

# Wave hello to the children in Wigan

In a solicitor's office in Wigan, Alison Hull is having a huge chunk of her hair cut out from her scalp. A pathologist is carrying out this procedure with what Hull describes as a large pair of wallpaper scissors. After he has finished Hull cries and the solicitor witnessing the act has tears in her eyes. "I had long blonde hair down my back," Hull says. "I've had to have it cut short now because of the bald patch it left."

In June 2012 Hull had her five children removed from her care by social services because they had witnessed domestic violence at home. Hull confided in a teacher at school – also a personal family friend – about the abuse and almost immediately her five children were placed in a foster care placement to safeguard them.

"I'm a good person," says

Hull. "If this can happen to me it can happen to anyone."

After attending court to get her children back, Hull's abusive ex-partner, who has two previous charges of domestic violence against him, accused her in court of being a bad mother, a drug addict and an alcoholic.

## Abuse

In order to prove that she was none of these things the court ordered a pathologist to carry out drug and alcohol tests. Hull agreed and this involved having her hair cut out, which she says felt like abuse in itself.

The tests came back negative.

A condition of getting her children back meant that she had to do a number of things to prove that she was a good mother. She attended family contact meetings each

week with her children in the presence of a family support worker, and she was also advised by a solicitor at court to attend the Freedom programme at the Women Against Violent Environments (WAVE) centre in Wigan.

"I didn't even know about the Freedom programme – I'd never heard of one or seen one advertised," she says.

WAVE helps women and children who have been through domestic violence and abuse, and offers shelter and support. The charity was set up in 1989 by Christine Ashton following her own experience of abuse.

"When I suffered domestic violence there was nowhere to go," says Ashton. "I wanted other women to have somewhere they could ring and say hey, this is happening to me."

The centre runs the 12-week Freedom programme, which teaches about domestic violence and patterns of abusive and controlling behaviour.

## Safeguarding

Between June and November 2012 62 women were referred to the Freedom programme, including Hull.

At the beginning of the programme 16 of the women referred had children in the care of the local authority, and 28 of those children were subject to child protection plans and described as in need of safeguarding. After completing the programme, 12 out of the 16 women had their children returned from care and 16 had their children's names removed from the child protection plans. Hull was one of the 12 women.

"I didn't have a life before the Freedom programme," she says. "It has given me the freedom to be who I want to be and I've made changes to my life now and I am my own person."

## 'Valuable again'

Hull suffered 20 years of domestic violence from her ex-partner – physical, emotional and financial. She is getting a divorce now and says the Freedom programme has opened her eyes. She is now training to be a counsellor and works as a part time volunteer.

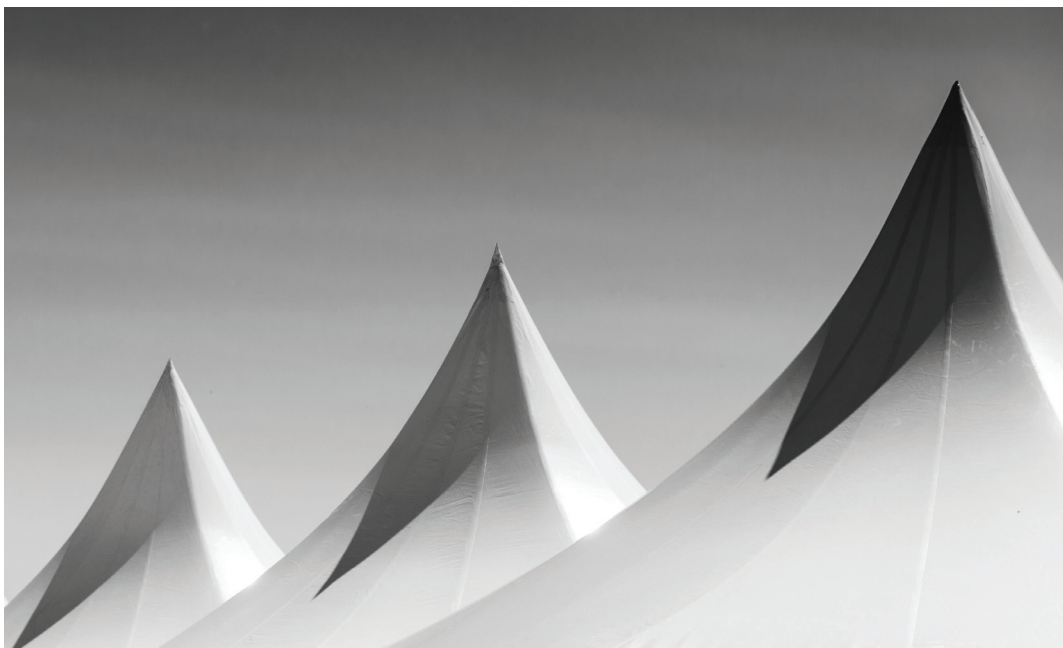
"Knowing there is a person inside you and not being able to do anything about it makes you very depressed. Through attending the Freedom programme I have lost that depression because I realised I wasn't the only person going through it.

"As soon as I left him I went straight to college. I'm doing my masters in September. I found myself a life again and made myself feel valuable again."

She has an indirect court order against her ex-partner, meaning he cannot contact his children, but she says: "They don't miss their dad or have any feelings for him. They had their toys smashed up and watched him physically abuse me.

"On some occasions my boys pulled him off me. Now he's gone we no longer live on egg shells."

KELLY MATTISON



Three peaks at Goodwood. OCA photography student Nigel Prosser was at the motor circuit in West Sussex shooting a weekly track day. From his position at the chicane, he saw the roofs of a temporary marquee. The conversion of the original colour shot to black and white gives the image an alpine feel.

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