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Changing Script, By Stephen Naysmith

For victims of childhood abuse, talking about it can be liberating.

In some cases it can be traumatic, says Kay Hampton, who sits on the new accountability forum for 'survivors' of institutional care.

"People get emotional. Some people cry, some get angry. They have every right to be upset, and we need to be strong enough to respond."

"Several times people have come in and said: 'I had a script for today, but I've told you so much more than I thought I would.' Sometimes they've not even shared it with their family".

Listening can be demanding, which is why there is counselling on offer for the short-handed team now taking on several such sessions a week , just as there is for the people who come to relate their experiences.

"You can't sit and listen to people's lives as if it is a conveyor belt," Hampton says. "Listening to people's suffering four times a week could easily lead to burnout. You have to prepare yourself mentally and not everyone is strong enough to do it."

Kay Hampton has no shortage of public appointments on her CV, as well as a fascinating personal history, having grown up in Apartheid-era south Africa.

So her claim that her current work is more important is striking. "I've done several high powered things in the past, but they pale into insignificance alongside this" she says.

"Jobs I've had have involved changing policy and made an impact on society, but that doesn't compare to sitting in a room with someone who has consistently not been listened to or believed."

Since the turn of the year, Hampton has been a member of the National Confidential Forum (NCF), which invites anyone who was in care as a child, in any setting to come forward and tell their story.

Originally designed in response to campaigns from those abused in children's homes run by charities or churches, the forum's remit of acknowledging the experiences of people who grew up in institutional care has been extended.

As well as anyone from residential care or schools, it will now offer a listening ear to people who spent a shorter times in other settings - in hospital on a children's ward, or even a brief time away on a trip run by a school, or a youth organisation.

This latest stage on her personal journey was very much a conscious choice, Hampton explains. After 15 years in academia in South Africa, and a further 18 in Scotland, largely working at Glasgow Caledonian University, she wanted to do something more practical, 'make a difference' if you like.

That determination to bring about change was ignited in South Africa, where she was born, as were her parents although her family had originally come to the country from India in the early 1900s. As immigrants in a segregated country, they were doubly disadvantaged and inevitably her experiences gave her an interest in equality and human rights from a very young age.

By the time she got into university in Durban, she was an activist and campaigner, who kept pictures of Nelson Mandela hidden in her room. "If they'd been found I would have been charged with terrorism offences, or something ridiculous", she says.

"I went to an Indian-only university and the area I lived in was designated in law as Indian-only. We weren't regarded as human beings, really. We were stripped of all human rights.

" For example, it was illegal to date the man who is now my husband, who is Scottish, and white. It would have been a crime had we been seen together. That kind of thing is hard for people to believe."

As a student, Hampton went through a period of being very angry, she says. "Eventually I mellowed and decided I had to choose between staying a victim or doing something about it."

Over the course of her career 'doing something about it' has meant balancing academia with taking on increasingly high profile public appointments. It's seen her achieve her Phd and the a professorship in community and race relations, but also becoming Scottish chair of the National Lotteries Charities Board, (a predecessor to the Big Lottery Fund), where she was also a member of the UK board. "I was the youngest board member, and the only one from an ethnic minority background, so I was a bit of a novelty. I helped introduce equality to grant-making, which is what I've tried to do wherever I've been - introducing equality, or building on what is already there.

She became transition chair the year the Commission for Racial Equality was merged into the Equality and Human Rights Commission, of which she was then commissioner for three years.

Then in 2011 she decided on a change. "I had spent so many years in that kind of work and I realised I wanted to apply my skills in practice and make a difference." With her previous work, she says, the difference it made was in policy terms, on paper. She wanted a career shift.

She joined the Children's Hearing System as a panel member and subsequently a tutor. But the big development has been her involvement in the NCF. Set up by the Scottish Government, it came very clearly out off a 14 year campaign for justice and redress from victims of childhood abuse in Scottish children's homes.

The predecessor to the forum was the Time to be Heard (TTBH) pilot project, which gave former residents of Quarriers children's homes the chance to explain their experiences. Stories are recorded, and shared anonymously for acknowledgement and so lessons can be learned, but under the new forum institutions will not be named.

There was always a concern that this was not enough for some victims, who wanted financial compensation, or criminal accountability for abusers.

Other developments - particularly the Scottish Government's inquiry into historic child abuse - may now deliver some of that. However until recently, it seemed the forum might be all that was on offer.

Hampton decided to get involved. "At the time it seemed as if the forum was going to be the only game in town. I felt 'if this is all there's going to be, I want to get involved and shape it."

She was particularly influenced by No More Silence, the life story of one of the most prominent campaigners, Dave Whelan, who was abused at Quarriers in Renfrewshire. "I was very touched by the book, it made it three dimensional. When I applied to be on the forum, he was on the interview panel and it was a privilege to meet him."

The Forum offers not accountability for the culprits, or retribution but a chance for victims to explain what happened to them as children, and be believed, possibly for the first time. A low key launch

last year was followed earlier this year by the first cases coming forward as people tested out the approach.

The experience of visiting the forum's Glasgow base is intended to be as comfortable as possible. Rooms are bright, not too institutional, and two forum members sit and record the stories of those who attend. "We were worried with the first few people particularly that we get it right. If we didn't they would go out and say to others 'don't touch the place'.

The forum will even hear from those who have a good care experience to relate. "It's equally valuable for people to share what went well. Some people have come forward and said it is not all bad. I was an orphan, I had nowhere else to go, it gave me a family," Hampton says.

Extending the remit is not 'mission creep,' she adds. "It is more about taking a collective picture of people in care. Did children in hospital get any education for example? Were there volunteers coming into the hospital?" she adds, an obvious nod to the crimes of Jimmy Savile.

Submissions can also be written, recorded and sent in, even Skyped. Forum members have already been down to Nottingham to hear the account of someone not fit to come to Glasgow. Reasonable travel expenses will be paid for those who do wish to come to Scotland and give evidence.

Now, the forum is being approached on a daily basis and as knowledge spreads, the pressure on forum members is only expected to increase. Hampton welcomes it. The change in some of those who attend is almost physical when they walk out, she says. Some have buried a childhood of beatings and abuse, other have been mistreated in other ways, but not being believed has shaped them for life.

"Some won't come because this is not what they want, and we respect that. But I wouldn't be doing this if I wasn't passionate about it," she says. "The worst thing that can happen to you is that you stop caring. "

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