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'I run out of money a day or two after I get paid'



GROWING UP POOR

'I'm still a teenager. I'm scared inside'



LES MISERABLES' AMANDA SEYFRIED • KEEPING SAFE ONLINE

Shelby's bed is broken, she has no cooker and she drinks coffee to numb her permanent hunger. She's just one of the young women featured in new documentary *Growing Up Poor*. By **Kelly Mattison**

"I always imagined when I was younger I would just live normally and it would be easy just to have things and buy everything you need. But I'm always skint. I run out of money usually a day or two after I get paid," says Shelby, 17. Shelby lives in a high-rise flat on the south side of Glasgow. She moved there from a hostel after spending her teenage years shifting between her dad's, her aunt's and her friend's. "I'd go and stay somewhere and at the time I was like, they don't want me, they don't care about me, they don't love me."

Most things are pink in Shelby's flat and canvas pictures of Marilyn Monroe hang on her walls, a small black and white one above her bed. "When I was younger I wanted to be an actress but acting lessons cost money."

She says she expected when she left school that somebody would discover her and she would be a famous actress within a week. "But it's just not how it works. You don't know anything about life and how hard stuff is."

Shelby is one of three teenage girls telling her story in a BBC3 documentary, *Growing Up Poor - Girls*. She speaks with insight direct to the camera about her struggle to survive on less than £10 a day.

After living on benefits Shelby now works five days a week. She is happy to be working because for a year she lay in bed with no reason to get up. A six-month work placement arranged for her by a local charity, it is her first job and, she feels, her "one chance". She is stacking shelves at a supermarket but, despite working 30 hours a week, Shelby is financially no better off. The £55 a week she gets from the placement is the same as Jobseeker's Allowance. "It's not

that great," she says. "But at least I'm working and going out doing something. Obviously I'm still going to make mistakes but I'm going down the right path."

When she moved into her flat she had nothing but two duvets and a teddy and slept on the floorboards. "It was quite cold then because it would have been November." She then upgraded to a pull-out bed that hurt her back and "wasn't much better". She pulls the bed out with difficulty – it's bigger than her – and sits on it but the spring is broken and she falls through to the floor. "You end up down here," she says with a laugh. "It was straight to start with."

In the flat wallpaper hangs off the walls in places and plugs hang out of sockets. "For the first couple of days I was like, I don't care, this is my house. I just thought everything

When she moved into her flat she had nothing but two duvets and a teddy

would be sorted and I'd have a nice time and a nice house, but I don't."

She stands on her sofa to look out of the window. Facing her is another high rise flat and far below women are shouting and arguing. Gangs of teenage boys are pushing each other around in the children's play area. "It's quite sad – I spend a lot of time up here just looking at everything. You know, it's sad that I'm 17 and just looking out of the window." She doesn't feel that there's anyone else her age sitting there doing this. She shrugs her shoulders. "I'm bored," she says. "And there's always people fighting and drunk."

"£55 I get and that's all I've got to live on." Shelby sits on the edge of her bed. A broken piece of mirror



'This week :

leans precariously on the wall next to her. The other half of it stands on top of the storage heater with odd shoes scattered underneath. She writes her shopping list – fishfingers, cereal, chips, crisps, cold meat, juice and cheese. It adds up to £14.50. Then there's £10 for electricity, and new socks this week, which she predicts will be about £2. "Toilet roll – I need that as well." She scribbles it down on her pad. "Before I did any budgeting I'd just go to the shop and say I want this and this and I'd spend like £20."



I'm getting myself socks'

She has £12.50 left over – for cigarettes. She looks guilty. “I could probably get more food with that but fags are about the only luxury I get.” Then she remembers. “Well, this week I’m getting myself socks.”

To furnish her rented flat Shelby applied for a Community Care Grant. She was initially refused but eventually given just enough money to buy a bed, a fridge and a microwave. But for the last ten months she has had no cooker.

She returns to her flat with two carrier bags. “Under budget – I spent

£10.25 so I’ve got £4 left to play with.”

She lifts up the bags. “All this for a tenner.” She goes to the fridge and pulls out a ready-made fishfinger butty, which is £1 and goes in the microwave. “It’s quite nice – it’s just fishfingers and this wee bun thing.” But food for the microwave is “dead expensive” and she wishes that she had a cooker to

Shelby wishes that she had a cooker to “cook real food like real people do”

“cook real food like real people do”. Her aunt has a spare cooker that she can have; she just needs to save the cash to pay someone to collect it for her.

“I know I’ve got a big appetite. I’m always hungry – even if I’ve eaten I’m still hungry.” She tells herself she’s just greedy and smiles. She has found a way to keep her hunger at bay. If she drinks a lot of coffee she gets “this sick feeling” and doesn’t want to eat. “So if I drink that then it helps.”

For Shelby the options to save or

Shelby would have to give up her flat and return to a hostel if the government stopped housing benefit for young people

borrow money are limited. Doorstep lenders would help but at a cost, while the likelihood of getting a loan from a high street bank is almost nil. Shelby hears of a possible alternative and goes to open a credit union account. "I want to save for a carpet; I think I could squeeze like a fiver a week." As she returns to her flat and fills out the form, the reality of her weekly wage sinks in. "Are you currently employed?" the form asks. "I'm doing 30 hours a week – that's £1.83 an hour." Isn't the minimum wage £4-£5 an hour, she wonders aloud? "That's quite bad," she laughs. She had never thought about it like that. "Feels like I'm getting ripped off a bit."

A colleague at work with a van helps her to collect her aunt's old cooker, and for the first time in six months Shelby makes contact with her dad, who comes over to fit it for her. She enjoys the family support. "It was good doing something with him." It's with his help that she is able to cook herself a "real" meal. She makes soup like her granny and aunt do but after buying the fresh ingredients she will have no money left for the rest of the week. "Ninety-odd pence" is all that is left.

"David Cameron is supposed to be stopping housing benefit for people under 25, which I don't think is fair because I'm getting housing benefit but I'm still working. So if he did that right now then I wouldn't know what to do. There would be no way I could stay in this house. I'd probably be back in hostels or something."

It's evening and Shelby is looking out of her window again. "I think when I was a wee girl, like seven or eight, everything was so easy. Everything just happens the way it happens. You're only a child for so long, then it's up to you to make what you want of your life. I don't feel bad about where my life is. It's not ideal but I'm still only 17. I've got a lot of time to make what I want of my life, so this is just a temporary position hopefully." ■

Growing up Poor - Girls is on BBC3 at 9pm on 9 January



AMBER, 16

Amber is 16 and pregnant. She lives in Bradford and is sleeping on the couch in the lounge as her bedroom is getting re-decorated. She'll stay on the couch until she can afford to buy a new carpet for the bedroom.

"It's hard," she says. "I'm still a teenager. I'm scared inside. Being pregnant is a new beginning and I've got to grow up."

When she goes to hospital she feels awkward because she looks so young compared with other mums. "Sometimes you get a few stares."

She feels that being pregnant at sixteen means she has done something wrong. She describes other mums at the hospital.

"A lot of them are with their partners and I just walk in on my own."



BRIDIE, 17

At just 17, Bridie from Ferham, in Rotherham, is on bail. As part of her bail conditions she is not allowed to enter the street where her best friend Billie lives. Bridie breaches this order and goes to see Billie. Neighbours hear that she is back and call the police. Bridie is then arrested, kept in the cells and fined £170.

"I wouldn't dare fetch my kids up in Ferham," she says. "It's horrible and there's no hope for nobody."

Bridie used to live with her grandmother. "At my nan's I had discipline but I didn't like what she was saying so I just argued with her until I couldn't live with her."

She has dreams of joining the army so that she can go back to her grandmother and say: "Look, I have come out with something and not just a criminal record or something stupid like that."

Billie says about Bridie: "She's just a little girl in a big world trying to be a big girl."