

A Social Firm in our Area – 27th March 2006, Glasgow
Interview - Victor Willis with Upkeep employee Stephen McLaughlin

1. What is your working background, Stephen, since leaving school?

I have had a number of jobs since leaving school – 12 years with Henry Healey, the last 6 as a manager; a few years with the Wise Group where I learnt cladding procedures; plus some more casual landscaping type jobs.

2. How did you get involved in the drug scene?

During one of my out of work spells, I was influenced by my girlfriend who was on hard drugs and I began to dabble with some of the softer drugs, always thinking that I wouldn't get hooked on them – the "it wouldn't happen to me" mentality kicked in! But...I did get fully drawn in and got really hooked.

3. What was it like when you became hooked on drugs – when you became ill?

*It was a bad time for me – I just moved from one 'fix' to another and **had** to have the drugs to satisfy my craving. I got some casual work in the black economy to pay for the drugs for both my partner and me so that we could keep the benefit money for the needs of our two boys. I didn't actually steal to get the money – I always tried to earn it casually - but without the tax people knowing about it because my benefits would have been affected.*

4. How many years did you feel like this?

In total, it was about 9 years – 9 years when I didn't know much about what was going on – you could almost say these 9 years were wiped out of my life! I was 6 years on drugs and it took about another 3 years to actually get off them and regard myself as 'clean'. It was an awful time for me as I had lost my self respect and dignity, the respect of my two sons and was probably just a nuisance to many people, including my partner.

5. How did things change?

I had to come to terms with my life – did I want to carry on like I was doing which would have meant continuing depression, constant craving for another 'fix' or perhaps even an early death! I had no alternative but to dramatically change my unsatisfactory lifestyle. Me and my partner had been having constant fights over money; she threw me out of the house a number of times and I had to go and live in a hostel for a year.

6. What was it really like being on drugs, knowing that you had to stop?

It was really hell on earth! I did not seem to have any future. It was hard to see a way out of it all. The compulsion I felt to experience the 'high' feeling which the drugs gave was very strong. But I knew deep down that this feeling was only temporary – it never lasted for any significant time before the craving returned. And so it seemed this would just go on and on.... I started to sell the drugs myself to increase our income and inevitably got caught in possession by the police. This meant I could face a prison sentence or at best be given lots of community service to do. It actually took me fourteen months to decide to give the drugs up – my mind was like Swiss cheese, totally scrambled!

7. Did you receive any helpful rehabilitation or training?

Yes, when I finally decided to try to chuck the drugs, I was allocated a drugs counsellor who was quite approachable and friendly. I saw him for an hour every week for fourteen months. He was very patient with me and persistently recommended I make the move away from drugs and tried to talk some sense into me. He put me through a detox programme which helped me progress towards rehabilitation – but it was really hard going! The toughest thing I have ever done! But my own determination won out in the end.

8. How did you progress to meeting people again?

Because I had been sentenced to 480 hours of community service instead of a prison term, I had no alternative but to meet people during the course of this experience. Obviously the circumstances of these meetings were difficult – but I had to get used to them. I had no choice in the matter as the alternative was going to prison.

9. How long did it take you to get your life sorted out?

It hasn't been easy – but it has been worthwhile. I was introduced to our local development company – the East End Partnership – and, over a twelve month period, they put me through a number of their courses which were quite interesting and worthwhile. These were all designed to try to get me back into the labour market. I applied for a few jobs but always got knocked back and became convinced it was because no one wanted to employ a former drug addict.

10. How did you get the job opportunity with UPKEEP?

My connection with East End Partnership was a door opener as they gave me the job vacancy details which had been circulated to them by the local job centre. I ideally was looking for a job with a cladding company where my previous experience would have been useful – however,

East End Partnership's employment counsellor told me firmly I couldn't afford to be choosy and that I should go for it anyway! I am really so glad now that I did!

11. When you were offered a job at UPKEEP, did you receive any training, induction or otherwise?

Yes, I was asked to attend the John Wheatley College at Shettleston Campus with 5 other men for an intensive three week induction training course. This covered topics like customer care, health & safety, manual handling, equal opportunities and first aid. I found them all to be useful and interesting – especially as we were also getting paid to attend! It also gave me the opportunity to get to know my other work colleagues before the actual operations of UPKEEP started.

12. You have now been working for UPKEEP almost a year; have you received any other training to support you in your job situation?

Yes, my manager, Mr. Willis, sent me on a commercial driving refresher course for two days. I had always had a car driving licence but had not driven for over 9 years – due to the drugs influence – and had lost my confidence. My manager wanted me to train as a back-up driver and I was keen to try driving again. The course cost £300 and was funded by a grant from Righttrack. I really enjoyed this experience and I am pleased to say that I now drive the UPKEEP vehicles quite frequently.

13. Be honest now Stephen – what are the best and most worthwhile things about your job in UPKEEP?

The JOB itself – as I was beginning to think no one would want to employ an ex drug addict like me! The ability to hold the job down; earn some decent money legitimately; enable me to save some money; give me back my dignity, self respect and independence. I am very grateful to UPKEEP for the opportunity to work again and the team are a great bunch of guys. They treat me for who I am and for what I am doing - not for who or what I have been. I really enjoy working for UPKEEP and the company looks to have quite a good future too. So everything is looking good at the moment.

14. On the personal side, Stephen, you also have made good progress in the family sense as the court recently decided to give you back custody of your 2 sons – isn't that right?

Yes – just a month ago, I was granted custody of my younger 15 year old son who is still at school. My eldest boy, Stephen – who is 18 – has chosen to live with me again and has left his grandmother's home for mine. I just think this is wonderful that my two boys respect me again after so many difficult years of domestic quarrelling when I was put out of the family home and

had to live in a hostel. I now feel I am working for a great family reason again – to provide and care for my two boys. This means so much to me personally.

15. And finally now Stephen, to end on a high note, tell us all what happened back on 12th December?

On 12th December I took delivery of a second hand car! I was really pleased that I had been able to save from my wages enough for a deposit on the car and I also managed to get a Credit Union loan to meet the balance. This has all come about thanks to the UPKEEP job!

V.W. Final Summary

That was a short but interesting and graphic account of Stephen's own personal story in which our social firm UPKEEP has played a part in his overall rehabilitation. The job with us has helped give Stephen dignity and self respect with his family, his working colleagues, his neighbours and his friends; the ability to work and save some money out of his wages; and has given him a degree of independence as he knows he is able to have a better living away from dependence on state benefits. It demonstrates that social firms give people back choices which the majority of us simply take for granted.

At UPKEEP we are not judgmental – we keep the past in the past and treat people on their current merits. Many thanks, Stephen, for demonstrating your courage and for sharing so very honestly your personal experiences with all the delegates. In my opinion you have achieved a very great deal by taking up our job offer and you have been a most worthy beneficiary of a second chance. And.....I hope it shows everyone that people can achieve so very much, given the right environment, combined with the right positive attitude and, off course with the right job support. I am personally very pleased that our little social firm has been able to support Stephen and Stephen has unquestionably repaid our faith in him.

Victor Willis 27/3/2006