

Mustard Tree Life Stories

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.

“B”

“I joined Mustard Tree to gain work experience and build up my confidence since not having worked for several years. At Mustard Tree I joined the office work stream and gained experience in customer service on the reception desk. I was also trained on how to operate the phones and dealing with incoming calls to book-in furniture collections.

I attended the weekly job club and got support with looking for work. I updated my CV and got support with thinking through the type of work I would like to go into. I also received 1:1 advice around the job seeking process and about interviews and how to succeed. 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 I was interested in. I really connected with the employees at the Starbucks stand who were looking for new staff for their city centre coffee shops. The next 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 face. I love the fact that I’m now getting up and going to work - and feeling good about myself.”

“M”

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, starting 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 use my skills and abilities to develop something that fits the purpose of the Mustard Tree has given me back my aspiration and my sense of self.

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 the 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.

"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 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 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. In particular, I have now enrolled on a university degree course, something I didn't envisage before.

As a result of taking part in the Freedom Project, my aspirations have grown and transformed massively. My main goal now is to complete my degree, which 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 confidence regarding my own ideas, and I am continually working towards beating my mental health problems."

July – September 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 lovely 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.”

“M”

“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 two 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 job 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 me and my son to see me working.”

“R”

“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’m happy again. Since becoming a Freedom Project volunteer, I have also managed to get myself off the street and into my own flat.

Being in the 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 of 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 have helped me. "

April – June 2013

