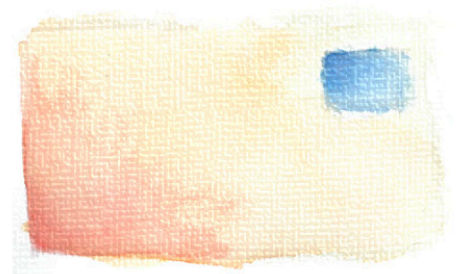
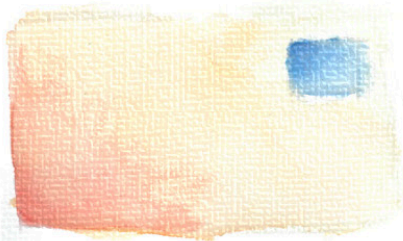


Sometimes I write letters



Cover Art:

Lucia Veitch

Lucia is a Year 12 student from Ōtepoti / Dunedin who has a strong interest in design, photography and painting. Inspired by an idea floated by the story teller, Lucia responded to “Sometimes I write letters” by drawing on the more ethereal quality of watercolour to similarly float the cover image.

Figure 22. Watercolour envelopes appear to float behind a white page with the title of the narrative *Sometimes I write letters*, written in Zaphino font, as if carefully hand written.

Sometimes I write letters

Dear Reader,

First of all, I want to let you know that my story talks about hard things, but they are things that are important to say.

I am not impressed with what happened with me, nor am I happy with the actions of my rapists. It has made me very upset and angry. My abusers took advantage of me when I was a child and I lost my innocence because of it. It is unfair how my abusers did this. I was raped several times. I remember, on one occasion, I had gone over to the netball courts and was playing with one of my sisters and a friend. I felt thirsty so I went to get a drink of water. That’s when he came up to me and told me we were going for a walk. We went for a long walk through the school, past the park, over the bridge, through the rugby grounds and over a few steps. He then attacked me, making my friend (who he had also taken with us) watch while he raped me. I would have hated to be the person who had to watch.

He was 16 years old and I was only seven. I have had more experiences like this as a child and I am not impressed. In fact, I am quite saddened by how people could choose to hurt other people as a path for life.

There is a part of me that still feels hurt because my Mum and Dad were not able to protect me from my abusers as they didn’t see it coming. But I know that it’s not their fault. I guess my abusers were good at playing the deception card.

Because of my abuse, I have found it very hard to live and do things that your average person should be able to do like working, going outside of the house alone for a longer time, socialising, and having a stable mood. It’s so annoying and frustrating because one day I can be fine and the next I can feel way down. I have had a very unhappy childhood because of my abusers and they have affected my relationships with others and my

relationship with my physical and mental health. I am trying to do my best but I have had many challenges to face over the years because of what happened. I hope that no one who reads this story has the same thing happen to them.

My relationship with the opposite gender has been a struggle. I find it hard to trust men because I worry they might hurt me like my abusers did. That is so annoying too because I want a relationship. I am not really in the space to be with someone right now, but one day I would like to find the right person for me. I would like to have a family and be with someone who makes me feel safe. I would love to be able to be married at one of the Temples of our Church somewhere. I would also love to have children. It would be nice if we were able to live on a farm with animals.

My relationship with God has helped me to keep moving, even though my abusers hurt me. Involving God in my life has made things a lot easier for me. He has been that extra person I am able to turn to when things get tough.

My pets are also God's beautiful creations which have been helpful to me in many, many ways. They have all made me feel better when I felt sad about what my abusers did to me. They have also given me an excuse to go for a walk, distract myself and have given me company when I need it. They have looked after me, helped me feel alright and have given me a reason to not kill myself when I have felt really down. I have always been able to turn to them to feel happier.

It is also good to find things you are good at and that you enjoy. This gives us something to turn to when we are having a hard time – it gives us enjoyment and bridges a gap in our lives. Sometimes those of us who have intellectual disabilities can find relationships get strained very easily. This is because we do not always understand what someone is saying or intending to do with their actions, and if we don't understand, how are we actually supposed to figure it out?

Past hurts have made things difficult for me, but I want you to know that it doesn't have to determine who you are and what happens in your life. I know my story won't be the same as yours. We all have our own battles, feelings and experiences. But here are a few things I have learnt that might help you.

I want you to know that abuse is not your fault and you don't deserve all the pain and hurt. But I know it makes you wonder why me? This can make you feel sick, angry, hurt, lonely, trapped, stuck, unloved and unappreciated. I want you to carry on, keep loving yourself and get good sleep!

Not everyone is happy with the opposite gender and can find it hard to embrace a relationship with the opposite sex. For me, because of my religion I would hope not to ever turn to the same sex or bisexuality. It would shame my parents and my God. I would never want to feel like I had done the wrong thing and turn the opposite to what I have been taught while I was growing up. It's just not for me. But if you want to be in a relationship with someone of the same sex, that's up to you. Just try to be with someone who is from a good background, is trustworthy and safe.

I want you to know that bad mental and physical health isn't your doing, it's just part of life sometimes. But there is a lot you can do to help yourself and get support. Mental and physical health is a part of you and helps to make you who you are. So just try your best to live a life that you are happy with. Being close to your family, pets, and God can help you overcome these things.

When I feel sad, or get reminded about my abusers, I also try and write letters. It helps me to let everything out. It might help you too.

Key Messages

It's a hard story to hear, but it's a positive story

- We appreciate the way the letter writer warned us before beginning her story. It was just one of the many ways we thought she was cared for people who are going to read the story.
- This is important story for everyone. Not just for people with a learning disability. When you are listening to anyone's story, you take on what they are saying. How it might be like for you. It is important for everyone to put themselves inside of this story.
- Even though the Storyteller was writing about rape and the impact that it had had on her life, we felt the story was a letter of hope, especially to people who had been sexually assaulted.

Sharing stories is what we do at People First

- Battling with feeling angry, hurt, lonely, trapped, struggling with relationships and not being able to do things most people are able to do, are feelings people with a learning disability recognise.
- The story gives practical advice from someone who feels familiar to us. When other people with a learning disability hear it, they will get something out of it - and think through on their life journey and know how this will support them.
- Listening to other people's stories and offering advice is the way people with a learning disability support each other. It is what we do in People First - Share things that I have been through as a way of being supportive of other people who might have had similar experiences. It encourages people on their own life journey.
- The Storyteller trusted us with her private story. We don't get many invitations to talk and think about private things like this. "People and journalists talk about us, but we don't get to talk about our own stories in of our own community.
- We wonder whether not wanting to share personal stories is because of the shyness of people with a learning disability or that the culture around us telling us our stories aren't important. Maybe it's a bit of both.
- This story is important to hear because it is the story of a woman with a learning disability – and not someone else. We are the experts in our own lives.

Taking control of your recovery makes it easier

- This letter has important messages for people with a learning disability who have been abused. Most especially that abuse is not your fault. Abuse is about the person doing it – not the person who has been abused.

- We liked that the letter started with the writer's anger. I am not impressed she says. We also thought;
- It was important the letter writer had a plan. She knows what to do. We thought that taking control of her recovery meant that she was not a victim.
- It is important for people with a learning disability who have been abused to hear that recovery takes time - and work – and the right people to support you. It is ongoing. It is always. Professionals can't just fix it quickly.
- It is just as important for people with a learning disability to hear that every day is a new day. The letter writer wants us to know past abuses don't define you.
- We noticed the letter writer followed her own advice – by loving herself by continuing to love and care for others. She stayed close to her family, walked and loved her pets, talked to her God and she wrote letters that might help others.
- We thought that the key message in the letter was to know you have the right people in your life. We think the right people (to have) in your life are; strong, trusted, intimate, loving and caring.
- We also noticed that the letter writer thought finding a partner who was good and trustworthy and safe was important. We heard it in other stories too like Tipa looking for his toka (a rock) and the way the Storyteller in I've got this chance now described his mum as being his rock too.

I would like to have a family and be with someone who makes me feel safe. It is so annoying because I want a relationship.

- We thought it was important the letter writer told us that she still wanted to find a loving partner and to have an intimate relationship, despite her deep mistrust of men. It was just that the things that had happened to her that made it hard to get these things. Abuse doesn't stop you wanting things for yourself. We thought that wanting a relationship was (and yet at the same time was not) a very ordinary hope she held for herself.
- We also noticed that, like many of the Storytellers, the letter writer wanted to have children and to bring up a family. She wanted to be a mum. She would have been a good mum - but we don't think it is going to happen for her.

Everyone will take something out of it that means something to them

- One of the best things about the letter is that it speaks directly to people who have had a similar experience. It tells them that you are not alone and to know that it can happen to anyone's life.

- Although people with a learning disability are often abused and sexually assaulted, they are almost never supported by other people with a learning disability who have had the same experience.
- We could all think of someone we would like to give the letter to – Some were disabled and some were non-disabled. We also thought;
- It would be a good letter for men to read. It would be especially useful for men who were trying to recover from being an abuser in their past.
- It's a letter to the whole community. Even though the writer knew it was not her mum and dad's fault, she couldn't help feeling hurt no one was able to protect her. No one saw it coming.

What do you think?

Post script

- On second listening, the letter was still hard to hear (especially at the start) but it did get easier. We wondered if that was because we had had the chance to talk about it together as a group.
- After listening to the story again, we decided that it was a sad letter, made even sadder by the matter of fact way the story is told. We thought the letter writer was a kind and thoughtful person who did not deserve the story she had to tell.
- We asked ourselves, well how does a person with a learning disability get the support they really need then? We took four lessons from the story that we think are important for services to hear;
 - o You need to think about the relationship you have with people who have been abused. Are you a strong, trusted, intimate, loving and caring recovery partner?
 - o Surviving abuse is complicated. The letter writer no longer trusted men and yet also hoped for a trustworthy male partner.
 - o It isn't your job is to fix a person with a learning disability – It is the person's journey and the recovery needs to be their own.
 - o Be patient. The letter writer said she was broken and that recovery was forever. We liked that she gave other survivors of abuse permission to take their time.

- One of the most positive things about the story was that writing it may have helped the letter writer. We asked the story gatherer to take our comments back to the writer. We wanted to let her know how important it was for us to hear her story and what we thought after reading it. We hoped this would make her happy.
- After taking our comments back to the letter writer, the story gatherer told us that the writer was proud of her story and that she had shared it with one other family member. After reading her letter, she said her family member revealed to her that they had had a similar experience. Neither knew the other was recovering from abuse.

What do you think?

We don't jump fences any more We walk through our own gate

Intro: | R / A / P | STOP

P: David's got his hat on. He's going out today
letter put your sunscreen on. Summer's on its way.

G: Hip hip hip hooray. David's got his hat on
A Summer's on its way.

P: Jess's got her shorts on. She's going out today
letter put your sandals on. Summer's on its way.

G: Hip hip hip hooray. Jess's got her sandals on
A Summer's on its way.

P: David's got that t-shirt on. He's going out today.
look out Jess. David's on his way.

G: Hip hip hip hooray. Look out Jess
A David's on his way.

P: Jess's got her speed on. She's rolling on her way.
look out David. Love is on its way.

P: Jess has a crush on. She's on her way.
look out David. Kisses on the way.

G: Hip hip hip hooray. Hip hip hip hooray. Hip hip hip hooray.
A David and Jess are going out today

A David and Jess are going out today



Cover Art:

Figure 23. Lyrics to a song have been placed overlap an image of an acoustic guitar. Half of the guitar is covered. The song is to be played in the key of D with chord changes written between the lyric lines.

“Davids got his hat on”

Tune: “The sun has got its hat on:” Noel Gay & Ralph Butler (1932)

Lyric: Jess Kittay

We don't jump fences anymore. We walk through our front gate

We do almost everything together

David and I have been married for three years now.

Well it will be four this March Jess

We do almost everything together. It's how we are, so we want to tell our story - together. That way it will be right.

The sun has got its hat on (intro)

David and I first met at a day programme. When David first started, he sat on his own. He didn't have anyone to talk to, so I went up and asked him if he was ok.

Jess coming up was a bit of a shock.

Not a lot of people would talk to me because I was different. I stand out in a crowd.

But Jess came over, and that is where it all started.

David was the first man who really talked to me. Literally from the first time we sat down.

Jess sat and had lunch with me and I asked her how things were for her. Jess told me that she was not really liking where she was living. I told her I had the same problem where I live. I know what you are going through.

There was a sadness in David's life, so what I did was write down how I was feeling about him.

It was the first song I ever wrote.

At that point we had been going out for months but I wasn't allowed near David. My caregiver helped me get to get all the words written out. I rang David before I did.

And what did I say Jess? I didn't have a problem with it. So long as there are no dodgy words.

The troubles

Getting to know David was a slow process.

We took the relationship slow didn't we. For about three years we took it slow.

If Jess wanted time we just gave it a miss, you know. We didn't commit to any long term relationship until we knew it was right, did we? For a long time we had monthly visits and I wasn't allowed to take Jess to the movies or anything like that.

The day after I met David, I asked him out. But staff stopped it. They were telling me I wasn't allowed this.

I knew people would be telling you "Oh David is not who you think he is - because of the trouble I got into when I was younger." I knew people would be telling you it was a mistake.

But what mistake Jess? You haven't made a wrong mistake at all.

And I said, what's to be careful with. If I don't talk to him, I won't learn what life is about. He can tell me. He has a voice.

We had our first date on the 29th of April, 2011. We went to a cafe. Jess was 23 and I had just turned 19.

The next time I phoned to see if it was ok for me and Jess to go out they said no because you've got charges. What had happened was a staff member at the house I was living in rang and told Jess's staff I had a conviction. Everyone assumed I had been charged. Because I had a disability they thought I wasn't going to be honest.

I've been hurt basically all of my life because of it. I wasn't allowed to marry Jess and at the start I wasn't even allowed to see her.

Jumping fences

They couldn't stop us all the time. Sometimes I'd run away.

I would often storm off. You know, because I was getting bullied at the house.

I used to sneak off other times too. When staff went down to the wash-house I would sneak outside and book the mobility van so they didn't know where I was.

And then she would ring me and say is it all right for me to come in? We spoke to my staff and they decided yep ok, we'll give it a chance.

The taxi drivers knew more about what we were doing.

That's why we get respected as a well known couple.

We would meet secretly at the club too. I started going to be with Jess until one of Jess's staff popped in and put in a complaint and I was stopped from going. In the end I was allowed to go, but Jess always had to bring a staff person.

The sun has got it's hat on (reprise)

When David started coming I was a bit nervous. I used to have this staff person following me everywhere – like a little puppy.

People didn't come up to me to say hello. I'm just sitting there thinking I'm looking like a piece of trash really. Eventually I turned around and said This can't go on.

I think the other members saw Jess as a very lonely person. When I started going things started to change. I was her boyfriend, not her staff.

My staff were really there to make sure I didn't have any contact with David. That's where the song comes in.

I was there that night. When Jess sang it. Jess was crying and I wasn't allowed to go near her.

I couldn't go up to her and say You did a good job. I wasn't allowed to say, Well that sounded beautiful darling.

The song is about discrimination. People don't have the right to say who you can see. If you were in a relationship with someone, what would you do? If you loved the person, what would you do? Sit there and watch them get discriminated against. I wanted to be with David, so I sang it out over the top of the other members. I sang it to David and I sang it to the support person. David and Jess are going out today.

This man who keeps on coming and fighting for us to be together.

David and Jess are going out today.

Maybe this is the way it's gonna be for yous

I was a bit of a mess back then. I would ring David because he would listen.

I remember ringing quite a lot of times crying.

One day I spoke to one of David's staff members about it all. She was the first person to say, We might be able to make this work. You have turned David's life around.

This crap was constantly going on. So in the end I decided to go to the Needs Assessment Service and say, enough is enough.

I had it all on my laptop. When Jess was talking on the phone to me I would write it down. In the end I printed it off and took it into the needs assessment service.

I said to them, Hi I am David Austin. I am advocating on behalf of Jess Kittay. And that's where it all came out. Jess gave me her mothers number and I rang her. She told me she knew Jess wasn't happy with the way she was being treated and I said no, neither am and that I had gone to the Needs Assessment because I was concerned.

Her rights were not being respected!

In the end Jess's mum said maybe we need to look at having a sleepover at my place and rang my co-ordinator. That's what happened. The next day and my co-ordinator says, Would you feel comfortable going and spending a couple of nights with Jess and her mum?

I remember lying on mums spare bed... and I said to David, I never want to go back to that shithole.

We were only there for one night..... but It was enough. Enough for Jess to decide we wanna keep this up. So we did another trial. My co-ordinator asked me how it worked.

I thought it went really well. I told her, I can't see what the concern is and she goes, Oh well, maybe this is the way it's gonna be for you.

Please don't get shocked

Don't take this the wrong way Jess. I was pleased I managed to get you out of there.

I thought no one was going to listen to me.

Were you worried?

Well other people were. They didn't want to see me get used as an advantage to look after you all the time. People would tell me it's hard to look after someone with a physical disability.

They said it would be way too hard for me.

People didn't have a lot of faith in either of us did they?

Jess's disability is not really anything to be worried about and it didn't take us long to figure that out.

The only thing that did worry me was when you told me you had been sexually assaulted. I did go to my staff and say, well what do I do? You know what do I do If she well, wants somethingor whatever. I'm not going to say because I don't want to embarrass Jess.

The topic for her will be a bit awkward.

(Laughs) No!

We don't really talk about that kind of stuff.

For a start I was a bit scared.

I never imagined I could live in my own house. When I'm in bed, I stay in bed. I can't get out.

If there is a strange noise I have to rely on someone else figuring out what the noise is.

David changed everything.

Please don't get shocked, but I was sexually assaulted when I was twelve.

I had a caregiver who used to bring her boyfriend around. They were visiting and he touched me around my ribcage and tried to undo my buttons while I was on the couch. I ran to my bedroom. I shut my curtains, that's how fucking scared I was.

Sorry for swearing.

I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to say to mum. I do remember telling her to get him out of here.

It was six months before I went to the cops.

I asked mum if she could come because it was her friend.

They just smacked him on the hand.

They didn't do nothing.

They didn't do diddly squat. He had to do it to someone else first.

Because of that I was frightened of men. I never thought I was going to be married or anything like that. I thought that won't work.

Sometimes I have flashbacks.

Then you have to sit up, don't you?

I have to sit on the end of the bed. I have to do what I have to do.

I was twelve.

Do you reckon I'm the one?

People were shocked when we got engaged weren't they Jess.

My father was quite shocked. My stepmum was quite shocked. My brother was quite shocked. My little brother was quite excited.

People were actually quite nasty. In the end we got engaged to shut everybody up.

At the time we didn't know anyone with a learning disability who was married. I don't really know why people with a learning disability don't marry.

Well I think anybody with a disability can be married to who they want, when they want.

Other people shouldn't have that control. We really didn't think it was so unusual.

To us it was just a normal thing to do.

Well you might not have been thinking about it too much, but I had!

I asked David three times. I asked him. Do you think I am the one?

Do you reckon I'm the one for you?

I won't ever get this chance again

The first time we had been intimate was when I fell asleep on David.

I was around at Jess's and she was upset. You know, pissed off at what was happening and so I picked her up and put her on my knee and she just relaxed and ended up going off to sleep.

He was talking to me and then I didn't respond.

Basically David has soft skin. He's got very, very, soft skin. I don't know why I fell asleep on him. It was just the touch. The touch of his hand on my stomach and stuff.

So here I was, sitting there talking to her and the next thing I looked and her eyes were closed and I thought Oh fuck! Anyway, Jess's staff knock and I give Jess a wee tickle on her hip. Woke her up. Put her back in her wheelchair. Did her up because I didn't want to get caught with them walking in and seeing Jess on my knee.

(Laughs). Yeah we had to be very secret. Very, very, very secret.

They didn't acknowledge the way we were. We couldn't talk about it.

They would have stopped it alright!

I didn't trust anyone. Especially the service.

We couldn't really have sex. So we just cuddled and stuff like that.

We weren't too sure about it at the start were we. But it all turned around and became ok.

We took it slow, then all of a sudden, yep Jess started wanting me to touch her and that was fine. I didn't have a problem with it.

I took control because I wasn't too sure how to....

How to ask me?

Yes to ask you. So I wrote it down in a letter and got David to read it out.

We had no opportunity to talk about sex so writing a letter was the only way I could think of to let David know.

Sex is a little complicated for me too. We have to do things differently, so I had to find a way to let David know what I wanted.

I didn't know what to think of that did I. To be honest I was a bit hurt.

I had to ask my staff if it was normal. Putting it in a letter like that.

No! You didn't know what to think of that. (Laughs). So I explained it again.

It was also a pretty big step for me. Because of me being abused.

So that's when we leave it.

And at other times I do feel like it. Depending what my mood is.

Sex helps. My muscles get tight. Sex helps me to relax.

Touching me like that also replaces a bad feeling with a good one.

I'm fine with whatever Jess wants to do. I don't want to force things on to her that she doesn't want, you know.

It's her decision at the end of the day. I don't make decisions for her.

Well come on what about you?

Well it doesn't really happen for me that way. I don't really have needs that way.

It was really hard for me to touch Jess at the start.

I didn't want to physically touch her because if someone saw me doing something to someone else, I worried about getting reported to the police.

Because I've had that history I was a bit against it.

And I said, it's your choice if you don't want to touch me. At that stage I was really, really, really wanting to be intimate though.

Which is what ended up happening.

If I ever ended up going to prison, Jess ends up back in care and that's the relationship over.

I won't ever get this chance again.

They had to state their concerns I guess, didn't they?

When we started living together we didn't know too much about sex did we?

At the all boys school I didn't have many friends. You know, being different.

Well I can remember going home one day and showing mum I had four NCEA credits in sex education!

I remember thinking, how can a disability person pass this test when she hadn't had it?

I had that as well, but I failed!

I absolutely passed with flying colours.

Sorry if this sounds wrong. I had to put a condom on a stick.

I was quite angry. I turned around to my teacher aide at that time and said, "Do you actually have any faith in me passing this?"

And what did she say?

She goes, No.

And I go, well, how can I learn when I don't try these things? How can a person pass with flying colours when you're telling me I couldn't have anyone to do it with?

It's important for everyone to know that people with a learning disability want a partner.

And want to know more about how to be intimate with them.

Pretty much the only place I talked about sex was in the counselling up at the hospital.

They only told be what I wasn't allowed to do.

I always felt as if they were watcing what I said.

You know to decide if I was a bad person.

I went up to the hospital too. I was doing walking, cooking and sexual reality.

Sexual reality was about having a relationship and what the kids would turn out like if we were to have kids. They had to state their concerns I guess, didn't they?

It wouldn't matter if the child had a disability or not

We did talk about having kids

I looked into it properly because I didn't know if I was allowed to.

So I went to Family Planning. They said with my disability possibly not.

They weren't that helpful really. They gave me condoms and god knows what else but I thought to myself, Why aren't you listening?

I went to a male doctor after that and he said you can try but it would have to be delivered early. So we just kind of gave up.

It's a shame we can't have kids because your foster parents said....

I'd make a good father.

We thought may be we'd adopt a child. That way I don't pass my genes and there's is a chance with Jess's disability too.

So we thought maybe adopting would be the safest. Or fostering.

It wouldn't matter if the child had a disability or not. It wouldn't make it harder for us.

If the child had a physical disability, it wouldn't really matter.

I know what to do and Jess would be its mum.

Because we can't have kids ourselves we put a lot of energy into our family.

The sun has got it's hat on (coda)

Do you know, even after I married David, people would still come up to me and say, You won't last. And I would tell them Just watch this space! You just watch me jump this fence.

In the end we proved them all wrong.

And we still prove them wrong.

We are still proving people wrong aren't we.

I knew I was able to have a flat on my own. And have a proper relationship.

There was so much negative stuff about us.

If I hadn't met you David, I wouldn't be here today.

How do you mean sweetheart?

Well because you were my advocacy person.

If David was gone, I would have taken my life. That's how I feel.

And if someone was to take David away from me, well what am I supposed to do?

But Jess that's never gonna happen.

Jess helped turn my life around. When you first got with me I was very unsure.

Because of what history I had. I just wasn't sure if a relationship was going to be my thing.

But then I thought Jess is worth the risk.

And that's the way it's been. We do things together.

We knew who we were.

In a way that's the point of our song.

When we are allowed to be together and to decide things for ourselves, the future looks brighter.

The sun has got it's hat on. Summer's on its way!"

I do think there is still a lot to be proved, right, but I don't think there's anything major for us to prove anymore.

We have done what we can now.

I don't think there are fences we need to jump now.

In the future we will just walk through our own front gate.

Key Messages

People with a learning disability always feel like they have to prove something to get something. I don't think that's having the same rights as everyone else

- We noticed how David and Jess always felt they had to prove something just to have or do something. They had to prove a lot!
- Having an intimate relationship feels like the end of a very long ladder. You have to prove that you can do all the lower rungs before you can get there. Disability support services (and others) never assume it's your right to start at the top of the ladder.
- Whether you have a disability or not – you have the right to an intimate relationship. You shouldn't have to have a relationship just to prove to other people you can do it. We are no different to anybody else - except that we have to work so much harder to be together.
- We did think that other people always saying “no” might have motivated David and Jess to give it a go though

Disability Services control our relationships

- It is not right that people who work in a service can tell you who you can see and who you can't. It's our choice. Unless the person has asked you to be an advocate staff have no right to step in.

Disability support services limit the possibilities of relationship by what they do say and do

- Community Group Homes are not spaces to be in a relationship with someone. Friendships are always scrutinised and there is no privacy. You always have to sneak away. You have to escape your service to be in a relationship.
- People with a learning disability are often told they are not allowed to have sex in their service. It's a policy. Couples who are caught doing it can get in big trouble.
- When you are not allowed to have sex in your service there is no proper place. You have to do it in places like the park.
- It is like Big Brother is always watching you.

Just as importantly, disability support services limit the possibilities of relationship by what they do not say or do

- Partner relationships are open and they are equal and you care about each other equally. We think that relationships with a partner are what makes the biggest difference in people's lives. They are really important and should be respected and valued by those whose role it is to support us.

- Relationships take time. You have to build loving relationships by learning how you connect and what you enjoy doing together. We think it is critical that services talk about and provide people with a learning disability the chance to build intimate, trusting and loving relationships by supporting (not surprising) life sharing.
- Relationships are built one-to-one, not one-to-five.
- People who live in disability support services are not often supported to build relationships by doing things non-disabled adults do to become intimate, like out to a restaurant or planned a date. We also think;
- People with a learning disability have fewer opportunities to meet people and become intimate, which means you get no chance to know people in a way that would help you decide if you want to be in a deeper relationship.
- Sex feels like the needle in the hay stack. A precious and hard thing to find surrounded by the “hay” of everyday living. People with a learning disability who spend a lot of time in disability support services are steered towards non-sexual lives by the “hay” of being taken to places and kept busy doing things where meeting someone and becoming intimate are not easily possible.
- People with a learning disability never get any practice or to feel confident taking things beyond friendship.
- Not encouraging people to think of themselves in sexual can lead people with a learning disability to doubt that they have the same rights as others. You ask yourself is it ok to go through the gate (of friendship). And exactly what do you do when you get to the other side of the gate.
- We would like to hear that it is normal and natural to have sex and want to be sexual. You need to have trust and faith in yourself to become a caring and responsive lover. Not being able to talk to people as if sex was a real possibility takes away the trust and faith we think you need in yourself.
- We would like to talk about how to have sex. But only with people who are open, and listen properly and accept that we would like to have sex.
- When people with a learning disability talk to staff it often feels like there is a right (approved of) answer. We feel the lack of opportunities to talk openly and honestly harms people with a learning disability because we are more likely to be met by more issues and opinions (discrimination) than people who do not have the label of intellectual disability.

- People with a learning disability don't talk to other people with a learning disability about sex or sexuality either. We think this is because when you are not used to hearing those kinds of conversations you don't know if it is ok to talk about. "Not talking (or hearing) about it makes sex a more complicated thing to talk about.
- We also feel that believing you didn't have the right words (vocabularies) makes it much harder for us to know what to say too.

Sex Education

- We think the way David's experienced sex education was more about what he couldn't do in a relationship. People with a learning disability are told "no you can't" all the time.
- The messages people with a learning disability hear about sex are almost always negative.
 - o Don't get caught
 - o You have to be careful of people who are paedophiles or want to take advantage of you
 - o Women with a learning disability often get sexually assaulted by men
 - o People can watch or record you on their phones
 - o You need to have safe sex
 - o You can't get people pregnant
 - o You can't have children
 - o You can't have sex until you have a good income
- We also think men with a learning disability find even getting into the partner zone frightening because of the all the negative messages about male abuse.
- On the other hand, sex education for people with a learning disability almost never includes conversations about sex being pleasurable or a way of showing your partner you love them. Sex as part of loving someone is never talked about. We are never told positive stories about sex.
- (Thank goodness for story-telling).

What we know is that many people with a learning disability take it slow

- People with a learning disability are prepared to take the time to build a connection slowly. David and Jess took four years to get engaged and both said they took everything slowly. We think that this is the more usual way that people with a learning disability build relationships.

- We think that people with a learning disability tend to take it slowly because they wait until they know they can trust the other person. To a person with a learning disability, trust is one of the most important things in life.

One of the other things you can't do is have children

- We think that one of the ways that families and disability support services don't trust women with a learning disability is by putting them on the pill without asking or talking to them.
- Being on the pill just means that women with a learning disability can't have children – It doesn't always mean you can have sex. You still can't do that!
- We do know women with a learning disability who have made the decision not to use contraception because it should be a woman's choice. No one else should make that decision for women. Having control over who and when you are in a relationship means that women can be confident their decision is the right one.
- We noticed that Jess and David had looked into becoming parents. We didn't know anyone with a learning disability who was bringing up their son or daughter in our community. We think that that could also be because of the negative messages that people with a learning disability hear about parenting too like;
 - o There are lots of rules about bringing up children
 - o Being a parent will take up all of your time
 - o Being a parent will take up all of your money
 - o That you don't have enough room in your place to be a parent
 - o Being a parent is too much of a responsibility for you
 - o Children are a burden
 - o You need to be able to drive a car
 - o You will have your children taken off you
- We did notice that David's foster parents said to him that he would make a good dad though. We were surprised because we have never heard anyone say people with a learning disability have something special and important to give their children or that being a parent can be the most important thing you do in your life.
- We remembered having dreams about having kids when we were younger and wondered if all of the negative messages about parenting had changed our dreams. We think we just assumed it wasn't possible because we had come to believe that that is the way life is. People with a learning disability aren't allowed to be parents.

They got engaged to shut everyone up!

- David and Jess said they got engaged to shut everybody up! We wondered whether anyone had said congratulations? That's what most people would say if you told them you were going to get married.
- When no-one expects people with a learning disability to get married we learn not to expect it for ourselves. The first time I heard someone with a learning disability was married it blew my head off. I just didn't think of it as an option.
- Like becoming a parent, we think we dreamed about getting married but then forgot about it.
- Talking more openly and honestly about sex and marriage and may be becoming a parent might help us to reimagine the future - David and Jess's story gave us this chance.

What do you think?

I wish we were current



*I wish we
were current*

4/19

Cover Art:

Sam Orchard

Sam is a Dunedin artist who uses comic art to tell stories that celebrate difference and works on community projects that use art to create social change.

Figure 24. A comic art image in which a young t-shirted man is depicted imagining or perhaps remembering himself in a “thought bubble.” Within the thought bubble the imaginer is drawn sitting next to another young man on a two-seater couch. In this scene, the other man orientates towards the imaginer. Their knees are touching and his hand rests on the imaginers knee. A red love heart hangs in the air in front of the other man and two exclamation marks punctuate the air in front of the imaginer, perhaps explaining his wide-eyed stare.

I Wish We Were Current

I want people to know that it's ok to be gay and just because you got an ID doesn't mean you can't have a sexuality.

Emma

I remember one day I was playing in the yard with Emma. I was 10 and she was 8 years old. I asked Emma if it was okay for me to rest my head on her butt. I sort of wanted to cuddle her and I felt safe and happy around her. But then a family member saw and they started yelling, I was petrified, I wondered what the hell was going on. I was using Emma's butt like a cushion but this family member saw it as something else. I felt guilty when the family member started to yell. We also got caught a few times, kissing, and they wouldn't let us be alone together, but I kind of liked spending time with her.

Me getting into trouble for that kind of thing probably messed up my sexual growth more. Because it's when I started to get to high school and teen years, sexuality was taboo for me. I felt it was wrong to be straight, it was wrong to be gay, or anything. But I was young and curious!

Cooper

When adults say, don't hang around someone because they are trouble, it makes you 10 times more want to hang with them. One time Cooper and I were in a corridor at school and he told me he shaves his pubes. And then he showed me, but I don't know why he showed me that he shaved them? I didn't see his penis or anything! I just saw the top part, above the genitals. I kept wondering what he was trying to do. I don't know what that's supposed to mean? I remember at the time, it was confusing, and I remember wanting us to experiment.

After finding out that Cooper wanted to shave his pubes I wanted to do the same. I don't know if it's a gay thing, I'm thinking straight guys probably don't care about it? I tried to shave my legs and probably my chest. Sometimes the skin is smooth but then goes all prickly.

Coming out

The word gay can pop in and out of people's minds. People can be in denial or it can be completely hidden. When I think back, it's like I don't want people to know I'm gay because it can be a terrifying thing. I do remember wanting to be with other teens when I was a teen but I felt, this was gonna be impossible. I thought things like, no one would want me, how am I gonna meet someone when I'm stuck in a group home and when you're gay, people think you're creepy.

Puppy Love

One day I was going outside to get something, and a girl from next door, grabbed me and started kissing me. I was like, stop! She just grabbed me and started bloody kissing me. I felt a little bit of puppy love. Well, it was strange, I don't know, I kept thinking I will be straight, normal. Actually, what the hell is normal? Does that exist? For quite a while I was interested or curious about girls. At the time, I thought all people had the same body parts, but and then I realized that females don't actually have a penis. I didn't have gay thoughts at this time, I just felt empty when I kissed girls.

Ethan

When I was 16 I still didn't understand about my sexual orientation, well I didn't have a word for it, I didn't even know about gay. I didn't know the word existed. You don't know about your sexuality or sexual orientation if you can't meet people. But one day, this person Ethan, we were on the trampoline, we weren't talking much, and out of the blue he just said 'I'm gay'. I didn't give a second thought to it, I just said 'I'm gay too'. It's like something inside of me just forced me to say it. I could have done stuff, but I was afraid because of the way that Ethan's carers were watching him like a hawk, all the time.

The Diary

When I was staying with some caregiver, I done this diary of all the confusing mess that was going on in my head. It was like my head was screaming all the time. It wasn't making any sense sort of screaming. It was loud screaming. I was trapped in my head. So, I had to write down in a diary to make sense of it all and figure myself out. It was like a kind of therapy for me in one sense. It started to develop my sexuality. Because of all the screaming, it was like a puzzle I had to put together.

But the problem is one day I had a bit of a tiff with the partner of my caregiver at the time and he read my diary. I found out through a family member later. And that's why I never went back to that caregiver's place again. My family member taught me not to be so trusting. I've learnt after this incident. I don't write anything down, ever.

Church and Waffles

I did go to church for a while, but then I thankfully I moved away from that. They actually didn't know that I might be gay. I didn't feel like I could be open and tell people. There might have been the odd guy I had a crush on. Sometimes we would go to someone's place to have these waffles. That was the good thing about it, free waffles, can't complain. We also went to a bonfire thing, so it was good, but I just felt like if I told them I was gay then I'll probably get rejected and they'll probably kick me out and I won't get to go there anymore.

Counselling

I remember I went to a counsellor and they tried to make me straight. They showed me pictures of women in bikinis, well it didn't work. I felt like I was being forced to be someone I wasn't. I felt this was very controlling. I realized that I needed to figure myself out on my own and not have someone else meddle in my head. I did go to another counsellor and they talked to me about relationships and showed me pictures of guys. Looking back, I wish my support person wasn't in the room with me, I might have opened up more.

Learning about consent

I knew about consent when I was young, but it's not actually based on sex, it's based on other types of consent. And it's not completely whether you've been taught it, because sometimes consent comes to you naturally. It's like 'oh, I don't want to do anything that offends or upsets'. The first time it came to me was when I was on the trampoline with Emma. I do remember, I asked if it's ok to rest on her. And that is asking for consent. It's not invading someone's space.

When I was mentally unwell I didn't really think about orientation and relationships because my mind's not on that. This means when you're unwell, if someone's interested, you won't be able to consent to sexual activity or anything like that because you're not in the right state of mind.

Sophia

There is something that did happen that I just keep being puzzled over, and I don't think it's anything you can call abuse, because we were both young. I think Sophia was a few years older than me, I think she might have been 15 and I was 11. But I didn't really feel into it and I don't know if that's because I was too young? She kept coming onto me and I remember thinking back that I just liked that someone was paying attention to me, even though it's probably for the wrong reasons. She was a bit of a predator, when you think it about it. She was a bit creepy.

Sophia and I were in this abandoned house, sort of abandoned, it was falling apart. Months before this person ripped off the wood boards and I was annoyed because we didn't have

much privacy. I think I asked if I can kiss her but then I didn't feel a sort of rush type of thing. I didn't know if I was too young and not started the changes yet.

Dennis

I was in a van with Dennis and he started to touch me, he was rubbing my leg. He just touched my knee and I immediately got turned on. I actually only started going through puberty when I was 16. Well my body started earlier but my mind, that took a lot longer for me. That took longer to develop because I remember I didn't even have much sexual thoughts for a while. When I think about it, the way the carers reacted I felt it was deeper than our differences. I felt it was because we were two guys. I didn't think about it at the time, but I think that now because I have more knowledge, you know you gain knowledge over time.

Sexual Abuse

I remember when I was about 8 - 10 years of age this older man tricked me into kissing him. I didn't know what he was gonna do and I knew what he did was wrong. I felt quite disgusted by it to be honest. I wanted to tell people about it, but because of my disability, my lack of communication, I didn't know what words to use. I felt I wanted something done about it, I wanted to tell people about it but I felt I'd get into trouble. The thing is, that person might be dead, but I still want justice and I'll always want justice.

My father abused me and my siblings, that is why we went into foster care. I keep thinking back from when I was 18 and people had this assumption about me, that I would be like my father. I just keep thinking it's because of all of that. I don't understand, because, I mean for crying out loud, I even kept an eye on children. When I went overseas I had to keep an eye on my nephew and because of the past, I didn't really want to. I didn't know how to keep an eye on him, because they wander and move around. When I was 16 I did have to look after a toddler for a while, it was hard work, but at the time my main priority was making sure he was okay.

They gave me that responsibility, they trusted me and so I wasn't gonna break that trust. A close family member and I were hanging out one day and she started assuming that I would do stuff like my father did. It made me uncomfortable her saying all that because it was in a public place and someone could hear her. I told the family member I was never like that, I never am like that. With all that was going on, it actually was the first time I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to jump into the ocean and swim far, far away from land, and just see how far I could make it. But I didn't want to brave the cold water so I never did that, because I know how freaking cold the water would be.

Accusations

These thoughts of ending my life were also caused by service providers, who were making the same assumptions and accusations about me. They were assuming that I was going to look at illegal pornography. I did look at women online, but it was adult women. It was R18 sites, it wasn't illegal. Some of these false accusations might have been because I was making things up to see how the service provider would react. But then they made a big deal about it and it just made things complicated and made things stressful for people. They wouldn't let me get the internet without signing this contract, and actually I didn't understand what I was signing. I felt like the service provider had control over my life. I felt trapped by the contract, if I didn't sign it they would think I had something to hide.

I got accused of looking at pornography on the computers at my computing course too. It's like they've got nothing better to do! They searched through the computers because, from my understanding, if you've accessed pornography, it doesn't matter if you clear that computer, they have a record of who's been accessing stuff. It would all be backed up. They searched and they found nothing. And because of all that stress, I only managed to pass my level two. I don't think I could do level three because of what the staff at the course put me through.

Leo

Leo and I were friends through this support organization. They had these rules. They said no one can go into your room and you can't hug anyone. The room part was understandable, but when they said hug, I felt a bit creeped out. When they said that, it's kind of like, who the hell do they think I am? One day I saw Leo crying at one of the parties they run every year and I wanted to hug him, but I felt I couldn't even do that. I remember feeling a bit sad at that time.

We met years later again, surprisingly at a course I was doing. I met Leo there and I don't know why I had this really painful feeling in me all the time. It was annoying. It wasn't like an actual painful feeling, it was like a psychological painful feeling. It's like you're being ripped apart.

Leo invited me to a party. I got a few drinks and apparently, I was getting a bit tipsy. Leo was saying that I had to leave. Maybe I was drunkenly coming onto him, I don't know! But they say alcohol brings out your true feelings, it can release what you normally control. So, if you're in denial about being gay and if you were drunk, most likely you would find yourself waking up next to a guy.

But Leo was paranoid and I don't know what was happening, but he said I had to leave, but I didn't really do anything. I wanted to stay, but I've kept thinking that maybe the alcohol, because sometimes you can flirt without knowing it. Sometimes alcohol makes you a bit more relaxed about your feelings.

Jeremy

Sometimes I have a type but it's flexible. Like someone might come along that doesn't fit my profile and yet I might find myself falling for him. It's like when I first meet Jeremy, I thought he was ugly. Ugly and old. Jeremy wasn't my type but I did like him, I think I was emotionally attracted to him. He smoked, sort of smelt, that kind of put me off wanting to kiss him when we dated. I don't know if our carers even guessed it was happening. I'm pretty sure they might have known what was going on. But they never said anything.

Well one time Jeremy and I had sex in the open air. His family were homophobic and we couldn't do it in the house so we just done it outside. And it's funny cause there were these people that biked past us and I don't think they knew we were there.

I liked Jeremy mostly because of his personality. But I wasn't 100% attracted to him because like, he didn't have the looks completely. I know when he broke up with me it hurt a bit. And I cried. I don't know why I cried, I don't know if it's cause I wanted someone to move in with me so I could get an affordable place, or if I cried because I actually did like him. I don't know what the actual reason is why I cried. And still don't know to this day!

Hunter

When I was younger and staying at a group home, I went to a monthly dance and I did meet this guy, Hunter. I approached him and said 'hi', and then I actually asked for his number. We became friends. One day I went over to Hunter's house, and we were watching a movie. I didn't really see it as anything, I just saw him as being friendly. Hunter said to me 'I like you, you're cool'. And he slaps me on the leg. I didn't know what that's supposed to mean. I didn't know if that meant just a friendly thing or what. He did actually come to my house, but there wasn't much to do and I didn't know what we could do. I think he was lost too.

I met up with Hunter again a few years later at the library and then later we caught up on Facebook. Hunter sent me a topless picture of himself. I said to my carer, "friends don't send each other pictures of themselves" and they said "oh they could". But then I replied "they don't send pictures of themselves with their shirt off in bed". What I don't understand is why I don't find Hunter remotely attractive in photos but I seem more interested in him in person? I sent Hunter a photo of myself but I wasn't shirtless. People can share that. We chatted on video once but then Facebook removed my account. I actually had a second Facebook account anyway as back up. It's so addictive that you have to have two! So, I don't think you actually send pictures to each other if you're friends, that's how I see it. But if you're attracted to each other then you probably would.

At first I asked Hunter if he wanted to visit, just as friends, to hang out. I was sitting at the computer desk, Hunter touched my knee and asked me "is it ok to be gay?" I said "yes" and I made it pretty obvious I was into him. Hunter dropped his pants and said "I

feel sexy”, then one thing then one thing lead to another. It’s like sometimes you have an insatiable urge and you can’t really stop yourself. It’s like a magnet and it goes deeper than looks. I don’t know if Hunter was just being friendly, but he liked to come over, and after a while he just ended up turning up out of the blue. No notice. Like one day I was asleep, as you do in the morning. And he messaged me on Facebook and he was sitting waiting outside, and I’m like “oh my god, how long have you been here for?” But then I can’t forget that day, how good it was. I was standing in the kitchen and Hunter was kissing me all over my neck. I liked it, I can’t deny it either, it felt good.

One day when he came over he gave me a condom. And I didn’t really know what to make of it. I was unsure if I was getting mixed messages. I was trying to work out what he wanted, I wasn’t sure what I wanted. I was trying to work out if we were on the same level. Because to me, it’s all about, if you are on the same level, is this what you both want? An acquaintance was making me feel like Hunter wouldn’t be on the same level as me, which is why I probably didn’t do anything, because I wasn’t sure. I was trying to look out for him because I didn’t want to take advantage of him. But it must have been obvious, I mean, you wouldn’t give someone a condom if you didn’t want to bang.

If you’ve got ID (intellectual disability), or whatever you call it, doesn’t mean you can’t love or be loved

I want people to know that if you’re with a service provider, they shouldn’t be controlling of your life and they shouldn’t tell you that you can’t be gay. Families can also stop you being yourself too, if you have ID. Growing up I had to fight to try and enjoy being with girls. With boys, I had to fight the denial that I liked them. But now I know I’m attracted to guys. I’m gay, but I don’t like to stick to labels too much because people’s sexuality can change over time. I don’t know if there’s such a thing as soul mates, if there is I haven’t found mine!

Key Messages

He couldn't come out of his own shell

- We think the worst thing about this story is that the Storyteller never felt free to be who he really was. He was a gay man and couldn't be himself until he had the chance to speak up.
- [The Storyteller] couldn't come out of his own shell. It is important that people with a learning disability feel like they can come out of their own shell.

You should be respected for who you are

- Whether you are a man or woman or gay or straight you should always be respected for who you are. We noticed that the Storyteller kept avoiding labels. He said 'whatever ID is' and 'whatever normal means'. We wondered if this was because he wasn't made to feel good about either being gay or having a learning disability. Being valued for who you are is very important. The story teller had two labels that he thought made it harder for him to get respected.
- We also thought that it was interesting the psychologist thought the way to correct the Storyteller was to show him pictures of women in bikinis. We didn't think that was respectful - of the Storyteller or women either.

Can't talk: There is more than one puzzle

- We felt the story tellers didn't feel he could talk about his sexuality. One of the ways you know whether you are respected is that you feel free to talk up and ask questions when you need to.
 - We noticed he said he didn't trust anyone.
 - He also said he wished his staff person wasn't in the room. That he might have opened up more to the counsellor if he wasn't there – which made us think he was frightened to talk to his staff.
- We weren't surprised that he said that he said figuring out who he was, was like solving a puzzle because he didn't have anyone to help him. Everyone should feel free to talk up when you need to.
- Disability services never seem to look for diversity. They don't look with rainbow glasses! No one talks about being gay or lesbian or other sexual identities. Staying silent closes doors.
- The Storyteller had to wait for another boy with a learning disability to ask him if it was ok to be gay.

- We also believe that disability services and others need to think about the questions people with a learning disability might have over their whole life time.
- We thought the Storyteller needed help when he was a younger that was different from the support he needed to figure out what was happening when he was older and starting to have sex. There is more than one puzzle to put together.
- He was fighting time. We thought that because he never seemed to get the help he needed when he needed it, he would feel behind other men his own age. We all remembered feeling that other people knew more about relationships and sex - and that not knowing things made us frightened to get into a relationship with someone else.

He didn't know what was ok

- We realised the Storyteller had very few chances to learn how to get into a relationship with another man. He seemed to be confused about lots of things.
 - o He didn't know why Emma's dad was yelling
 - o He didn't know what Hunter slapping him on the leg meant or what he could do when Hunter came to his flat
 - o He didn't know what sending a photo or giving him a condom meant.
 - o He didn't know if it was ok to want to have sex with someone who was not on the same level.
- Not being able to talk to anyone would have made it so much harder to know what was ok and how to react.

The 'no hands on' policy

- If people who self-identify as LGBTIQ are going to love themselves and get to love others in a positive way, staff need to think about what is the right environment for this to happen. You need to get the environment right!
- We believe the Storyteller wasn't allowed to have a positive sense of himself as a gay man. We thought that because he kept saying;
 - o When you're stuck in a group home and gay people think you are creepy
 - o That he and his friends watched like a hawk. He must have felt there was something wrong with him to have to be watched like a hawk.
 - o They checked his computer.
 - o He also said he wasn't allowed to hug anyone he lived with or he met in his service.

- People with a learning disability are often not allowed to touch in their own home. We called them the “No hands on” policy.

We think he must have been very lonely

- All of the places the Storyteller connected with his community were places where he could not be his true self. His home and his disability service, his church, his family, were places where he felt he could not say he was gay. “We think he must have been very lonely.”
- We think the story teller had to have sex in public and other risky places because he had nowhere else. He couldn’t go to a motel and he couldn’t bring someone home. It had to be in the back of the van, or a house with no boards or outside in the park!
- We wondered what impact that had on the Storyteller’s sense of himself.
- Within the culture of disability support it is often impossible for people with a learning disability to bring someone home or to go to another disability support service. Services don’t trust each other. It’s like two tribes.

The same rights as everyone

- Not feeling good about yourself, (thinking that you are creepy or are doing something wrong) can make you from think that you have the same set of rights as everyone else. In this story, the Storyteller didn’t have the same rights to;
 - o Privacy
 - o To watch what he wanted
 - o To say he was gay
 - o To be in a relationship with someone he chose....

It’s a circle that keeps on going

- The more we talked about it, the more connected everything seemed. To us the Storyteller seemed to be stuck in a circle that kept on going. When we drew it out, it looked like this:

How do you break the circle?

- What really troubled us was that the circle had led the story teller to thinking about killing himself. Some members of the research group said they had felt the same way in the past. The advice they gave was;
- To un-do feeling bad about yourself it helps to feel valued for a long time.

- We liked the way the Storyteller brought his story back to finding a soul mate. We wondered if what he needed was someone he could be open and loving with too. The kind of things that are about being intimate but not necessarily about having sex. It could be as simple as helping him to find someone he cares about. And someone who loves him so he can love his own self.
- Being able to talk openly and find someone who loves you for who you are should be doable.

What do you think?

**Love yourself pretty much,
before you love anyone else**



Cover Art:

Kama Warburton

Kama is a young Dunedin artist who loves colour and has previously worked out of Studio2

Figure 25. Vibrantly coloured poster-paints have been used to create a collage of images. A curtain of bright blue and yellow and grey and orange polka dots look as if they have been pulled back to reveal stylized flowers in one corner of the painting and a red heart, be-speckled in ladybird black dots in the other. A small yellow cat sits unobtrusively at the bottom of the page and the artists name is painted diagonally centre-stage.

Love yourself pretty much, before you love anyone else

I do remember a lot...

Well I can start from the very beginning. So pretty much I was bought up in foster care because my parents couldn't look after me. My Mum had sort of a similar experience to me but hers was physically worse. She was physically beaten up, she's still lucky to be here and she's still alive but she's not with that person anymore. That was my Dad and because of that, Mum couldn't look after us because Dad kind of brain washed her a lot and she did try to leave apparently but that never worked because he'd track her down.

[It was] domestic family violence and us kids kind of had to, me and my brother and my half-brother kind of saw it, but my half-brothers were of the age where they could leave and live with their Dad. They were worried [about us] but they didn't have to deal with it because they could just pack up and leave because they could decide what they wanted to do. And me and my brother were left but I think from what I was told about it, one of my [half-brothers] rang Oranga Tamariki, which was CYFS back then, and got me and my brother out of that situation and there were a whole lot of family meetings about it but I was never able to live back with my [mum].

[So I went into foster care] and the situation wasn't better, it took Mum about 10 or 11 years to finally get out of her situation and that caused a rift between my relationship with my mum but we're a lot better now - but it's never going to be....

I was five [when I went into foster care]. I was very young ... No-one really wanted to look after me because I was the kid with ADHD and that was kind of full on for anyone.... I was very full on. And also in saying that, Mum's side of the family, they would have tried to look after me but they couldn't because Dad kept threatening them and stuff like that so that put them in an awkward situation and they had families of their own so it wasn't fair.

There were some good foster places and some not so good. I had lots. I went to about 24 homes, I think. From the age of 5 till the age of 16 or 17.

[One foster home in particular] wasn't good for me though, a lot of stuff happened there, there were other really bad foster children there and it just, wasn't a good situation. Then I went to another home and that was around this way - they didn't have children of their own because they couldn't have children and because of that they didn't really know how to bring up another kid that wasn't their own and just, it wasn't their fault, they just couldn't really understand me. Like I said, I was very hard to raise so they struggled. I didn't have the best behaviour, I understand that and I know that kids with ADHD can be very full on, because I was full on for a fact but I'm not going to compare anyone else.

I went to two primary schools...

I went to two primary schools. School for me growing up, especially primary school was really hard for me. Because I didn't really fit in with the other kids. I got bullied, I kind of bullied them a bit as well, just like struggling with things

One time because I was getting annoyed because these people in my class were just being real horrible to me, I got angry and I was like right, I'm going to teach them a lesson, so what I did was, I kind of threw a chair at them, like a plastic chair and I got suspended for like two or three days because of it. But I felt really awful afterwards.

The [teachers] never really realised [that I was being bullied and that was why I threw the chair] and I did try and talk about it but it was always when the teacher wasn't around so like they couldn't do much about it unless they were caught out on it. I think [the teachers] just thought I was struggling with everything in life and that. I found there were some nice teachers though, I felt like my teacher aide was really good with me and did a lot with me. [I didn't have my teacher's aide] at lunch time or morning teas, I kind of had to figure that out.

I didn't really have friends. Eventually in year four or five, I did make a friend. This girl was really lovely. I'm still friends with her, we still kind of keep in touch at times. Yeah, [she's] a long-time friend, although we don't see each other much and she's doing her thing, and she's a bit older than me. But she's always been my friend. Yeah, but then she left a year before me and I was left, because I got held back a year a primary school. I was kind of left to deal with that and it kind of sucked.

I found [having ADHD] really hard, and still struggle now. Whether that be because my home life wasn't settled enough because of going from home school I struggled with my math, still struggle with my math. And they tried to teach me and also, my learning wasn't up to the standard it should have been for my age.

High school got worse...

High School, got worse. Let's just say that, I wasn't the bully. I was the one who was getting bullied. Year 10 camp, let's start with that. Year 10 camp we went to [the country]. I was in main stream, I wanted to be in main stream because I wanted to make friends and just be a normal... Like I know that I'm normal but like fit in, try and at least fit in for that thing but that never happened. Until year 13.

[On school camp], what happened was, we were told to go to bed at a certain time. Everyone had their cell phones and some of the girls, they were just being really horrible and stuff like that and asking inappropriate questions to me. Just being really inappropriate. And I'm just like, I don't know what to do about this. Tried to get a teacher, teacher told me to go back to bed so lucky I had my phone on me and I rang a person and this person rung the teachers of the school and really said something to them like..... it's like 11 o'clock at night and these kids are tormenting my child. Well yeah, and she's like and my child is very upset about this and this is not on. This is a school camp, and you guys are meant to have a no tolerance for bullying at this school. And anyway, so the teachers came in and I ended up sleeping the night in the teacher's cabin. But that didn't really change anything.

I don't know [what would stop bullying], but like maybe, there needs to be more put in place for the people with disabilities and like trying to maybe, discussing things with the [other] students in a way that they'll understand and they'll respect these people and remember that their brains don't always exactly be like theirs but in a way that's not going to affect these people and make these people feel like they're stupid of something cos also I think a lot of respect needs to be given to these people and like the [non-disabled] students need to spend time with the people who have disabilities and just make them feel wanted and not horrible about themselves.

For a while, a long time [I always felt horrible about myself]. I did, because of what was going on, I thought yeah I'm usually different from the rest of these people, I'm stupid, I'm all of those and I used to come home crying and just get really angry about it.

My behaviour got very out of control

Yeah I was going through the teenage years, some really bad teenage years, let's just say that. Ummm, with all the bullying, besides that, there was the relationships, the people I sort of connected with. I look back now and think, why on earth would I go out with those people? Or hang out with those sorts of people? I really don't know [why I did hang out with them] to be honest. I just think maybe I just thought like, I was cool or something - but that wasn't the case. I don't know.

At the time, I just wanted a boyfriend and you know, everyone else my age, in my class had boyfriends and people used to kind of torment me about it. Like, oh have you done this, have you done this? Or have you got a boyfriend, you should get one, and then

I'd turn around and they'd try and get me to talk to people I didn't even know. And they asked me if I've ever done that or ever done that? I felt uncomfortable actually, really uncomfortable. I don't know [if they did that to other girls] to be honest, I kind of I don't know. I just know that they were trying to make fun of me and stuff because I was a little bit different.

But so anyway, I'm going to get onto the topic about this relationship. He just wasn't a nice person. He had all these charges against him and I was just stupid, young. [He was] a lot older. And I don't know why.....people did try and not allow it but I just wouldn't have a bar of it! I was living at [my foster] home because I was only 16. [The relationship ended], but that was after a big screaming match.

He asked me for sex all the time

And then the other person I met. So, we went out for a couple [of] years. He was older than me. He asked me for sex all the time. I felt I couldn't say no, and that he called strangling me, play fighting, used to argue with me, he'd sit on his play station. I got [a pet] at one point and when my [pet] arrived, he was jealous of [it]. I don't know why he'd be jealous of [an animal], to be honest and when [it got a bit older], this person tried to [hurt my pet] and I literally screamed; it was just really horrible.

[I started getting support from a disability service] and my boyfriend was allowed to stay two nights and I used to go round there and stay at his house. That wasn't good either. Any time he got the chance to like maybe physically hurt me, and claim it was play fighting, he'd do it.

He wanted sex all the time. Even if I said no, he'd literally drag me on the bed and really badly pressure me. And I don't know, one point, I got to the point that I rang my mum in tears. And I was like this is what's going on, and she yelled down her phone. [And when I got invited out he said] you're not going unless I'm going. And I was like, what, so now I'm not allowed to go out by myself and have fun.... And he was like, "[no] - I'm coming". So, I had to ring [the person I was going out with], I felt like I had to and he made me feel really guilty. And then we did, and we were drinking and that then we got a taxi back home and that night he spewed up all over my toilet floor and I woke up the next morning and I was busting to go to the toilet. I was busting to go to the toilet and what happened was he kept refusing to go to the toilet to clean it up. And he was all "you clean it up, I'm lying in bed, I'm staying in bed", and I was like, you made the mess, you clean it up, it's not my job. So, I ended up scrubbing the floor, cleaning the whole floor up. This was round the time I'd had enough of it all because it got really bad. And [because of him] I would stop contact with my family and all of that and it wasn't good.

[A close friend] actually knew about it, well she actually picked up, I didn't really talk about it. They had a couple of things that I think they were worried about but I never

really discussed it. I think I refused to discuss it for some reason. [I know it was an abusive relationship] but my mum was beaten up more than I was beaten up to be honest.

I snapped...

A couple of weeks after the bathroom incident, we were on the bus and I think we went somewhere, we were doing something and on the bus, he kept winding me up and winding me up, and I don't think the bus driver realised, and anyway, I slapped him across the face because..... I snapped, I had just had enough and then he got off the bus and he was really upset and I kind of was in the mental state where I decided I was going to ring the police on myself which is the most ridiculous stupidest thing to do, see my brain was not right. [But] I wanted to resolve the situation, because I'm a nice person like that.

I felt I was in the wrong when it was actually him that was in the wrong. More or less.... So, what happened was the police went round to his flat and he decided he wouldn't press charges. I don't know why but that just made me feel even more guilty but in saying that, I shouldn't have felt guilty because he was the one who was treating me terribly and then after that with everything, on day, I don't remember the time frame but I do remember this, I'd had enough, and I was like right, this isn't on, this isn't fair to me. This is not a healthy relationship. So, I ended things and I told him to pack up, come down and grab all his crap and all of that. He wouldn't so I ended up chucking a whole lot of things out and he was all "Oh, I can't carry all of that" and I was like "well, if you're not going to get it, then I'm going to chuck it all out", so I chucked most of it out, then he tried to contact me again and I blocked him on everything.

I think I realised this - I didn't want to end up like my mother and live with that for like 10 years or more, and I don't think it was fair to my family to see me go through all of that, and plus I was struggling with my schooling as it was. I was trying to get NCEA level one and I couldn't even focus on that, and I was like well my education is more important than someone putting me through that. That person doesn't deserve to have someone like me.

It felt good that [the relationship] was gone actually to be honest. I was still processing in my mind what had happened. It was kind of hard to process because I kind of knew all about that stuff but yet it happened to me, and I should have been more aware of the warning signs, the warning bells.

I've learned this...

Well first of all, how do I explain it... I've learned this... maybe if a guy just sits around and does nothing, expects you to do his washing, expects you to do everything, not even taking turns at cooking, you know like normal relationship things that you'd do.

Another warning sign would be the really bad arguments all the time. The constant arguing and as soon as he started physically hurting me, claiming strangling was play fighting, that should have been another warning sign I should have taken into consideration.

And, I should have told someone else sooner. I shouldn't have kept it all to myself. But I did because I didn't want anyone to worry about me. After I broke up with [my former boyfriend] I do know that from the experience, it took me a long time to recover from that. He never come back but he told everyone a whole lot of lies about me and claimed that I was pregnant to him. I wasn't.

He's lovely

Yeah, so I kind of met him online, but I did it the safe kind of way. He decided one weekend he was going to come to [where I live] drive all the way here and meet me. We met at [a park]. And yeah, things just progressed from there and we kind of had a connection and we just talked and talked and that and he ended up staying the night and yeah, it just kind of progressed from there. And in saying that, I wanted someone who was going to treat me right and I think I've finally got that because he is really lovely. Like he comes to see me and I to see him. We go out for lunch, do things normal couples do and you know. He has respect for me. We have our disagreements but at the end of the day we still care about each other. And like even after a hard day at work, he always will talk to me.

[I have found someone] who respects me and has loyalty and love for me, who is not going to abuse me in any form or way. And in saying that, my [close family and friends] absolutely love him and that's the way it should be. Your family should be able to know your boyfriend is a nice person and respect him. And I know his Mum and his Dad. They respect me. Like first time I was really nervous because I haven't really had the best experience meeting [the family of] a person I went out with.

[A good relationship is when the person] respects you and has loyalty and love. It doesn't always have to be about the intimate stuff, it can just be maybe going out to a movie. Maybe going for a walk or something? For a while I was really scared [of intimacy]. It just kind of happened with me and [current boyfriend] aye. Yeah it just kind of happened. No pressure, he never pressured me, it just kind of happened, like I said, yeah... In my opinion, don't rush into things. Wait till you meet the right person. Love yourself pretty much before you love anyone else.

Key Messages

The big question

- The whole story seemed to change when the Storyteller said she should 'love herself.' It was like flicking a switch [to a new life]. She realised she was worth loving.
- We think the big question is, why is it so hard for people with a learning disability to feel good about themselves? Why don't they feel they are worth being loved and respected?

She was not safe in any of the places she should have

- We noticed the story teller did not feel safe in any of the places you need to be able to feel safe. She was not safe in her home (family or foster parents), at school (teachers) or in her relationships (partners).
- Our advice to parents, teachers and partners is to:
 - o Stand up to violence
 - o Pay attention by listening – Ask for people's stories.
 - o Understand the impact bullying and abuse has on people's lives.

She only found one true friend

- The story teller only found one true friend – but it was her friend for life. We think a true friend is all you need to begin with. True friends are open to truth about what you are finding hard. They are where you can find security and begin to trust.
- You can say you are unsure about what you are doing to a true friend. Without them you mightn't get to say it [when you are unsafe].

Home wasn't safe

- The Storyteller's mum had had the same things happen to her. All the Storyteller had seen was violent relationships at home. She may not have known anything else.
- We think everybody should have a place where they belong and can talk.
- And we asked ourselves, how does a person with a learning disability find their way out if they are not in a safe place? Where do you go?"
- We also thought all of the moving [between foster homes] would have been hard. She did not have a stable home. It was never her place.

Relationships with men weren't safe

- We noticed that her violent partners were older men and were very concerned the Storyteller was forced to have sex. Especially that her boyfriend strangled her and said it was play-fighting.

- Sex and strangling seemed to be one of the ways her boyfriend used to have power over her. He also said she couldn't see her family or go out with friends.
- People with a learning disability can feel controlled but put up with when they feel like they might not be worthy of a loving relationship.
- We were interested that the Storyteller chose not to listen to other people who were trying to stop her seeing her violent boyfriend. We think it was because she wanted her own choice.
- People with a learning disability don't get to make many important decisions in their lives. We think that choosing who you see is a decision that is hard for other people to take away. Choosing who you have sex with might be a way of feeling you have some control in your life. You are setting your own goals. Sometimes it can feel better not to listen.
- We also thought she might have felt trapped because, she didn't want people to worry about her and didn't know what to do about it.
- "Worrying about someone can be different. There is caring worrying and there is controlling worrying." They are not the same thing.

School wasn't safe: We had all been bullied at school

- Being called names like "retard," happens all the time for people with a learning disability. It is especially hard if you live with anxiety or don't know why it is happening.
- The Storyteller said she didn't feel like she really fitted in with other kids. We think feeling like you don't fit in would make it harder to love yourself.
- She said the teachers never seemed to notice that she was getting bullied but did notice when she reacted to it [like throwing the chair or getting someone to phone her teachers]. It was always her that got pulled away [she got suspended, she got put with the teachers] rather than confronting the bullies. The Storyteller is telling us that pulling her away never helped. It was punishment.
- We think schools need to pay more attention to why people with a learning disability react the way they do. What is making them behave the way they do.
- We are especially worried that bullying is often about sex. Other kids would tease the Storyteller by asking if she had a boyfriend, if had she done things, introducing her to people she didn't know and asking inappropriate questions.
- She said it was a way of tormenting her because she was different.

We thought the Storyteller was brave

- We thought the Storyteller was a risk taker.
- We also thought she was very brave. She threw a chair, stood up to her boyfriend and other bullies, survived abuse and violence and offered common sense advice about how other women might avoid violent relationships [as ways of getting some power back].
- She was also brave because, even though she knew family and relationships and school were not always places of safety, she kept going back because she thought it was right.
- The Storyteller said she wanted to be in a main stream school because she wanted to make friends and be normal, but that she was always made to feel she didn't fit in.
- To us she was showing other kids she was normal, just like them, and that the best way to do this was for them to spend time with people who have disabilities.
- We liked that the Storyteller imagined that schools could stop bullying by discussing things with other students in ways that would help them understand and respect people with a learning disability. That their brains worked differently but they were just as normal and bravely trying to change places by showing up.

It was like flicking a switch

- The other way the Storyteller was brave was she decided to break it by saying she had had enough of this.
- We noticed the switch flicked on sex. Before, sex was about abuse. After she decided to love herself, intimacy wasn't only about sex. Having normal safe and close relationships is more important. Holding hands and going to movies as well as other kinds of intimacy.
- It's about respect mostly.

What do you think?



“Mean As!”

People with a learning disability telling and reading stories of relationships and sexuality