

Darren was born on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1962 in East London, he experienced a troubled and violent childhood and his father would regularly both mentally and physically abuse him. He struggled at school and his attendance at school was poor, he went out to work when he was 13.

Darren joined in the Royal Artillery as a boy soldier at 15 to escape and start a new career away from the social and family environment he was in. Some of his family had been convicted of a number of offences and this was one of the reasons why Darren decided to join the army so he wouldn't follow them in criminal behaviour and to escape the violence.

Darren left the Armed Forces in 1985 after serving two tours of Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Belize and during the Falklands conflict in 1982. He served back-to-back tours in Ireland and during his last year of service he was involved in an IRA bomb blast at Woolwich. He experienced the usual demands of operational tours and left the Army at that time with no long lasting effects. Darren only left the army due to the pressures that military life brings to his new family and the difficulties that long periods away with overseas tours and training of army life.

Darren struggled with the transition from the military environment to settling down into a new life as a civilian. He had a number of jobs within two years of leaving and tried to re-join the army. He failed to re-enlist following a medical due to the early onset of some mental health symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

His relationship with his wife and child started to deteriorate and experienced a number of further symptoms; Self-harm Suicide attempts, violent behaviour, flashbacks, personality disorder and dissociative disorder. Darren made a life changing decision to leave the family as his actions were affecting them, and as he had a similar childhood he didn't want them to experience the same.

He became homeless and lived in his car for eighteen months and the only contact he had was through the internet. He became friends with a friend he had during his childhood and she supported him. With her support he contacted Combat Stress and for ten years he started to live with PTSD. Whilst at Combat Stress he was introduced to art, and this was one of the therapies that were having a positive impact on his PTSD. With her support Darren moved up to Haslingden in 2011 and started a new life. He was diagnosed with PTSD in 1990, and was attributed to his experiences during the Falklands Conflict.

In 2012 Darren was introduced to a veteran's charity 'Veterans In Actions (VIA)' that was working in Haslingden at that time, it later became 'Veterans In Communities (VIC)' in 2012 and he was one of the core team who helped set VIC up as a charity. Darren was still under Combat Stress at that time and was not coping mentally, he relied on his partner heavily and rarely went anywhere on his own or engaging with local NHS services. However he still used art and this was one of the first activities VIC encouraged him to take part that was to set up an art group for other veterans. This very quickly proved to be a success not only for Darren to regain his confidence, self-esteem and motivation but also others using the group. With Darren's guidance and enthusiasm the group and VIC developed, Darren is one of the core team and gets actively involved in all the activities that VIC now delivers.

The art group under the guidance and experience Darren has gained over the last three years has exhibited the group's work; it has been recognised as good practice by a number of organisations. Darren's mental and physical conditions have improved substantially and no longer have a reliant on

the statutory services that previously supported him. He has become a positive role model for others with similar mental health and transitional difficulties.

In the last three years he now has the confidence to now organise small and larger art exhibitions, give presentations, interviews with East Lancashire CCG and university students, has been filmed by Granada TV and film makers promoting art as a therapy, given live radio interviews, newspaper and magazine interviews and has successfully passed a number of qualifications in Art Therapy, teaching, Advice and Guidance, Suicide Prevention, Mental Health First Aid and many other short courses.

In 2015 Darren had mentioned that another of his life time goals was to open an art shop where he could help other fellow artists buy art materials at reasonable prices. VIC trustees felt this was worth investing in and provided the funding for the initial set-up costs, and the 'Positive Art Shop' is the first Social Enterprise for VIC. Darren has full responsibility the on-going managing of the shop and to manage a team of volunteers.

Darren has said in 2011 he had no future but now is sees a positive future and is planning ahead. He is engaged to his partner and is building a good relationship with his own children and grandchildren.