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Prisoner to Listener

Niel Swann was a Listener at Highpoint South prison. He was discharged in May this year.

I first became aware of Prison Listeners when I came to Highpoint in May 2001. There was the odd Listener in my remand prison, but I was not really sure what their job was, what they were there to do; I was never really told anything about them. That all changed once I arrived at HMP Highpoint. On induction, I heard a session by a lifer who said he was a Listener, there 24 hours a day for people like me, anyone who needed to talk. There to listen and offer a way of hope, instead of feeling alone and lost in times of despair.

I listened to him, and knowing I had worries of my own, still wanted to maybe sign up to helping others instead of thinking of myself. But I knew I had some way to go before I could even sit down with another, and hear their heartache on top of my own.

I could write at length about the pain and hurt I was feeling then, on top of the sentence I was given. The crime was my own doing, but the hurt had been growing for years, like a tumour. I had become a little bitter and twisted; and had the 'poor me' syndrome. But with the right care, and often helping attitude of prison staff, I slowly became a person again, the person I used to be, and was happy to be again.

This did not happen overnight. It was seven months before I became a Listener. The training lasted six weeks. I became friendly with other trained Listeners, and members of the Samaritans, who are not a bad bunch of people. For the first time in my life, I felt a part of something.

I will always remember that Christmas of 2001. I had my first call-out. I was worried I'd get it all wrong.

I was in front of a 23 year old who had cut his arms, and who talked like he did not want to be a part of life any more. And I thought I had worries. When you start to hear what others are going through, your own life seems 'normal'. After what seemed like a lifetime, I left the guy's cell. He shook my hand and said 'Thanks' with tears in his eyes, and told me I was a lifesaver. 'I know', I said.

However, it was never all plain sailing. I came to a point where I wanted to give up, and felt myself sinking back into the hole I had taken so long to climb out of. I still at times needed that helping hand myself. I found it in the last place I would have looked. Many of the officers at Highpoint have given me their time and much good advice, and to my surprise, I will miss the people they really are. And they are many.

I have been a Listener six months now, and have listened to many. Where some cried, I left them knowing they had a friend in a Listener. As I near the end of my sentence, I look back over the last year, and know Highpoint has taught me a lot, about myself and what I can achieve if I try. In the darkest of hours there are people who care and are willing to give all their time and a helping hand to a fallen brother when he's down.

I was not the first Listener and know I will never be the last. But what I know now has helped me in my life to become more outgoing, and to believe that I can make a difference. Although being a Listener will not suit everyone, I would not change who I have become for anything in the world.

Thanks to the Samaritans and to Highpoint.