

Charlotte's Story

“Mentoring gave me purpose, focus, and a little more self-belief.”

Loss of freedom when coming to prison is difficult, no matter what the circumstances. You know life will never be the same for anyone involved. Losses come in many forms, from losing your home, to losing your family and your friends. Material things didn't bother me at all but mourning for a life I once had, did. I had let people down, many of them.

I was numb for a while. Devoid of any emotion or rather not allowing any emotion at all. I began writing a diary. Every single day I would write and write. Thoughts and feelings, good or bad. I was lucky enough to access reading groups and a creative writing course in prison.

Nearing the end of my sentence, I was concerned about how I would live on the outside, and what I would do for work. I was worried about the present, the past, and the future - what would it look like? Would I have one? Would I ever be in a relationship again? Would I ever have any confidence again? Would I ever be remotely happy?

Upon release, I didn't have my own place but was fortunate to be able to stay with a friend. Although I was very thankful to have a roof over my head, I was still feeling vulnerable and insecure. I felt I just wanted to hide. I had no purpose, no vision. Even some months after my release, I found it hard to cope and self-harmed. The first and only time I have ever done this.

I didn't know where my life was heading at all as I had no goal, no plan and little motivation at this point. But I did, however, continue writing. I started to write about the initial stages of release, when you are back facing reality, and it helped me come to terms with childhood issues I had never processed.

I came across the Koestler Arts Mentoring Scheme a few months after release, and felt inspired - I really wanted to be involved, so I emailed:

“Hello,

I have recently been released from Prison where one of the most rewarding things I did was write, sometimes about not very much but I wrote every day, it was very therapeutic, and I participated in a couple of projects the Prison ran which was hugely rewarding. I read about your Mentoring scheme; I would also be interested in helping volunteer with any kind of writing projects you may have”.

I was absolutely thrilled when I was accepted onto the scheme soon after. My first 'win' in a long time. I received a Mentee Handbook which gave me details about the programme, and a letter from my Mentor, telling me a little about himself. He was a published writer, with a passion for reading and storytelling.

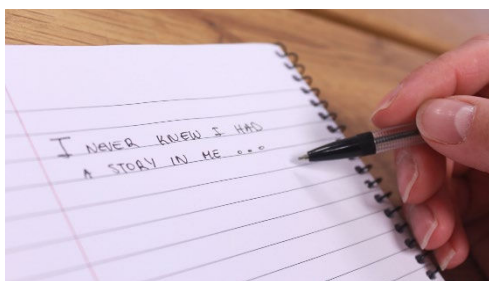
I dedicated myself entirely to the programme, opportunities like this don't come too often. When I wasn't writing I was studying, researching,



generating ideas, and it also gave me the space to think about what I wanted for my future self.

My Mentor was utterly brilliant. He helped me focus on what ideas to take forward, and gave me great reading lists. I took every bit of advice and guidance, and as soon as I got home from the sessions I would immediately put into practice what I had learned and work on my 'homework' while it was fresh in my mind. We would always meet at the Barbican, and I loved getting to the city early on a Saturday morning and walking through the quiet streets to get there.

From the outset, I did not want to write longer fiction. I thought it would be too much of a commitment and I wouldn't be able to do it. But as the sessions developed and with the encouragement of my Mentor, I had an absolute breakthrough when I embarked on writing longer fiction. Hearing my Mentor 'laugh out really loud' when reading some of my anecdotes and describing them as 'golden' was real validation for me as a writer, which I was starting to believe I now was.



I realised the only barrier that had been stopping me from pursuing creativity after prison, was me. I had come such a long way over the 12 months of mentoring, not only in terms of my writing but my confidence. I was a long way from being totally happy, but I had hopes and felt really proud to be working on my first novel.

I have continued my involvement with Koestler Arts since then, as a Mentoring Alumni. After my sessions ended, I was asked to be part of a focus group which would contribute to ongoing research into the impact of Koestler Arts. Then I was asked to design creative Art Aid tasks for people in prisons during lockdown, which I continued for several months. But an absolute highlight for me was being invited to choose the Themed Category for the 2021 Koestler Awards, and judging the Awards alongside another Mentee. I am incredibly privileged to have been a judge for 3 years now.

I had felt lost to say the least when I left prison, but the mentoring gave me purpose, focus, and a little more self-belief. It helped take my mind off unhelpful thoughts and flashbacks. I had something positive to focus on. It wasn't all plain sailing, but it helped me move forward. Without the programme and my Mentor, I doubt I would have achieved any of it.

Charlotte's story will be shared in our 2024 BBC Radio 4 Charity Appeal, airing on Sunday 7 April and Thursday 11 April 2024.

If her story has inspired you to apply for mentoring, or to support our work, please get in touch info@koestlerarts.org.uk.