

James:

As a teenager I'd always relied on being a fast runner to get me out of trouble but on an eventful day in 1985 I wasn't playing British Bulldog at Pilton school; this time I was running for my life.

Forty eight hours previously I'd been a top cadet on my course at Sandhurst. Now, however, I was being chased around a hospital by various nurses, doctors, ambulance men and security personnel who were intent on capture. I ended up being cornered down by the mortuary entrance, scared witless and completely compromised.

Minutes later I was being pinned down on a hospital bed and as I was injected in my arm I slowly faded into a life of medication and treatment at the mercy of mental health services.

I was to face adult life with the diagnosis of schizophrenia – a condition which still has the capacity to strike fear into the heart of any parent, employer, in fact most people who have had their opinions shaped by what they read and hear via the media.

In those early years, the reality of schizophrenia and its 'chemical cosh' treatment made life virtually unbearable. The side effects of maximum daily doses of a particular drug known as Clorpromazine left me unable to write or speak, my skin reacted to sunlight, my eyes rolled involuntarily back into their sockets, I was unable to even feed myself due to uncontrollable shaking, I constantly dribbled and all whilst my head was performing mental gymnastics.

I reached an important point in hospital one dark night. I can remember believing I was on the edge of an abyss, staring into the void and totally alone in a universe that was desolate and bereft of life. At this time I dug my fingernails into my palms and constantly checked for a heartbeat to try and confirm I was still in the land of the living.

It was at this moment of utter desperation that I sent up a prayer. Very simply, I asked for help, strength and guidance. No blinding light or sign from the heavens appeared before me but I recall feeling a strong presence that reassured me this was the lowest point I was ever going to reach. Knowing this was very important as I now knew that whatever trials I still had yet to face, I would survive.

My army training had left a lasting impression and I believe without self-discipline and a strong survival instinct my recovery would have taken considerably longer.

Eventually I recovered sufficiently to undertake a degree at University but still being on medication it quickly became apparent that I had bitten off more than I could chew and I left after a term.

So there I was, barely twenty and already two promising careers scuppered. However, I didn't give up and spent two summer seasons as a hotel porter, a far cry from the prestige of Sandhurst but at least I could afford to pay mum a little towards my upkeep.

Over the years I've worked for Mole Valley Farmers where I spent eleven years running the print department and have also held down several sales jobs, though I feel the greatest achievement in my employment history was the eight years I spent as a retained fireman. As you'd expect, the Fire



Service have a stringent acceptance policy with regards to health. Yet, after five medicals and an eighteen month wait, I was accepted and even went on to be part of a crew that was awarded a Chief Fire Officers Commendation.

Today, after more sectionings than I care to remember, a six month stay in a secure hospital two years ago and a successful stint as a mental health awareness trainer for WAND, the Barnstaple based mental health charity, I have decided to leave my current sales job and embark on a new chapter in my life working as a freelance mental health trainer/speaker/motivator.

Whilst working for WAND I used the media of print and radio to promote a positive view of mental illness and received much encouraging feedback. A Radio Devon programme entitled 'What Happened to James?' even went on to win a national award and I went on to establish bookings as a keynote conference and after-dinner speaker.

Over the years I've been very fortunate to have a supportive family who, together with my greatest advocate, my wife Lesley, have remained loyal despite some very trying circumstances that have tested relationships to breaking point.

Twenty years ago my future looked bleak. The prognosis back then for schizophrenics did not include being a valued and responsible member of society. Times have changed and it is now my firm intention to continue to address the prejudice, stigma and discrimination that those with a mental illness face, by going out and speaking about the reality of my experience. It will be a message of hope told with humour as one of the greatest weapons to defend one's sanity is to always try to see the lighter moments in life.

James Wooldridge, 23rd August 2005