

Name: James Hepburn

DOB – 19/08/1963

Name(s) of Care Home – Foster care at Sanquhar Mains Farm, Forres

Reason for going into care: Breakdown of parent's relationship

Age in care: Approximately 5/6 - 16

Personal statement

I grew up in the care of both my mother and father. There were six of us in total myself, my brother Robert, and our four sisters: Maureen, Sheila, Mary, and Phillis. I was very young at the time and don't remember a great deal, but I know that we were placed into care following the breakdown of my parents' relationship.

I later learned that my father was a violent man. According to my brother, Robert and I used to sleep in the same room as our parents, and we often witnessed our father beating our mother. My mother left when I was around four years old, and as a result, all of us children were placed into care.

We were first taken to a children's home in Aberdeen. I can't remember the name of the home, but I do recall that all of us were kept together there. One vivid memory stands out: a massive warehouse fire across the street. I remember watching the flames through the window that image has stayed with me, even though we weren't there for very long.

After that, we were separated and placed in pairs with different foster families. Robert and I were fostered together for about a year by a kind couple who treated us well. Sadly, they eventually decided to start a family of their own and no longer wanted to foster us. It felt like yet another rejection.

We were then sent to live with Mr. and Mrs. Munroe at Sanquhar Mains Farm near Forres, where I stayed from around the age of 5 or 6 until I turned 16. My memories from that time are overwhelmingly negative. My childhood was effectively destroyed there I have no happy memories. Although social services placed us in care to protect us from abuse at home, we were simply transferred into another abusive environment.

Mrs. Munroe was physically and psychologically abusive. She was quick to use her hands and ruled the household through fear and intimidation. Having already been exposed to violence from my father, this continued pattern of abuse left me surrounded by fear throughout my early years.

The environment in the Munroe household was cold and emotionally barren. Mrs. Munroe showed no affection, only hostility. She screamed at us in public, forced us to always walk ahead of her, and would often lash out if we failed to notice she'd stopped somewhere, like a

shop. At home, even watching TV came with strict rules: we had to sit with our hands and knees together, afraid to move or even relax. Any perceived misstep could result in her physically assaulting us. She would pull down our trousers and underwear and beat us.

Robert and I lived in constant fear. We ran away twice together, and I ran away four times on my own, always on a Monday after receiving my weekly school lunch money. I remember sleeping in awful conditions. Once even wrapped in an old carpet just to stay warm.

Each time I ran away, my social worker asked why. I always told them the truth: that Mrs. Munroe was beating us. Yet each time, we were sent right back. She would behave for a short while, and then the abuse would resume. I was desperate for someone to listen and couldn't understand why nothing changed.

We weren't starved, but we had no freedom around food. We could only eat what we were given and when. I looked forward to going to school just to have a decent meal. Mrs. Munroe was a poor cook, and the meals at home were terrible. When the Munroe's had family get together's, me and my brother Robert had to stand behind the kitchen door to have our meal, whilst the rest of their family sat around the table. We were obviously not seen or treated as part of the family.

School wasn't much of a refuge either. I was bullied there as well, likely because others knew I was in care. It felt like there was no escape. I don't even understand why the Munroe's took us in; looking back, it seems like it was for the money. They already had six children, one of whom still lived at home, but she wasn't treated the same way we were.

One of the few glimpses of what family life could be came from my best friend at school. His parents were kind and showed warmth. Their home had love and joy, things I could only dream of as a child.

We were never taken on trips or holidays, and we didn't experience the normal joys of childhood. The farmhouse was isolated, and even though there was another cottage nearby, we weren't allowed to explore or interact. Mrs. Munroe's presence loomed over everything.

Occasionally, my father would visit and take us to see our sisters, maybe twice a year. When my brother Robert discovered that our siblings had reconnected with our mother, he left. I never saw him again during my time there. For the last four years, I endured the Munroe's alone. Social services made no effort to help me stay in touch with my siblings, and over time I lost contact with all of them.

Robert left at 16. Since he was four years older, I was left behind to face the abuse on my own for four more years. Every day was miserable.

When I turned 16, I left immediately. I went to live in a boarding bed and breakfast in Elgin and started working at William Low's supermarket. I don't think social services even knew where I

was. I had minimal contact with a social worker during school because of the difficulties I was facing, but once I left foster care, I received no aftercare or support.

There was another couple, a kind woman and her husband who was in the RAF. Who wanted to foster and possibly adopt me. I worked with them for a time and started staying in their home. But I didn't know how to communicate or build relationships. Coming from the environment I did, I had learned to be constantly on guard. That situation didn't work out either, and I was alone again.

My mental health was affected throughout all of this. I've suffered from depression and anxiety, and much of it stemmed from both the trauma of my childhood and the challenges of coming to terms with my sexuality. I also struggled with alcohol. It became a way of numbing my emotions. I would drink whenever I had money. I once spoke to a friend about it, but nothing changed.

Eventually, I joined the RAF, partly inspired by the couple who had wanted to adopt me. But I still struggled to form close relationships. My childhood taught me to protect myself above all else, and to expect rejection or hurt from others. To this day, I remain single and without a family, as it's the only way I've found to avoid further pain.

Even now, if someone raises their voice, I shake, a reaction rooted in the abuse I endured for so many years.

Despite everything, I've learned to live life on my own terms. I'm as content as one can be living life alone.