

The Phoenix Development Centre Case Study

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Eric is a devoted volunteer at the Phoenix Development Centre, a community centre in Easterhouse, Glasgow. A community centre that “changed his life”. Living in a cycle of depression, constantly in pain and unable to find medication that worked, Eric was constantly angry, bitter and alone. Life was miserable. At its worst, Eric considered taking his own life. To hear the man in front of me say this is almost unbelievable. The Eric I chat with is a bundle of positive energy, full of chatter and enthusiasm. He is the lynchpin of the local cycling group and a face of the table tennis club run from the Phoenix. Eric’s journey is remarkable and he is very aware of the crucial role the Phoenix Development Centre played in helping this transformation.



Figure 1 - Eric with the bike that positively changed his life as we sit outside the Phoenix Centre.

As I sip the cup of milky tea Eric has made me in the Phoenix Centre kitchen it doesn’t take long for the conversation to turn to bikes. A mutual passion we share. Eric exudes enthusiasm for cycling which is clear to see from his body language. He excitedly tells me a series of stories about his youth with a bike, cycling around the dirt tracks of Easterhouse. Cycling gave Eric energy and a sense of freedom. He tells me of the huge jumps he used to attempt on his mountain bike and the wounds he proudly details as if describing badges of honour.

“I used to jump on my bike and take myself down to the dirt track. I used to lose control and one time had a bloody graze all up one side of my leg from my shin to my hip. But I jumped straight back on the bike and went for it again.”

Away from cycling, growing up in Easterhouse was tough for Eric. From an early age he combined school with providing for his mother, working as a log chopper. But as regeneration projects installed central heating into local homes, work as a log chopper dried up. It’s somewhat ironic that efforts to modernise one of Scotland’s poorest areas would force Eric out of work. 18 of the 20 neighbourhoods of Easterhouse are amongst the 10% most deprived areas in Scotland. Finding work was not easy.

Gaining employment was made even more challenging by the sideways curvature of the spine Eric had developed. A crippling and painful condition, Scoliosis would continually hamper Eric. In constant pain and frequently prescribed different medication, nobody trusted Eric with any form of work. Rejection,



pain, a feeling of worthlessness contributed to Eric becoming increasingly angry, depressed and isolated. Reminiscing about this period, Eric says:

“little things like you looking me in the eye would cause me to flip out in a confrontational outburst. Not only was I really depressed, I was really angry at every person and everything”.

For ten years, Eric drifted. Unable to find a job, unwilling to engage in his community, constantly in pain. In addition, he had a negative reaction to his medication. Depressed, angry and bitter, he distanced himself from friends, family and neighbours. He gave up on anything that brought him joy or happiness, even cycling:

“There were times when I was told someone approached me or said hello in the street to me. I honestly couldn’t remember that happening. My days would just come and go in a flash without me remembering anything you know? Anger and depression just took over everything and I couldn’t break out of it.”

After a decade of “hell”, enough was enough. He learnt to tie a noose as he planned to take his own life. Today Eric seems a million miles from this man. He is content, and he gives back positively to his community by helping others. Throughout the months we have spent together, I have enjoyed his company and its clear he has a strong rapport and relationships with others. Relationships he was far from making during his ten year “nightmare”. Today, he is on “no pills or medication”. It’s hard to believe that a tragic event would, as Eric identifies, be his “turning point”.

Eric’s mum passed away. Through the grief, Eric was given a glimmer of hope. Her will left Eric a small amount of money and stipulated he was to buy a bike. Honouring his mother, buying a bike proved to be the catalyst for change (pictured in the above image).

*“It was the bike that changed my life.
I am scared to think where I would be if I didn’t buy that bike with my mum’s
money she left behind for me. It was a life changer”*

He started to feel the sense of freedom and energy. That feeling he had in his younger years. After 10 years of pain, his caged anger and depression started to dissipate and he could feel the positive difference cycling was having on his wellbeing again.

For the first time in a long while, Eric engaged in conversation with a neighbour. This neighbour told Eric about the refurbished Phoenix Centre and encouraged him to drop in. With no idea what it was, Eric found out it was a community centre in the old library. The old library that was five minutes from his house.



So Eric went in. And life hasn't been the same since. Unknown to him, Eric self-referred in social prescribing into a community hub. A combination of the Phoenix Centre and his bike means Eric is no longer on the intense medication plan he was once on.

Getting to know Eric and the people in the Phoenix Centre over the last few months, Eric seems a far-cry for the man he portrayed himself as during his "nightmare" 10 years.

"You can't get Eric to be quiet these days. He is a completely different man. He talks and he engages. Far from the mute he use to be" explains Richard McShane, founder of the Phoenix Development Centre.

I've just finished a game of table tennis with Eric where he showed me his new table tennis bat. He is at the table tennis club two nights a week, engaging with others in the local club. He describes how he has developed his skills from being 'useless' to being 'able to hold his own' in games with the local table tennis enthusiasts. It's not just the Table Tennis Club that Eric engages in. In fact, he is in all day every day. He helps in any way he can. In fact, before making me a tea, he had been out to collect the essentials for this evening's 'pensioner's bingo'. Eric is known as the 'every day go-to man' that supports the voluntary running of the centre. He is part of the furniture.

"I don't know where I would be without the Phoenix. It's. I speak to people and I do things I never use to do. I love the cycling and I give back that way"

He is more than just the 'go-to man'. Supportive of his passion for cycling, the Phoenix Centre advocated for Eric to undertake bike maintenance and leadership courses. The education the Phoenix Centre has given him is allowing Eric to give back. He is now a community leader. This has led the Phoenix and Eric setting up a cycling group of their own which has grown from strength to strength:

"There is this lassie who has big anxiety challenges. She won't go far. But I've seen her on the bike and it's giving her a sense of freedom to explore other places around Easterhouse. Places she was to scared to go before" Eric explains.

By self-referring into the Phoenix Centre, Eric's life has positively changed. Eric's now a community leader and in a positive place, allowing him to engage and give back to the community centre which changed his wellbeing. He is no longer on the medication routine that sent him into a dark slump. Eric got the best possible gift his mum could have left behind for him. A bike. A gift he is showing others how to use and benefit from.