

Mustard Tree Life Stories 2013

Since 1994, Mustard Tree have helped thousands of people from setting up a new home, to providing food for families in need to giving people work experience so they have a higher chance of moving into employment. This document contains some real life stories from people who have accessed the Freedom Project; a 20 week life skills and work readiness programme that is aimed at those who have additional barriers to moving on in life, such as homelessness, mental health issues, addiction recovery and a criminal record.

Peter L

I joined the Freedom Project because I wanted to get back into a working routine after a long period doing almost nothing. During that time I had been getting more and more depressed and I needed to break that cycle. Up until early last year, I was still planning suicide and things were pretty bleak. Since coming to Mustard Tree I have been given various opportunities to prove that I can and will work well. These have been tremendously important to me. Being trusted and valued by the people at Mustard Tree and has been of great benefit.

After 6 months as a volunteer on the project, I've now moved onto full-time hard labour: working at StandFirm, which is absolutely fantastic. From the time I first started volunteering at Mustard Tree I really hoped I could get a job at StandFirm. Now I have, and I love it – many thanks! This has changed everything. Now I have a pretty good job to go to every day and I am working with & getting to know a lot of really good people. For now I feel that I've achieved what I set out to accomplish, and I'm very happy continuing to do what I am doing for a good while!

Pauline P

I was originally on the Get Ready! programme, which was run jointly by Business in the Community and Mustard Tree. At the end of the programme I moved onto the Freedom Project because I wanted to fill my time and continue receiving support from Mustard Tree.

The most beneficial thing about being on the project has been the help and understanding I have received from the staff at Mustard Tree. It has enabled me to make a great many changes in my life.

When I first started volunteering at Mustard Tree I was an alcoholic. The Freedom Project team have provided me with a mentor, a recovered alcoholic himself, who I meet up with every week. They also referred me onto one of Mustard Tree counsellors, who I have been meeting with weekly. Thanks to these avenues of support I have now been sober for 11 months. My time at Mustard Tree has taught me to have respect for myself and for other people. It has empowered me to change my life.

For now, I'd like to keep volunteering at Mustard Tree. I have gained a lot of confidence from being here and have been inspired never to give up hope and to stay strong. With this in mind, my main hope in life is to get my kids back and have them live with me again.

Euan R

I was originally referred to Mustard Tree by Back on Track, learning centre where I gained experiences in basic skills and cooking. The Freedom Project was something for me to do; to get me out of the house and to get some further experience after a long time out of work.

The support I received from the project gave me confidence to step out of my comfort zone and push my boundaries. I gained the self-belief to look for work and to change my attitude from being someone negative to someone positive. At Mustard Tree I graduated from the 20 week Freedom Project and stayed on to become a team leader on the shop floor. I kept on taking steps forward towards my goal of getting a job...

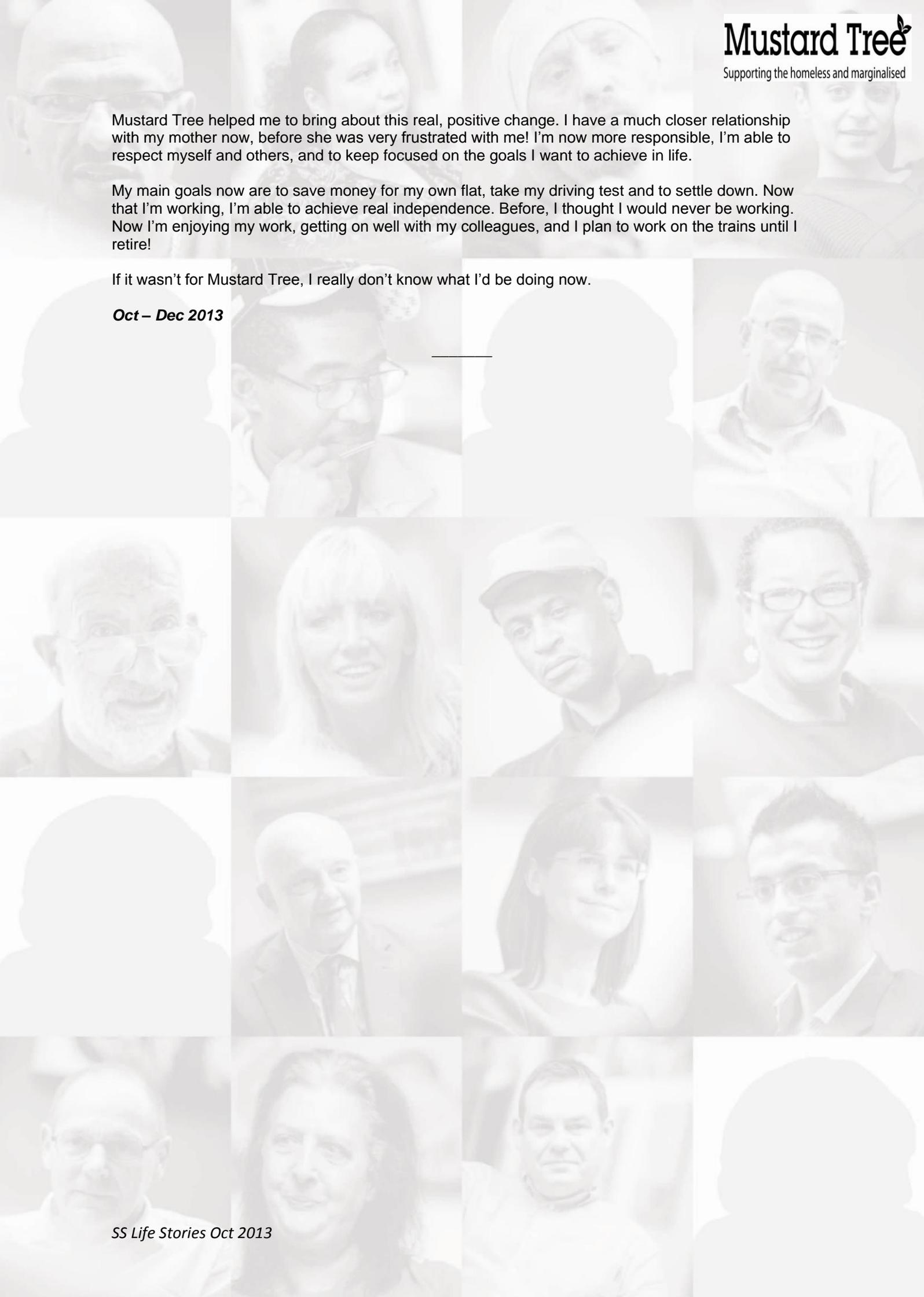
...and I did it! I'm not working on the trains with TransPennine Express as an on-board host. This involves greeting customers, serving hot drinks and refreshments and travelling across the North West. I'm using all the customer service skills I learned at Mustard Tree; getting on with people, being eager to learn, smiling and providing a great service.

Mustard Tree helped me to bring about this real, positive change. I have a much closer relationship with my mother now, before she was very frustrated with me! I'm now more responsible, I'm able to respect myself and others, and to keep focused on the goals I want to achieve in life.

My main goals now are to save money for my own flat, take my driving test and to settle down. Now that I'm working, I'm able to achieve real independence. Before, I thought I would never be working. Now I'm enjoying my work, getting on well with my colleagues, and I plan to work on the trains until I retire!

If it wasn't for Mustard Tree, I really don't know what I'd be doing now.

Oct – Dec 2013



MT

Before coming to Mustard Tree I had been through a string of major life changes. I finished my degree, my mum passed away, my mentor (who was a significant person to me) also passed away and I split up from my long-term girlfriend. I was left in a situation where I felt like I had no life. I'd been a carer, a student and a partner, and all that had gone. When you lose all the things that define you, it is an awful place to be. I was totally lost and started to look around for ways to rebuild my life. I came across the Freedom Project through the probation service. There weren't any other resources available to me, so I went for it.

Being on the Freedom Project has reinstated some good values in my life. This has started with having something to get up for in the morning. I have found that people at Mustard Tree are non-judgemental & forgiving. This is really important to me because it is very easy to be overcome by negative thinking and attitudes when you're in a vulnerable situation. I've also benefitted from the opportunities that are on offer here – both the courses that are available and the chance to do something for myself. I have been asked to produce various documents to support the work of the art department and to work alongside Graham in delivering the art classes. For me, the opportunity to use my skills and abilities to develop something that fits the purpose of Mustard Tree has given me back my aspiration and my sense of self.

Over the months, I feel that I have regained my identity. I was suffering badly from anxiety but I am no longer as anxious or stressed or self-oppressed as before the project. My behaviour was erratic and irrational when I first started here, but this has also changed. I am re-acquiring all the principles and values that I had before my life went downhill. I still drink but nowhere nearly as badly as I did a year ago: I'm no longer a danger to myself or anyone else on that front. I am a lot more flexible than before, and I'm also able to take advice from others and to negotiate with people. I am quite a persistent person and I feel like I've also regained my former resilience and some of my former self-confidence. I've acquired some aspirations and expectations for the future.

Having project work to do here is good, but it is also a means to an end. I'm not just doing the work here for other people, I'm also aware of the benefits to myself. It is a way of getting me grounded again without exploiting others or being exploited. My main aim is to be a more rounded person again without being self-absorbed. One of my objectives is to get the kiln project up and running at Mustard Tree. Meanwhile we are also developing the work of Mustard Tree art department by getting ourselves prepared to have our art courses accredited. This will enable people who need help to get some education. I am a big believer in the power of education.

Mike M

Some time ago Mustard Tree helped me out with food, a sleeping bag and clothes after a period of homelessness. This gave me the idea of getting involved so that I could help others in a similar situation.

Since joining the project I have found that I've also received help and support as a volunteer. Being around people who've had an understanding of my mental health issues from the start has helped me to rebuild my life. The support and advice I've received at Mustard Tree during my on-going battle with mental ill-health has really helped me, as has meeting others with similar problems who have managed to struggle through.

Part way through my volunteering at Mustard Tree I was admitted to hospital as a result of my mental health issue. Being able to return to volunteering after this was an enormous help to me. I've also been able to access counselling through the project, which has helped me to explore my issues and is giving me the tools I need to get back on track. Throughout my time at Mustard Tree, the staff have shown tremendous belief in my capabilities. This has been another good source of encouragement and strength.

Before I began volunteering on the Freedom Project I had a deep-rooted fear of new situations, and of being around crowds and new people. My experiences at Mustard Tree have helped me to overcome that fear. I have also greatly increased my confidence with day to day tasks and living. Things that I would choose to hide away from previously, I now tackle with confidence. In turn, this has boosted my

self-esteem and my belief that I can achieve goals that previously didn't seem possible. Specifically, I have now enrolled on a university degree course, something I didn't envisage doing before.

As a result of taking part in the Freedom Project, my aspirations have grown and been transformed massively. My main goal now is to complete my degree, which I never would have started before joining the Freedom Project. I would also like to have continued involvement with Mustard Tree in some way. Personally, I have also increased in confidence regarding my own ideas, and I am continually working towards beating my mental health problems.

BB

I joined Mustard Tree to gain work experience and to build up my confidence, having not worked for several years. At Mustard Tree I joined the office work stream and gained experience serving customers on the reception desk. I was also trained how to operate the phones and to deal with incoming calls regarding furniture collections.

Alongside this, I also attended the weekly job club and received support with looking for work. I updated my CV and received help with thinking through the types of work I would like to go into. I received one-to-one advice around the job seeking process, including how to succeed in an interview scenario. This, combined with the practical experience of working in the office, provided me with the confidence to look for work. It also boosted the confidence I had in myself.

One week, as part of the job club, we visited a careers fair in the city centre. I was interested in customer service roles and approached a number of employers that interested me. I really connected with the employees at the Starbucks stand, who were looking to recruit new staff for their city centre coffee shops. The following week I had an interview and was offered a full time role!

I now work for a Starbucks coffee shop and have been trained as a barista. I have learned to manage busy and potentially stressful situations. I really enjoy serving customers and putting a smile on their faces. I love the fact that I'm now getting up and going to work - and feeling good about myself!

Jul – Sep 2013

David I

I joined the Freedom project so I could meet more people and so that I could put some of my skills to good use. It really helps me to meet different people from different backgrounds, rather than just the same faces where I live. I also like the fact that Mustard Tree is a Christian organisation. There are a lot of people worse off than me, some without a roof over their head, and I wanted to help those kinds of people however I could.

Being on the Freedom Project and interacting with customers every day has built up my customer service skills very quickly. I was quite nervous at the start and didn't know what to do, but I've been trained up in my customer service role, which has made me a lot more confident and able to help people.

I have also made lots of good relationships with my colleagues at Mustard Tree – the people here are really friendly and helpful. Suzi, my mentor, also helps when she comes in to see me each week. She is very supportive and helps with my confidence. I find her really approachable and she manages to communicate at the right level.

A judge once told me that I was a danger to the public. Now I'm face to face with the public, helping them regularly and proving who I *really* am to the powers that be. It is all helping me to be more ready for moving on and also for getting a job. My experience here will make me much more ready for a career. It will also help me to get out of the environment where I'm currently living, by showing the doctors and managers what I'm capable of.

HT

I suffered domestic violence over a ten-year period at the hands of my partner, the father of my youngest three children. He used to drink heavily and take out his aggression on me. Because of this I smoked a lot of cannabis, which I felt was the only way I could cope with the violence. As a result of the drink, drugs and violence at home, my children were put on the at-risk register. I realised that the situation could even cause me to lose my children, so within 18 months I left my partner, reduced the amount of cannabis I smoked and accepted support from organisations such as Sure Start, Family Intervention and Social Services.

However, due to everything that had happened, I fell into depression and found it difficult to get out of it. A friend recommended the Freedom Project to me, as he thought it would be good for me to get out of the house and do something with my time. I was a nervous wreck at first, scared about interacting with other people and speaking to customers. I thought I wouldn't stay for more than a few days, but I'm glad to say I proved myself wrong.

Before I started volunteering, I only ever left the house to take my children to school or go to the shops. I felt depressed, and my relationship with my children wasn't great because I wasn't doing anything for myself. Now I have more motivation than ever before: I am volunteering four mornings a week and I also help with the soup run on Friday nights. My relationship with my children has improved immensely thanks to doing something for myself. This not only makes me happy, it also rubs off on the kids.

As I have become more confident and have started saying yes to things, I can see a fuller life ahead of me. I've stopped using cannabis altogether and on top of all this I've made lots of new friends from Mustard Tree. I not only socialise with them, but I'm able to involve my children in that too.

Matt R

I have a condition called keratoconus, which means I'm registered blind. I've had 2 corneal grafts to try to make it better, but my vision is still bad. A charity called Henshaw's Society for Blind People have worked with me, and they referred me to Mustard Tree. I was asked if I wanted to volunteer on the Freedom Project, and as things weren't going well for me at the time I thought it might help. I wanted see how I got on with a new kind of work with my eye condition. On top of this I had a bad gambling problem, and I wanted to try to get my life back on track for the sake of my kids. I figured that Mustard Tree might be able to help me to sort my head out and better myself.

Since I started volunteering nearly a year ago, I've benefitted from a few different things. Firstly, Mustard Tree staff don't judge people on their backgrounds and it was good for me to be given a second chance. My life was in a dark place when I first started, and although I've made mistakes along the way, the people at Mustard Tree have stood by me and given me another chance. People there will always make time to see me if I need a chat about anything, and some of the team have spent a lot of time listening to me and giving support. Attending counselling sessions at Mustard Tree has also really helped me. I was in a very bad state and I don't even know if I'd still be here if it wasn't for counselling with Melanie. She has helped me a great deal.

More recently I've had a placement with StandFirm, Mustard Tree social enterprise. I feel that I have something to offer there and that I'm appreciated for what I do, which has really boosted my confidence. My confidence has also grown through attending the drama group. I'm soon going to be performing with them at a Mustard Tree event and then at the art gallery in Manchester. There's no way I'd have performed in public before I started volunteering at Mustard Tree.

Since starting on the project, I feel like I've matured a lot. I used to put myself in stupid predicaments, but now I tend to think more and I try to prevent myself from getting into similar situations. I've also changed my views on homeless people. I used to be judgemental, but now I see where they're coming from. I've learned not to make a judgement of someone based on somebody else's opinions: it is much better to meet people yourself and make your own mind up. Another positive is that I no longer gamble. In fact, the last time I was in a bookie's was when I went to help another volunteer get themselves banned there! I primarily stopped gambling because of my children, but seeing the same problem in someone else really opened my eyes to what I was doing.

I am hoping for a number of things in future. I certainly don't intend to go back into the dark hole that I was in before, and I hope to build on all the good things I've been doing since I started at Mustard Tree. I want to sort out the situation with my kids and to get at least partial custody of them. I also want to be able to promote the services that Henshaw's and Mustard Tree give, because both organisations have given so much to me. I'd also like to get a job with StandFirm, but in the long-term I'd like to be a counsellor. Having been through such bad experiences and come out the other side, I believe I'd make a good counsellor and would be able to help others.

Apr – June 2013

E

I joined the Freedom Project because I wanted to gain some experience of working in the UK, which is something I've never done. I also wanted to gain some self-confidence and to meet some new people.

Mustard Tree is a good environment where everyone shows respect, and the time I have spent here has helped me in many ways. I am much more lively and confident than I was – before I was very quiet and nervous. I can clearly see the change in myself: I have a lot of confidence in myself that I didn't have before, meaning I can do things that I wasn't able to do previously. And if there's something I don't know, there's always someone who I can ask for help.

I've met some good people here, and the work itself is enjoyable. The routine of coming to work has really helped – I get up at 6am now and I'm usually in work for 8. I look forward to coming into Mustard Tree.

My main hope for the future is to find a job. The Ready for Work club and the support I have with looking for a job has been very valuable. I enjoy working at Mustard Tree and I hope to go into working in customer services or something similar – somewhere I can work with people. Right now I'm feeling excited and positive about it.

Mark

Six years ago I was addicted to heroin and crack cocaine. I was homeless for 11 months and sleeping rough behind Manchester University, or sometimes in a hostel or on a friend's sofa. During this time I was stealing to fund my habit and consequently I was in and out of prison. In total I've been in prison for over 2 years and have been through several rehab and detox programmes. Eventually, while in jail, I realised I'd had enough, and that I didn't want to be an addict any longer.

I joined the Freedom Project as I was finding it hard to get into work. I came across Mustard Tree on the internet as a place to get voluntary experience and something to put on my CV. I was going crazy at home doing nothing, so to get out and just do something has been great. Joining the project has kick-started me into looking for work. I'm now getting up at 6.30am and I'm meeting new people. The project has got me doing something positive again and has started to open some doors.

I'm more confident now that I'll move into work. I know that if I keep putting the effort in I'll get to do the work that I want to. Not having regular work meant that I was stuck in a rut before and I was giving up on life. Now, I'm itching to get a job! Through the job club I'm getting a Construction Skills Health and Safety (CSCS) certificate, and I'm about to start a construction work placement. Eventually though, I'd love to be a drug and alcohol support worker.

I don't want the lifestyle that I previously had. I'd prefer to be skint from paying a mortgage, with a small car in my driveway, and for my son to see me working.

Roy H

I spent about a year living on the streets, during which time I used to eat at Mustard Tree's soup runs. Soup runs were about the only time that I was able to eat. I got to know a lot of the volunteers from Mustard Tree, and they told me about the Freedom Project and that it could help me get back on my feet. I realised I didn't have anything to lose: I get on with people and I wanted to help others as well as myself.

In my old job I was bullied by my manager and I wasn't able to deal with it very well. He squashed the confidence out of me. When I started volunteering at Mustard Tree I was really quiet and wouldn't say much, but now my confidence is back and I am happy again. Since becoming a Freedom Project volunteer, I have also managed to get myself off the streets and into my own flat.

Being in Mustard Tree garden was my favourite volunteering activity as I love being out in the fresh air, working with my hands, and chatting with the other volunteers. I was asked to supervise new

volunteers in the garden, which gave me a real boost as it made me feel wanted and valued as a volunteer. I really enjoyed looking out for people and guiding them.

I found the job club interesting, and I also accessed a number of employment programmes through Mustard Tree and Business in the Community. Visiting different organisations as part of these programmes was really good for me: speaking to people from all different types of backgrounds helped build my confidence back up. As a result of all this, I am now in part time employment. I'm hoping to increase my hours, but to still have time to volunteer at Mustard Tree, as I want to help the people who helped me.

Jan – Mar 2013