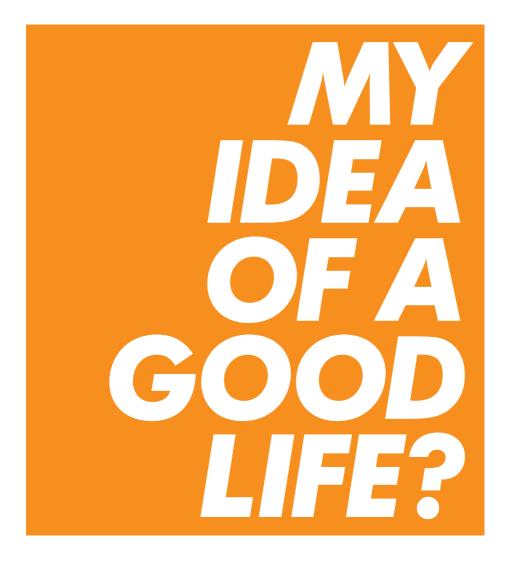
FIVE YEARS OF THE BIG LIFE GROUP



FIVE YEARS F BIG LIVES.

2002 - 2007

5 YEARS OF BIG LIVES BOOK SPONSORED BY THE CONNECTIVES. (SEE BACK PAGE FOR MORE INFORMATION)

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THE BIG LIFE GROUP WAS FORMED IN 200 AND NOW INCLUDES FIVE SOCIAL BUSINES AND THREE CHAR THE BIG LIFE COMPANY. THE BIG ISSUE IN THE NORTH, AISHA CHILDCARE, **BIG LIFE EMPLOYMENT, OPEN DOOR, BIG LIFE SERVICES, THE BIG ISSUE IN THE NORTH TRUST AND** SELF HELP SERVICES. TH **BOOK CELEBRATES** FIRST FIVE YEARS.

There was a day last week when I came home and thought I have the best job in the world. And although not every day is like that – there are plenty of challenges! – there are a lot of moments like it.

Most people who work in The Big Life group say they work here for job satisfaction and being able to really make a difference. We are very lucky to be able to work with such a variety of people – people who show great courage battling to overcome whatever life has thrown at them and people who give to their community.

It's not always a straight forward journey, but I never cease to be amazed at how people manage to pick themselves up and try again. This book tells a few of their stories. So often we look to people in powerful positions for inspiration. This book shows us we are looking in the wrong place. We should be looking at our neighbours, our friends and people who have gone through really tough times and come out smiling. They are the real inspiration.

<u>My idea of a good life? Being able to keep smiling</u> <u>and hopeful when things go wrong and really</u> <u>celebrate when they go right!</u> I first came to the Zion in 1991. My sister Sandra was working there and they didn't have a cleaner. She said, Vee, they're looking for a cleaner at the Zion – why don't you come and see? So I went over and looked around... it looked a bit grubby and I thought, yep, there's a job here.

Soon after this, my son, who was 16, was murdered. Living in this community can be very hard sometimes, but then everyone at the Zion really helped.

I moved on from cleaning to reception full time about a year and a half ago. My manager has really helped me and we have a good, strong reception team. I feel safe working here and working on reception really builds up your confidence.

We have people who come to work on reception on New Deal placements and I show them the ropes and I'm going to start running the open mornings. I suppose everyone knows me here and I know everyone.

I recently arranged the staff Christmas party and everyone says it was one of the best parties that Big Life has ever had. I worked hard, but I enjoyed doing it and it was great when everyone was there and happy and having a good time. I once said that I was the any other duties person and I suppose I still am!

It feels good to have known the people at the Zion for so long. There have been good times and bad times – but most of them have been good. The Zion is a good place because everyone pulls together and we offer so many different services and we're here to help people. Working on reception, you see the difference we're making to people's lives.

What makes a good life? It's just being a jolly person. It's just being Vee.

GYAON WATSON

I was 14 or 15 when I found a bottle of methadone in my brother's bedroom. I took it, it was just one of things you do when you're a kid. Then it was a progression really, through smoking, injecting, doing crack. Nineteen and a half years later I was still addicted to heroin. I'd tried detoxing a number of times without success.

I was still using when my son was born. He was born an addict. I wasn't really aware at the time of what I had done, I just wanted to get back home and go back into my own world.

Things didn't change until about 7 years after he was born. I had been living with my mum but she was deteriorating fast, it was clear that she was going to die. I knew that she was the only one who was really taking any interest in my son and that when she was dead he would probably be taken off me. I knew I had to get clean. It was time to get the ball rolling. Enough was enough, I went to the clinic and I told them I wanted to go into rehab, but they told me I'd have to put my son into foster care while I was doing it. I knew that I couldn't do it without him though. If my son had been taken off me I'd have ended up on the streets and probably dead. All this time, my mum was in hospital and was dying and time was running out. I was desperate.

Coming to Summergrove was like... I cannot ever describe it... when they said that I had a place, a flat of my own to live in, it was the best thing ever. Summergrove is the foundation of where I am today. They became my family, there was nothing I couldn't talk to them about and they helped with so much. They also helped my son. They helped him at school and with the way he was with people. We felt so safe and secure there. In the end, they taught me how to go out into the world and live.

My idea of a good life is having peace of mind, always trying to do the right thing.

Marvin, my son, is two and a half years old and he has eczema. It used to be bad – from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. He would scratch and scratch until he was bleeding, then his cuts would get infected and he would have to be admitted into hospital. It would drive me down, just looking at him made me cry.

I tried all the medicines the doctors gave me and nothing worked. Each time, I was thinking that this time it was going to work, then two weeks later it got to how it was before or even worse.

I used to take Marvin to the library in Longsight and I met the storyteller, Ginny. She told me about Sure Start Longsight but I didn't know where it was. Then I moved house and one day I drove past it and remembered the storyteller, so I dropped in. I met a Big Life Worker who sat with me as I filled in my membership form and told me what was going on for me and my family there. The worker saw Marvin's eczema and suggested I took him to Therapeutic Services for Homeopathic treatment at the centre. Within two weeks we had an appointment.

It was amazing! Marvin's eczema started to get better just three days after the first Homeopathic treatment began. His face just looked different. He started to perspire and his skin could breathe. He is a different child now, so happy and so much stronger. He doesn't scratch and he can play like any other child. He has no bandages on his hands. When I went back to the clinic the nurses couldn't believe the difference.

My idea of a good life is being happy.

MARY

I started football coaching the way many people in this profession do – I tried out to be a footballer, and when I realised I wasn't going to make a living out of it, I came over to coaching for Manchester United's Community Coaching programme.

Around five years ago The Big Issue in the North asked Manchester United to select and train the England Team for The Homeless World Cup. Since then, I've helped select and train every England team and the project has grown bigger and bigger every year. This year we're expecting over 200 people to attend the first round of trials. Out of them, we'll select about half to come back for another set of trials, and so on until we have the final team of 8 players who will go to the tournament.

I was so nervous when I did the very first selection for the first team. I really didn't know what to expect from the people who were taking part, but I just try to accept everyone as they are. I've learnt over the years that if you give people an opportunity that they want, most people will go for it. Out of over a thousand homeless people who must have taken part in the trials since the project started I think only one or two have ever kicked off at not being selected.

A project like this opens doors for people. Players who have been part of previous England teams have gone on to do coaching themselves, been re-united with family members who happen to have seen their name in the paper – and some have gone on to play semi-professional football. But even the simple things can make a difference.

I can remember one player being really impressed when he got on a plane for the first time in his life. He spent the whole flight taking photos out of the window. I suppose one of the most lasting memories for me, though, will be when Eric, our first England captain, put on an England shirt for the final against Austria. Here was a bloke who had overcome some real problems in his own life, now wearing an England shirt, preparing to captain an England team in an international tournament. I think that moment will stay with me forever.

My idea of a good life? Good health. You can't help where you're born or what you're born with, but to be healthy in the environment that you're living in is important. When I was about 22, I went to college to study IT, because I was sick of working in rubbish jobs and wanted something more. The course went really well and I was planning to go to university when I finished, but then I went into the job centre looking for some part time employment over the summer and was told about the opportunity to do a placement with Big Life Employment doing IT support. I took the placement because I knew it would be a good experience. When the placement was over, they asked me to stay on and that's how I started working for The Big Life group.

To be honest, it wasn't like being on a placement at all, it was just like a proper job right from the start (only less money!) As soon as I started everyone was great with me, no one treated me any differently to people working there full-time. That's what I like about the people who work here, everyone's so down to earth.

About two years ago a new business called Nornir started up and the IT work in the group was contracted to them, so I moved jobs with the work. It's been really busy, since as well as all the work we do for The Big Life group, we've got organisations across Manchester that we do the IT for, like youth centres and advice centres. I'm quite a chilled out person. You've got to be when you work in IT or you'd just get stressed out and end up in hospital or on Valium or something.

I'm finally starting that university degree soon. Now I have so much experience, when I do get a degree I should have no problem finding work. I suppose I did it backwards really, getting a job first and then a degree, but it turned out pretty good. I've had a really good four or five years here. I've enjoyed it, even the crazy times. There's always a friendly face wherever you go.

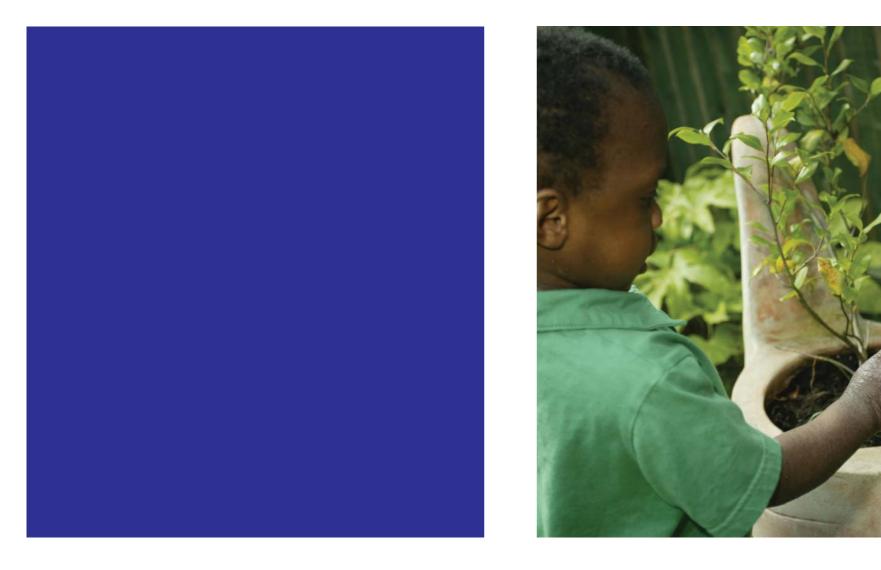
<u>What's my idea of a good life? Just to be happy. To be</u> <u>a millionaire would be nice, but as long as I'm happy that's all.</u>







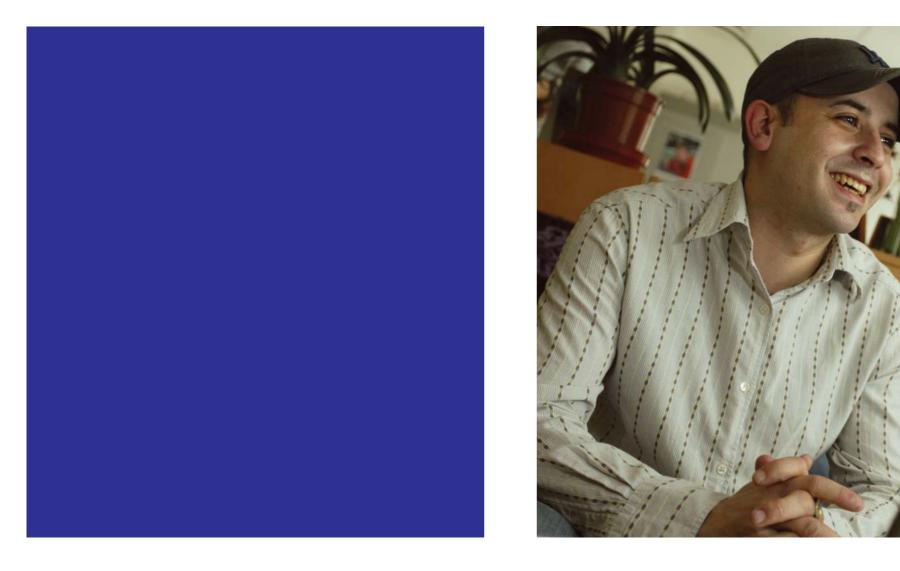












Four years ago I arrived in England from Portugal with my partner and daughter. I wanted to find somewhere for my child to play and learn about her new country. Someone told me about Sure Start Longsight, so I got a place for her at the playgroup and we started to get to know the local community. My daughter made friends and learnt to speak English.

Although I had an MSc in International Banking and Finance, I couldn't get a job as I didn't have work experience in the UK and I couldn't get a job with agencies as they didn't value my work experience in Portugal.

Then, one of the workers at Sure Start found me the opportunity to volunteer with The Big Life group's finance department and then I was offered a sixmonth training position with Big Life Employment. This was very good for me. I got good experience in terms of accountancy and I learnt to use some specialist programmes such as Sage. Now, I'm employed as a finance assistant responsible for Aisha Childcare and Big Life Employment's accounts.

Getting a job has improved our family life: we are able to set goals, we were able to buy a car and now we can get out and see what is around us. I have stability and can buy my house. Four years ago I didn't believe this was possible.

What is my idea of a good life? Being happy and loved by your friends and family.

Applying for the job with bloom was the first time I was able to write Moss Side on an application form. I had been told not to put Moss Side on my CV because of the stigma of living there. Then I saw the advert for Office Administrator for bloom. Since bloom is the healthy living network for Moss Side, Hulme, Old Trafford and Whalley Range, living in one of the areas was an advantage!

To work with people to change their quality of life has been invigorating. There was one client who'd not left her house for two years. She'd moved from somewhere else and didn't know anybody or have a job. Now she's working and has a social network. Coming to work everyday, meeting people, working for my local community – it's fab.

My idea of a good life? Being able to get up in the morning and knowing there are people that care about you. I became homeless when I was about 16, I saw my bother get murdered in front of me and after that I started drinking and taking drugs. Once you get on a road like that, it's really difficult to get off. I've been homeless, on and off, for around ten years now.

Selling The Big Issue in the North has given me a confidence boost. At the end of the day, it's a job and I'm earning money. I used to sell the magazine in Doncaster, and had to travel to buy my magazines in Leeds, but I was really pleased when they opened the office in Sheffield city centre a few years ago. It means I have much better access to the magazines and the services which are provided in the Archer Project where the magazine is sold.

This year, I started singing while I was on my pitch. People seemed to like it, well, except I got moved on from my pitch in front of the library – I think I was disturbing them! These days, I sell near the University. It's a good pitch because the students really like me, and my singing has attracted a lot of attention. I've been in the student papers and on radio because of it. It's another confidence boost – having people take an interest in you. I'm even thinking of applying for the X Factor!

I've even met my fiancée thanks to The Big Issue in the North. She used to buy the magazine off me every week and she was staying at the Salvation Army Hostel where I was also staying at the time and we really hit it off.

Now I'm off drugs and I've just moved into a new flat. It's the first time I've had my own front door in six years. It makes such a difference having a place that is just yours, where you don't have to worry about your stuff being nicked. I want to keep on rebuilding my life now.

<u>My idea of a Good Life? To have someone who cares about you</u> and to have your family around you. I first came to the Kath Locke Centre and Therapeutic Services because I wasn't well. I have MS and had recently come out of hospital. I came for massage, relaxation sessions and yoga at the centre.

Staff at the Kath Locke were really welcoming and friendly. My health improved, I could get out and about more and felt more positive about my life. Previously, I had completed a reiki course and I felt ready to study more and completed my Reiki Master. I initially used the reiki for self healing but my teacher commented I was naturally good at giving treatments so I decided to treat family and friends.

Due to my illness, I couldn't work, so I decided to put something back into the centre that had helped me improve my quality of life. I became a volunteer for Therapeutic Services, giving reiki treatments. It's great seeing the difference the reiki makes in the lives of my clients.

I have now applied for funding to run yoga classes for people with MS at the centre. In the future, I would like to set up more services for people with MS. I would also like to work and maybe get paid for giving treatments, this is something I didn't think I could do in the past.

My idea of a good Life? To be happy.

I started coming to the Sugar Group around 2001. It's not just about sugar you know, it's about your health, your blood pressure and weight, it's about people and it's about learning about other local services which might be useful. We go swimming every week, we have healthy walks and some members even go to the gym. The Sugar Group is good company, we discuss things, go on day trips, it's good to be part of a group. We get advice. It helps with both our physical and mental health.

The Kath Locke Centre is on all the bus routes and it's nearby. Everything goes on here. You can get out of the house and come here, because there's always something going on. You can have a massage and feel like a new person or do some Chi Qong which helps with your balance. Places like this – community centres - they make it much better place to live, you can get access to good advice, you can get put in contact with other people. This place is a Godsend.

What makes a good life? A bit of everything. Exercise, a good community, getting out.

WHATMAKESA GOOD LIFE ? A BT OF EVERYTHING. EXERCISE, A GOOD COMMUNITY, **MURIAL PALMER** GETTING OUT

I am so grateful to be a member of the Sugar Group. I heard about it in May 1999 from one of the staff at the Kath Locke Centre. It was the lowest time in my life because I had had a bereavement in the April.

I have found the group to be very helpful, I have learnt quite a lot and got some confidence in looking after myself. My health is good. I have also met many friends, have fun exercising and have massages. It's a great group with community spirit. Our motto is to be concerned about each other, to love and help. At 85, I am the oldest member. *My idea of a good life? To be happy.* I suffer from noises in my head. I've had these noises since I was fourteen – that's a long time, isn't it? I still get them from time to time, but since my medication changed it's been a lot better. I feel more talkative now, I feel like a normal person, a lot better, more cheerful, more like myself. I can do normal things now, like washing and cooking. My husband died last year and he was very protective of me. People said he was too protective of me, but he was just caring and I liked being protected. But now I can look after myself.

I use the mental health services at the Kath Lock Centre and I use the massage service here. Having a massage helps me relax and just fall asleep. I'd love to have it done everyday it's that nice. I have it done every Tuesday for free. I also go swimming with a support worker from the mental health service.

The trick is to keep occupied I think. Some people let themselves go. They don't do anything. And also, if you want to be well you need to listen to the doctors and nurses because they're trying to help you.

You can walk to the Kath Locke Centre from my house, although I get a taxi. The Kath Lock is lovely, it's clean and you can get a drink and something to eat here. The people are nice on the reception. I'd be lost without this place.

My idea of a good life? To have some money and just live in my house.

I came to England 28 years ago. Before that my family life was a big extended family living in Dahka, Bangladesh. My father helped lots of needy local people. He was very enlightened. He started a local school and university. Helping is in my blood.

I came to England a week after my marriage to my husband. Everything was new to me – now I was in a strange land, with a strange language, strange culture and with a strange man. And snow! I had read about Snow White and when I saw it in real life, it was so amazing I can't explain.

My husband is a professional man and when I first arrived he worked nine to five whilst I stayed at home thinking about sweet memories of home. I always tried to give my time – volunteering for the Bangladeshi Community Centre and working as a casual interpreter for the hospital. I did all the wards. Seeing a baby born brings good luck to you in my culture, they are like angels.

I heard about Sure Start Longsight and started to volunteer for them. Every time I met the team I pleaded with them 'Give me a job, give me a job'. For me, this was my cup of tea. I loved the way they worked. I could have worked somewhere else, but I wanted to work with Sure Start Longsight as it was like a family.

When I got the job at Sure Start I knew there were many challenges and we needed to build trust. My culture is male dominated and the men were concerned that we would advise their women wrongly. Firstly I had to talk to the men and often the mother in-laws and convince them that Sure Start was a safe place to learn and get help. Many people now have a better life because of our work.

We can't change lives straight away. One step, one step – slowly, slowly. I learnt never to think negatively and never to say there is no end to something – there is always a new beginning.

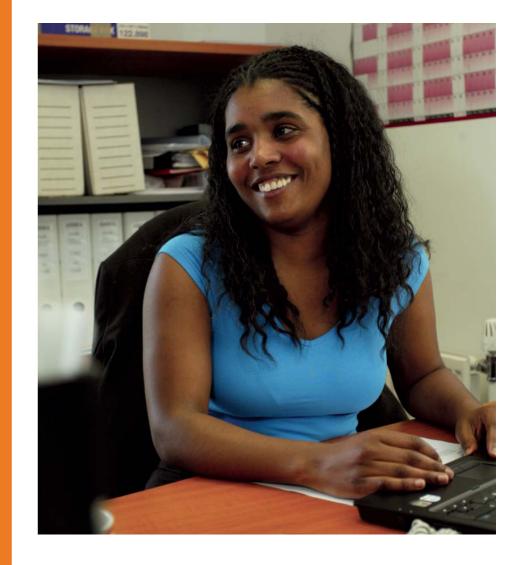
My idea of a good life is to know myself, then I can understand my community.

I was on a counselling course in Moss Side in 1994 and I met someone called Jodie. I was telling her about my personal experience of panic attacks and what little support there was. I had been to a support group in Stockport and it was really awful. I felt that if this was the only support there was – then I was in serious trouble. Jodie said I should go along to the Zion Centre and talk to Fay. I remember coming to the Zion and Fay telling me to go away and design a poster to advertise a self-help group. We printed a load off in the old Zion office and that's how we got started – a poster on anxiety.

I don't believe you get rid of anxiety, because it's a normal emotion and everyone has it, but I believe you can learn to manage it and I am getting better at it. I feel that I've become a role model for people who have mental health problems. I have proven that someone with mental health difficulties can not only operate at a high level but also deliver high quality services, commissioned by the NHS, which are held in high esteem. I got an invite to Buckingham Palace when we won the Queens Award for Voluntary Service for people who have made an outstanding contribution to their local communities.

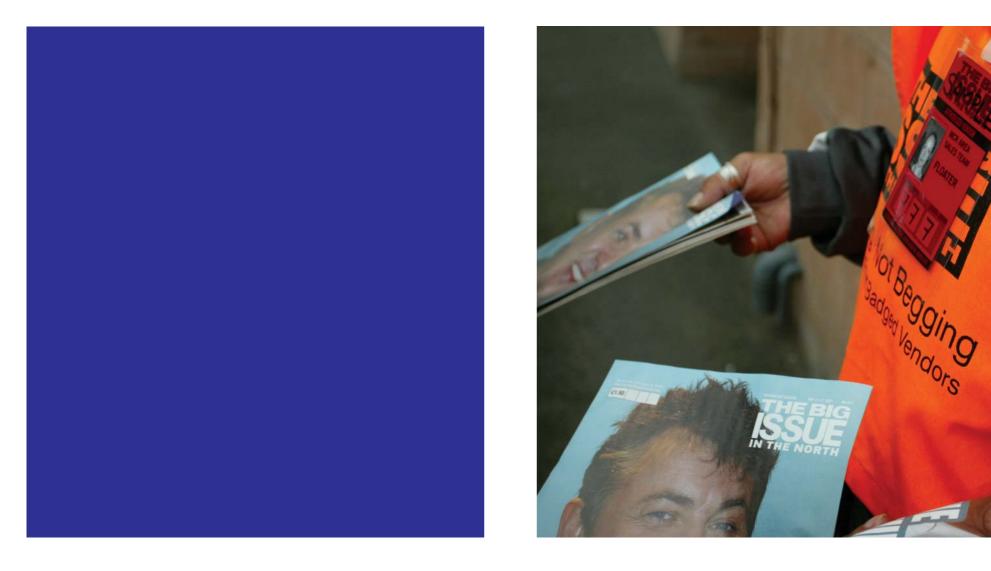
Having an anxiety disorder has never been an issue for anyone I have ever worked with in Big Life and if I had been in any other organisation I would not have achieved what I have. Valuing people and not seeing their issues and disabilities as a problem has been so important.

My idea of a good life is to be kept permanently challenged and permanently busy. I am never satisfied, I just like to keep going and going. You can never be good enough.





















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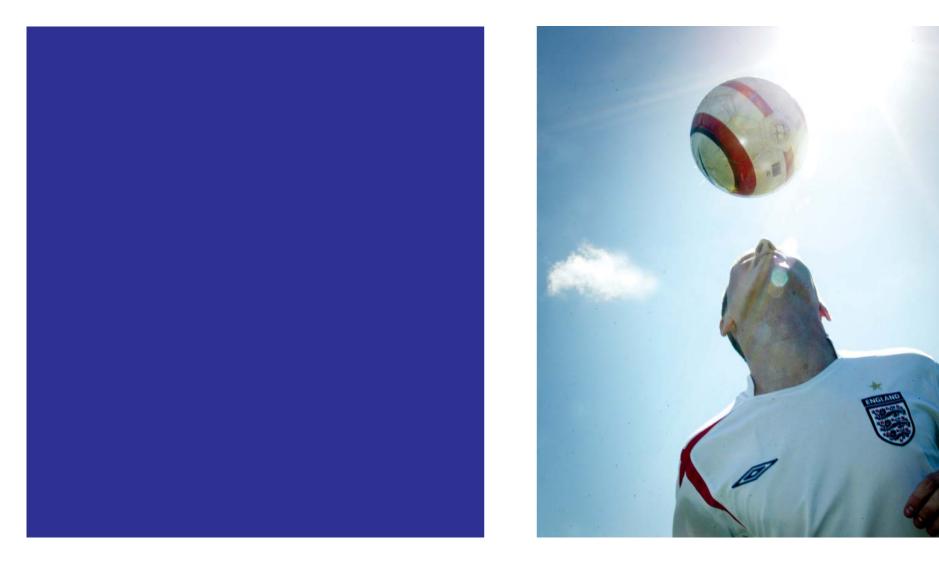




















I started working freelance for The Big Life group, looking at ways we could influence politicians and decision makers. It was a very exciting opportunity, and the Leadership Team grabbed the idea that if you spent a little time trying to influence the people high up, it can make a big difference. It was great for me because people in Big Life are so can do – they just get on with it. It's given me a lot more confidence and made me see that I can achieve a lot more. I am a naturally cautious person and meeting people who are willing to take risks was a real eye opener for me.

I joined The Big Life Board as a Non Executive Director in 2004 and it has been life changing. It's been personally challenging – to understand issues at a very complex level – and a big responsibility. It's not like a regular job where you might care a lot, but you can go home and don't feel that you don't own any part of it. If you are on the Board it's something you are responsible for.

The Big Life group gave me an opportunity to do something different at a point when I felt disillusioned about what I could do – about what I could influence. It's made me feel that what I was doing could make a difference.

Having a good life is having an interesting job, spending time with my kids and partner and having enough money to not worry about bills. I first came to Big Life Employment about four years ago, in January 2003. I didn't have much confidence, had very little work experience and my GCSE grades were below what I was expecting. I knew they didn't reflect my true abilities.

I was nervous when I first came to the office because I was worried if I was going to fit in. But BLE was brilliant, people made me feel really comfortable there and they were all really friendly. For the jobs I was looking at I needed a year or two's experience first and that's what BLE helped me to achieve.

The training we received and the courses I went on through BLE were all really good as well. I got a City and Guilds Level 3 Business Admin certificate while I was there, and I enjoyed doing the first aid course because of the way it was taught, really practical and interesting. It was the same with all the training, it wasn't just someone standing in a classroom talking, it was someone giving you practical experience, which I found easier to remember.

After a while I was given responsibly and that boosted my confidence and gave me loads of motivation. I've now got a job as a Business Administrator at MANCAT. But even after I got this job, I continued to receive support to help me settle into my new role and further develop my skills.

Now I've begun to realise my potential, it's given me the confidence to mentor others around me, in particular a BLE trainee, who I realised is facing similar hurdles to the ones I was facing. I've also sent in my application to the Greater Manchester Police force, which has been a life long ambition of mine – so fingers crossed...

My idea of a Good Life is having a good family and social life with the financial stability and the confidence to enjoy life to the full. I used to be a member of the Young President's Organisation, which was a group of business executives. We came on a visit to The Big Issue in the North office on Oldham Street in Manchester and were shown how it was helping to get people off the street through selling the magazine. After that, we wanted to do more than just fire money at it. We wanted to fund a particular project – which eventually developed into Big Life's Giving a Lift project.

Ainscough employs over 1,000 people and they don't just work for the money but for career satisfaction. The Giving a Lift project helps people get on that career ladder. We've been able to employ people who might normally find it difficult to get a job. We find them work in the community, providing basic gardening and maintenance services to local community centres and Housing Associations.

I believe everyone of us has a duty to look after those less fortunate. I've been very fortunate in my life. Sponsoring the Giving a Life project means that we can give something back. I'd like to see the project expanding with help from funding or from more businesses willing to invest in it. We're putting something into the community here, and I want to see more people involved in this.

My idea of a good life? You don't need a lot of money, but you do need your family of people who care about you; somewhere you call home; a sense of purpose and something to get up for in the morning. I came to the Zion Garden Project so I could find something to occupy my time, get to meet new people and settle into the area. It's important to come and integrate with other people in the community. To muck in.

It's good at the Zion Garden Project because you don't need to be a gardener. You meet other people in the same position as yourself. It improves your sense of self-worth. We live in such a specialised world, it feels as if everyone needs to specialise in something, now it feels like I can specialise in gardening.

Tom Lee, our tutor, knows everything there is to know about flowers, plants and vegetables. He's had life experience and he's very inspirational, so knowledgeable and he tells you this knowledge in a way you can understand.

I've developed a better understanding of horticulture since starting on the project – it was always something I was interested in but I was always very haphazard about it. Now I've been able to learn the ropes properly. The Big Life Company is a breath of fresh air after living in a society that tries to stifle individuality. They work to offer people opportunities like this, to help you think I can achieve something, I can do things, I do have an opinion and I am worth something.

Elizabeth, the project manager at the garden project also did the MIDAS minibus training with me. I passed and since then I've been the volunteer driver on garden project trip and I'm now doing some driving for other projects at the Zion.

When you move into a community you always feel a little bit isolated, but if you throw yourself into something like this you get to know people and the skills I've learnt here will hopefully mean that I'll be able to find paid employment soon.

My idea of a good life is finding your own level of contentment, its different strokes for different folks.

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WHAT'S MY DEA OF A GOOD LIFE ? JUST BE A MILLONARE GAMEAL HASSAN WOULD BE NICE, BUT AS LONG AS L'A

About six years ago I had a heart attack. I was working in IT in a really well paid job, but after the attack I wasn't able to work for a long time. I had quite a lot of surgery afterwards, which took a long time to recover from, and it was three years until I could even think about working again. The heart attack and the surgery afterwards had really taken it out of me, I didn't have any energy, I didn't have any stability because I had no income and my self esteem had really taken a knock.

I tried working in Adult Education part-time when I first went back to work, but I found it really frustrating coping with all the bureaucracy involved in teaching and it wasn't doing my health any good – I could barely manage to work two hours a week. After that, I just started cooking at home. Although that was sometimes physically hard, I found it really relaxing to do.

Throughout this time I was going to the Job Centre and signing on. I kept asking them to help me find training or help me get back to work. I said, I've got the skills, I just need some support. But they said they weren't able to help me. I felt really let down by the system that I'd spent my life believing in.

Meanwhile, my interest in cooking developed and sometime after that I heard about the café at Sure

Start Longsight. It was vacant and they needed someone to take it on and get it started again. It's a small community café, and running that helped me get back into working a full day again, while the positive feedback I got helped me regain my confidence.

While I was running the café, someone from Big Life Employment suggested that I do a work placement. That way, BLE could give me more support and structure, and help me find additional training to build on what I already knew.

Then, during one of the job search days, I saw an IT job that sounded interesting and I applied for it, not thinking I'd get it. But I did! Going back to work in IT was scary at first, I thought I might be a bit rusty. But I soon found out that I hadn't lost any of my skills and it was satisfying being back in work full time, knowing that I was still able to do the job I was doing before the heart attack.

I can honestly say that, if it wasn't for Big Life I wouldn't have had that kind of boost, which helped me want to do things again and also enabled me to do them.

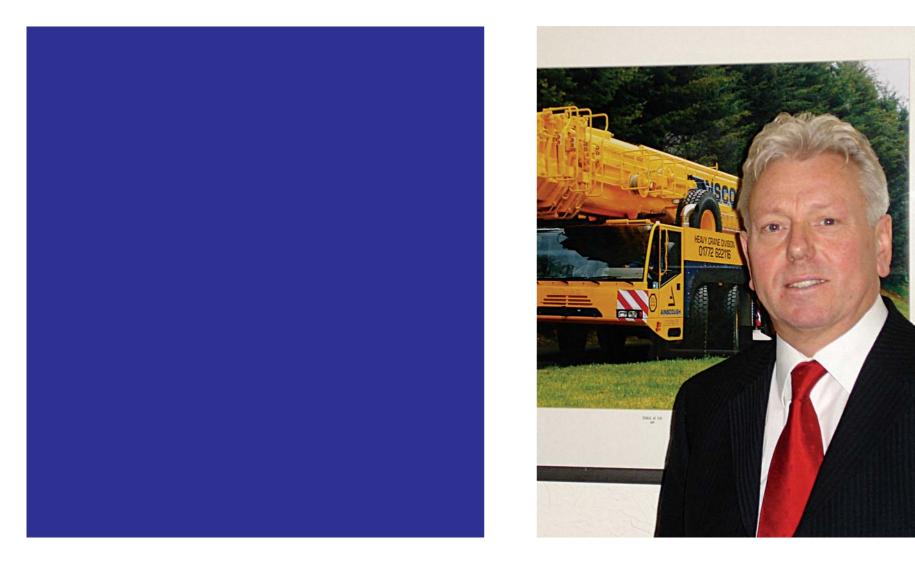
My idea of a good life? Having enough, but not too much, and being able to share it.

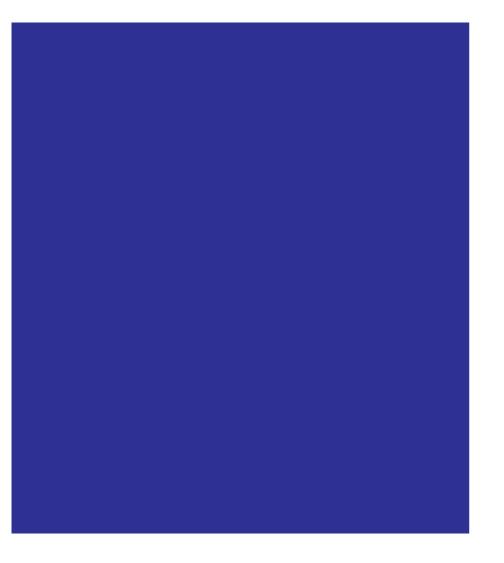




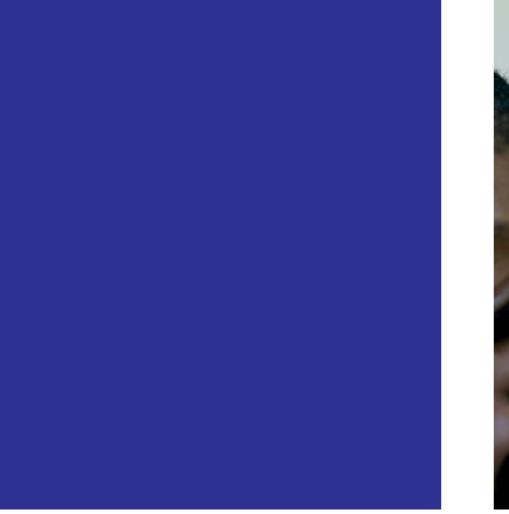


















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