Remarkable Lives: Andrew Aldred in conversation with Jerome Carson.

Andrew Aldred and Jerome Carson.

Abstract

Purpose- This paper aims to offer a profile of Andrew Aldred.

Design/methodology/approach- Andrew provides a short biography and is then interviewed by Jerome. Areas covered in the interview include Andrew’s experiences during the Falklands War, his poetry and his time in hospital care.

Findings- His experiences in the Falklands War brought home to Andrew the trauma of war as well as its futility. Its personal effects proved long lasting. His descent into mental illness led to years of institutional care and terrible physical complications as a result of the medications he was given.

Originality/value- Andrew’s story shows his long journey of recovery from his Falklands War experiences to prolonged hospital incarceration. Poetry helped him process these experiences and finding his wife gave him the support and love to rebuild his life.

Keywords Poetry, Recovery, Falklands War, Hospital care,

Paper type Case study

Introduction

I met Andrew through his wife Jane, who featured in an earlier Remarkable Lives piece (Aldred, 2013). He showed me examples of his poetry, which I encouraged him to get published. His book, “Dark Days and Other Poems,” charts his reflections. The statement on the cover of the book reads, “Dark Days is a description of an ex-soldier’s opinion of the army, prison, secure mental hospital, the Home Office and other aspects of life in his recovery journey from committing a crime of wounding with intent. It is not intended as a rant against a system he
found very unsympathetic but in its own way this is what it is because it could not be anything else.”

Brief biography of Andrew Aldred

Andrew Aldred started off adult life as a junior soldier after having an unhappy and unsettled childhood. The Army did not accept him as a Royal Military Policeman, and moved him to the Parachute Regiment and then to the Royal Engineers where he drove a tank in Germany and served in the Falkland Islands in late 1984 and early 1985.

Andrew experienced a huge mental breakdown after serving in the Falklands, developing ideas of persecution and paranoia which was not helped by being moved back to his family, an environment he had tried to escape by joining the Army.

As a result of his Army experience, Andrew believes in avoiding war at all costs, and that political solutions are always better than soldiers being ordered to fight for their countries. Andrew considers himself lucky to receive an Army pension and sympathises with those caught up in war situations as civilians who get no compensation. Andrew acknowledges that soldiers, sailors and airmen will always be necessary to protect countries and many will sacrifice their lives to do this. He has been fortunate enough to live through his service and the resulting mental illness.

Andrew had to take injections of tranquillisers for many years, and suffered oculogyric crises, a debilitating side effect with the eyes causing extreme discomfort and lack of vision for three hours every day. He also developed heart problems because of his medication.

Undeterred, after the Army Andrew got some ‘A’ levels and business administration, teaching and computer qualifications, but could not get a job because of his health conditions.

It was about this time that Andrew started to write poetry as a means of expressing his thoughts and putting them into some sort of order. As his life progressed this became a therapy for him.

Everything came to a head in 1997. Andrew could no longer cope with his parents living close to him, and his feelings of paranoia and persecution had developed to an extreme degree because of his treatment in hospital and not being able to break away from his parents. After many admissions to hospital and no adequate treatment he stabbed his father and went to prison.
Even in hospital, the authorities wanted to administer treatment that affected Andrew’s eyes and heart. After three years of treatment that did not work Andrew was put on Risperidone, a drug which suited him and did not affect his eyes.

Andrew later recovered from his heart problem after having his heart ‘reset’ in a medical procedure that stopped his heart from beating and restarted it soon after. The treatment was very traumatic and he was not even informed as to what was going on.

He was transferred to Prestwich Hospital in 1998, and remained there for six years, but ran into problems with staff. He was then transferred to Charles House in Salford and then to Oak Lodge in Bolton.

It was here that he met his future wife, Jane again. He had known Jane some years earlier, meeting her a ‘drop in’ centre for the mentally ill in Bolton town centre and forming a friendship with her. The system did not approve, and tried to move him back to Prestwich Hospital, but Andrew stood his ground and stayed in Bolton, getting discharged and moving to the community to live with his wife.

Andrew worked in a plumber’s yard and as a warehouseman for a company in Radcliffe but had to change career when he suffered from arthritis and was unable to continue his job.

He re-qualified in computers and teaching and currently works at the Recovery Academy at Prestwich Hospital.

Whilst ill, Andrew wrote a book of poetry, Dark Days and other Poems, which he has recently had published. He got into writing poetry before he went to prison and continued writing through his time in institutions. He found poetry a means of keeping his sanity in situations he found very difficult to cope with. The book covers life in the Army, and a lot of aspects of life in institutions, including dealing with the Home Office, Doctors and nurses and other patients. It is published by the Chipmunka publishing company. He has plans for another book in the future.

Andrew is now settled in Bolton with his wife Jane. His parents live in Wales. He has found a better life situation where he can cope. He no longer believes he is being persecuted and is at peace with himself after thirty years of trauma. He has found the key to being well has been being able to take responsibility for himself and being able to empower himself through educational achievement and work of many different sorts.

Andrew feels he has always had to struggle to survive in an unsympathetic system which has intentionally ground him down instead of helping him. The treatment has been oppressive and unpleasant and why it should have been like this is beyond Andrew. If the system wants to get
people well it should treat them humanely and try to see the best in them. It should foster some use for the mentally ill in society and make some space for them to exist in the community. Andrew sees that in the current climate of austerity less resources are being given to the mentally ill community, hospital beds are increasingly hard to get and once in hospital people are being locked up for an unnecessary length of time without any attempt being made to rehabilitate them. Andrew feels that the mentally ill are a forgotten people and that society at large does not want to deal with them.

Andrew in conversation with Jerome

Jerome. In your biography you mention how both the army and your family were triggers for your mental health problems? What was it about your time in the Falklands that you found particularly troublesome?

Andrew. I found the living conditions cramped and difficult. We were housed in an oil rig workers’ building with four men to a two man room. The air conditioning meant that infection was rife and everyone caught each other’s illnesses. I had a knee that was badly damaged and needed surgery after the tour and this made things difficult for me. Then there was a time when Argentinian Paratroopers were dropped near our position at Port Stanley. I was sent to guard the troop offices by myself whilst the troop remained in a position a few hundred yards away. I watched as shapes moved across the field in front of me, but they wanted to go past my position. There would have been about thirty of them, with a machine gun and all I had was my rifle. I remained very still and did not give my position away or I would probably have been shot.

Jerome. After the Falklands War you returned to live with your family. You say that you ended up stabbing your father and going to prison. Have you ever been reconciled with your family after this episode?

Andrew. We are reconciled but we don’t see a lot of each other. I have remained quite close to my brother, Ivor who sometimes visits us in Bolton. I have tried to support my father through his battle with cancer from a distance, but feel more responsible for my wife and our family in Bolton.

Jerome. You have just had your first book of poetry published, “Dark Days and Other Poems,” (Aldred, 2014). How has writing poetry helped you?
Andrew. Poetry has helped me clarify my thoughts and get a lot of dark emotions out of my system. It has been a way of contributing something when I really did not have a lot to offer.

Jerome. Do you still write poetry? Do you plan to write any more poetry books?

Andrew. Yes, I still write poetry. I have another book that I am writing but it is a lot more about the world in general and not specifically about me. It is my view of the world in general and not mental hospital, the army, prison and the like. The message is a lot more general.

Jerome. You have spent quite a long time in hospital settings. What were the things about being in hospital that you found most disagreeable?

Andrew. The lack of space and freedom was stifling. I spent three years in Prestwich Hospital without leave and it was very difficult for me. Also it meant my rehabilitation was a lot more difficult when it came. I think punishment comes into treatment quite a lot and I am not sure it should do all the time. Conforming to other people’s rules and discipline was difficult as was being bullied by staff and patients.

Jerome. Were there any good things about being in hospital?

Andrew. The company was very stimulating and challenging. There were a lot of people from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities and a lot of them were difficult but very rewarding as well. There was never a dull moment in hospital but a lot of people were ‘stir crazy’ and I was glad to get out of that environment.

Jerome. What changes would you most like to see in mental health services?

Andrew. I would like to see a move away from treating people solely with medication. Social factors are so much more valuable to everyone who is inside the hospital and should be made more important. I do not see the need to persevere with inpatient treatment indefinitely. There should be some time limit for most crimes and rehabilitations. People should not be punished forever in most cases.
Jerome. You mentioned experiencing oculogyric crises as well as heart problems as a result of psychotropic medications. What are your views on the use of medication for mental health problems?

Andrew. I wish I had never been given medication. It produces a need for itself and people get addicted to prescription drugs. I am. If I had never been put on medication I would have suffered a lot less. Drugs can be very cruel.

Jerome. What are your views on the concept of recovery?

Andrew. Recovery is a great concept. The idea of making something better without changing them is a good one. We cannot change our past or our personality overnight, but we can work around it and make it better. People can change the way they deal with their illnesses and make things better for themselves and the people around them.

Jerome. Have you ever had problems with internalized stigma?

Andrew. No. I have always been open and honest about my illness and what I have done. I view myself as part of society like anyone else and do not feel awkward about my illness or who I am.

Jerome. Have you ever experienced discrimination due to mental health problems?

Andrew. I have experienced discrimination, but more to do with personality and ignorance on the part of other people. I think personalities come into things too much and if you don’t get on with a Doctor you don’t get good treatment.

Jerome. Have any mental health professionals ever inspired you?

Andrew. A lot of them have. A lot of people have given me a chance to get outside of the hospital and do something with my life and I am eternally grateful for that chance.

Jerome. In terms of people with lived experience, who has inspired you the most?
Andrew. A War Veteran called Jimmy. He was dying of cancer in Queen Elizabeth Military Hospital and had been mentally ill ever since the Second World War. He was a genuinely great man and very kind to me.

Jerome. What challenges lie ahead for you? What would you most like to achieve in the future? Andrew. I would most like to achieve a long and happy marriage to my wife Jane and to keep my mental health good. I would like to be able to die sane.

Jerome. What would you most like to be remembered for?

Andrew. I would most like to be remembered for being a good husband to my wife, trying to see the best in people and trying not to let anyone down.

Conclusion.

One of Andrew’s poems is called The Army. It highlights the problems his military life caused him.

I joined at sixteen.
Anxious to fight and die
And be a hero
But after three years
Of working like a dog
I ended up in the Falklands
I was sick of the army
And I didn’t feel I could go home
To a family that didn’t understand
I had a mental breakdown

And fifteen years later

I’m still not the same

As Patricia Deegan says, sometimes coping with mental illness is the easy part (Deegan, 1996), it is all the other “wounds to the human heart” that are so hard to deal with. Freud talked about the central importance of love and work. For Andrew love and poetry have proved key aspects of his own recovery. There is something especially poignant about his comment that he would like “to be able to die sane.”

References


About the authors

Andrew Aldred works at the Recovery Academy with the Greater West Manchester NHS Foundation Trust and continues to write poetry.

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