives on the project and it's been an incredible experience. We are planning to tour 'Kailey' in Spring 2023 which is INSANE. Me touring a play that I have written and self-produced? Madness!

Not only will 'Kailey' give a voice to young people often forgotten in society, but it has been a form of therapy for me too. It has allowed me to come to terms and legitimise my experiences. And I promise you, it will get better. It really will. I might sometimes still feel like that lost seventeen-year-old girl, but I am not. I now own it, I own it all and wear it proudly on my chest.