

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.

Emily

When I was told by my Job Centre Advisor that they were going to send me on another placement, I was not looking forward to it. In the past I had hated work placements as they were all pretty boring. Back in September I spent a month with Learn Direct and they sent me to Mustard Tree on placement. I enjoyed it, and when I finished with Learn Direct I took the opportunity of joining Mustard Tree's 20-week Freedom Project. I found it was really good for my work experience, especially as my main goal was to get a job.

It was a real boost to my confidence when I asked to join the project, as everyone thought I had done a great job in my first month. I was volunteering as part of a small team in the office on the help desk. This involved manning the busy phones, sorting out enquires and keeping the collections and deliveries on track, which is no small task once the lines start getting busy. But ensuring the Mustard Tree vans all go to the right place with the right items at the right time is crucial to the work of the charity.

My time at the Mustard Tree was short, as I now have a full time job in which I am able to use the skills I picked up there. My new role, which I just started (November 2014) also involves answering phones and helping customers with their enquiries.

I not only enjoyed my experience at Mustard Tree, but I have also met some really nice people, gained new skills and gained a job out of it! What more could I have asked for?

James

I joined the Freedom Project simply for something to do. All I did was smoke cannabis all the time and I wanted a change. Since starting at Mustard Tree I've been involved with a lot of things here, including the job club, circuit training and volunteering in the shop. Going to counselling has been especially good for me, as has meeting all the good people at Mustard Tree.

I'm a much calmer person now than I used to be – I don't get wound up as easily. My self-confidence and self-belief have really grown too. I enjoy my time at Mustard Tree, especially working in the shop and dealing with customers. It has been a good experience for me – the best move I ever made.

If you'd have asked me before the project what the future held for me, I would have said: "Nothing." Now life is changing for the better. I've started to going to church and to an Alpha course, and I'm looking forward to attending the customer services course next month. I'm also hoping to get my own flat and find a paid job at some point.

Jane

The Mustard was originally recommended to me by an agent in Remploy. She said that she had worked there for two weeks when she initially started working for Remploy and that Mustard Tree had a range of things to do. She felt that they may be able to provide me with some current work experience.

I initially approached a worker in the Ready for Work Club at Mustard Tree. I was on Jobseekers Allowance and was seeking help to find work and update my CV. I was also hoping to gain work experience in order to put myself in a more favourable position for finding work. I was shown around the Mustard Tree invited to join the Freedom Project.

Before I joined the Freedom Project I just wanted to be able to leave my home and have a safe welcoming place to go, something that was realised at Mustard Tree. On the project I enjoyed meeting new people, many of whom were going through problems similar to my own. I no longer felt socially isolated and I know that I have grown as a person as a result of being at Mustard Tree.

I am pleased to say that I have now found a full time job, working at Manchester Metropolitan University as a customer service adviser. The role involves supporting new students in their accommodation, and I'm really enjoying it. While I now hope to stay in employment for the next twenty years, I am also focused on maintaining my wellbeing by creating a healthy balance between my work and home life.

'AB'

The weekly job club first got me interested and through the door. I was signing on at the Job Centre and I was finding it hard to get work. I also wanted to volunteer my time and do something positive. The Freedom Project was a good way to do both. My main aim was to find work and save enough money to return to live with my father in Jamaica.

I had not had work for several of years. Volunteering on the project built up my confidence again. I found that staying at home in your own four walls can imprison you. Being on the project, I realised that getting up and having discipline did me good, physically and mentally.

Through the project I got one-to-one support around budgeting as I had never properly looked at my finances before! This helped me to focus on where I could save money. I also had the opportunity to meet a mentor each week, who helped talk through how I was getting on and kept me focussed on my goal of gaining work.

Since starting the project my confidence has grown '1000%'. I now believe I can do things, whereas before I was always questioning my ability. My mental health and eating habits have improved, and I've learned to discipline myself in order to make life better. Through the project there was a network of people who supported and cared for you, which made me feel stronger.

I left the project after only eight weeks, as I managed to get a job. I'm now working for Viridor, at a recycling plant. There's lots I gained from Mustard Tree which I use in the role. It's still a challenge – it's physical work and I have an hour's journey each day.

However, I've learned to have a positive attitude and enthusiasm for all that I do, and to take the positivity that I've seen from others and make it an everyday part of my life.

After a long time of being out of work, I'm now able to save up for my future and to return to join my dad in Jamaica. He's not well and I can't wait to be with him.

'JC'

I left prison in January following an unstable lifestyle. I had been in care since the age of 7 and I was drinking a lot and getting into trouble. I wanted some meaning back in my life; to feel more positive about myself and to achieve something.

I've benefitted from the fact that I have progressed since coming to Mustard Tree. I'm approachable and people can talk to me, and now I've been successful in application as Volunteer Team Supervisor. Seeing a Mustard Tree counsellor has also helped me to talk about things that I hardly ever mention, which has put my mind much more at ease.

After five months on the Freedom Project I am looking more towards the future rather than just living day by day. I'm no longer a heavy drinker – I was using drink as a coping mechanism, but no longer feel that I need to do that. I have had positive feedback from people at Mustard Tree, from my probation officer and from my key worker at NACRO, where I live. My family members can also see a change. I'm closer to them now, and I'm a much more positive person.

Previously I felt that whatever I did would go wrong, so there was no point even trying. I no longer think like that; I've had to change how I think due to the consequences of my drinking and offending behaviour. I'm still unsure what my long-term aim is, but I'm very willing to try new things. I'm optimistic about getting a job, either short-term or permanent.

I'm also hoping to get a new place to live where I can start afresh and keep building stronger bonds with my relatives. I intend to keep speaking more openly to the people I'm close to about how I'm doing, rather than just putting on a brave face like I learned to do in care.

I'm thankful for the support I'm getting from Mustard Tree.

'JE'

It was time for me step out and do something to overcome my depression, gain a routine of work and overcoming my social anxiety, a tall order for anyone. Initially I came to the Mustard Tree to offer my services at their Job Club and was pointed in the direction of the Freedom Project which turned out to suit me better. I wanted to get back into employment after being out of work for a number of years and a positive step was volunteering. This way I could help others and help myself gain work experience.

To be honest I was anxious, but the friendly atmosphere, non-judgmental attitude of the staff and volunteers, has brought me encouragement and has helped me to achieve a lot more than I was expecting. I have gained confidence and my future is looking brighter.

I have made new friends and now have gained hope for my future. Being a part of the Freedom Project has opened new opportunities for me; this last month I took part on a Business Administration course with Skills and Work Solutions, I gained work experience at Manchester Metropolitan University. I have met new people and one of my colleagues even showed me how to cook Chinese.

I attended a motivational course with i2i which has encouraged me to reach for my goals. I have refreshed my skills and gained confidence to apply for three suitable positions, including a volunteer supervisor, assistant manager at the Mustard Tree and an assistant administrator at the Manchester Metropolitan University.

Through my short time at the Mustard Tree I realise that I already have skills and experience, I just need to regain my confidence. I am now not only looking for any job, but one that will give me time to put something back into my community. I hope that more people will become aware of the work of the Mustard Tree and want to get involved.

Anthony



I joined the Freedom Project because I was interested to find out how it worked. My main motivation was to try and find a job, as I haven't had paid work for ten years now.

I really enjoy working all the time instead of sitting at home doing nothing. As well as the work, the job club and the different courses have been good for me. I've studied English, I.T. and gained a Level 1 certificate in Warehousing and Storage. The people around me at Mustard Tree are great: I love working here and I've learned a lot.

When I first started volunteering I worked on the warehouse team and then moved onto the Facilities Management Team. Now I am the Team Supervisor for the Facilities Management Team, which involves helping new volunteers to learn the different tasks they need to do. I get on well with the other volunteers and enjoy the responsibility. However, I'm still trying to find that job! As much as I love it here, I really want to find paid work.

John

At the end of last year I felt like I was being pressurised more and more by the Job Centre. It caused me a great deal of frustration and anxiety, but it also served to get me moving, specifically by looking for the opportunity to do some volunteering. The Mustard Tree offered me what I was looking for: the experience of being in a supportive working environment. I am now 38 and I've never had a proper job. I want to provide for my children and ensure they get the start in life that I missed out on. I was having a conversation with my oldest son in which I was encouraging him to get into employment. My 8 year old son overheard and asked me, 'How come you don't have a job, dad?'

I started on the Freedom Project in mid-January and it has changed my outlook on life. In short, I thought I had problems, until I came here! I've been volunteering in the shop, and it's not just about assisting people with their purchases. It has been more about listening to their stories and being a part of the solution that the Mustard Tree can offer to meet their needs. Working in the shop alongside Mustard Tree staff has enabled me to grow both in confidence and in understanding other people.

For the last 2½ years I've had a serious offence hanging over my head, waiting for that call from the courts. My positive start at Mustard Tree and the enjoyment of volunteering had pushed this thought to the back of my mind... until I got the notification I was dreading! Johnny, the Freedom Project manager, was very supportive through this process and wrote a touching letter of support. In the end the case was dropped because of insufficient evidence. This has been another weight off my shoulders since I started volunteering.

In my short time being here I have managed to get my CSCS card, which allows me to get work on building sites. Before starting I had tried to get my card but never passed: having other people around me who really believe in me has been the boost I needed. I have also signed up with 12 different agencies and I feel like I am ready for work. At the end of March, through the Mustard Tree Job Club, I was offered a Ready for Work placement with Carillion

Construction. I am not even half way through my 20 weeks with the Freedom Project and already so much has happened to improve my life. My goal is to get a paid job, which looks now much more realistic.

