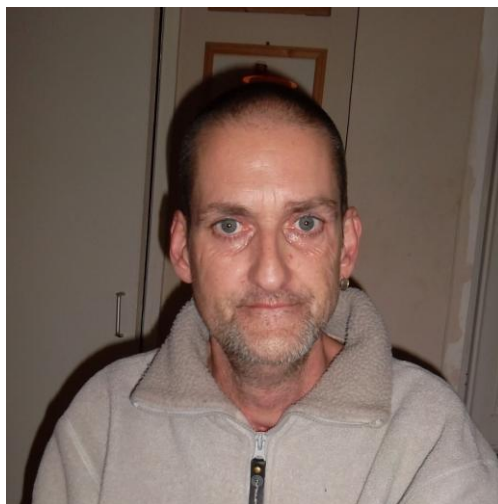


Andy Joel's story

I interviewed Andy in the flat where he spends 2-3 nights a week with his girlfriend Tracy, their dogs Baby [a three year old Staffordshire bull terrier who has been trained to a Kennel Club gold certificate level] and Freedom [a five month old Staffordshire bull terrier, cute as a button], two white rats in a huge cage, and a tank of fish.



My name is Andy Joel. I'm from all parts of the country, as most homeless people are. I'm 48 and I've been homeless since I was 14½, and I understand how the homeless feel.

I had a bad childhood, like most homeless people do. I was the middle child, and my brother and sister could do no wrong. My dad was always in and out of prison. He got done for armed robbery so many times that we hardly ever saw him. And when he did show up it wasn't "how are the kids" and that, it was "shut up and go up to the bedroom" for us, or we'd get slapped around the head, or end up in a cupboard for about three hours. He'd think you'd been drinking his drink and get paranoid. He was handy with his fists, my dad was. He used to force me have a drink, and burned my arm a couple of times because he thought I was stealing. I remember one time that he sold all our Christmas presents: we only had about two presents that year. But apart from that I didn't really have a dad. It's only been in the last five or ten years that I've realised that this isn't normal for someone to slap you or hit you or tell you off for no reason.

My mum was left on her own because my dad was always in the pub. He was a real Jack the Lad, but my mum worshipped the ground that he walked on. Eventually my mum met someone else and got married while my dad was in prison. I didn't agree with that because I thought she should have waited. We talked about it in the end.

I was never at school, especially third, fourth and fifth year. I was drinking in the woods. I had already become an alcoholic by then. My dad had a bar at home and that did me head in. But I was also working on the coal wagon and milk run. You couldn't join the youth training scheme until you were 15½, 16, and I had to find some way of keeping myself busy.

When I was 14½, I had enough of my mum and dad and decided to go live on the streets on my own. I was sleeping rough. Living on the streets then was like now, you don't forget that stuff. People know you're needy and they take advantage of you. I had instances of where people would try it on me, older men, when I was asleep. I'd get a lift and someone would say "do you want to come in the back of the van". I'd had enough of that because I was sexually abused when I was younger, by a member of the family, and that was hard. I don't talk to people about that.

After a couple of months of that I decided to go to London. I got my aunt's address there. She was my father's sister. I lived with her for a while, and she was great. My aunt had run away from her husband, and was living with a hippie. They had all been involved in the robberies, and had all got sentenced together, but blamed it on each other. I'd play on a Play Station, or on the street. I'd see the vicar in the small vicarage down the road. He had loads of old tins of food that were beyond their use-by date. He gave me about 150 of them. I shared some with homeless people, but then I gave some to a geezer in a shop. He said "I'll give you so much for them". And that's when I really started drinking hard, when I was about 16, 17.

My aunt was an alcoholic, and her boyfriend was too. Their routine was to be at work during the day, wait until five o'clock when the club would be open at the bottom of the road, go down to the club, drink until ten or eleven o'clock, come home pissed up and swearing and arguing, and then they'd treat me like a little kid and send me to bed. But I had already grown up by then, so in the end I had an argument with my aunt's boyfriend, punched him and left the house.

I started on a youth training scheme, £25 for forty hours per week. That was in the late eighties, early nineties, when money weren't around. I used to give my mother £20 of that and used to be left with a fiver.

When I was about 20 I went to prison for a few years, for being drunk and disorderly. Then I went back to prison again for 3½ years.

In between I had lost my wife and my twin boys. They died in a car crash in Swindon. That was very, very difficult for me. I don't want to talk about that. All I can say is that I loved her and the twins a lot. That's all. When you talk to people on the streets, they've always lost somebody or been through sexual abuse or whatever.

I used to be good at running. I went into the Bristol marathon with no training. It took me five hours and forty minutes. I had to stop quite a few times and my legs hurt, but I finished. I just wanted to prove to myself that I could do it and that I'm not worthless.

When I was 24 years old, I had been in a few hostels and I met somebody in Bristol. That didn't work out and I became depressed but didn't know it. Then I came to Oxford. I went to a place called the Portacabins, near where O'Hanlon House is now. They were ridiculous. People would piss while they were waiting to get in there. A lot of people there were mentally ill, and they don't give a shit about nothing. And then you got people that play on it. You go into some shelters now and people complain about the smallest thing. If you were in a place like in Centrepoin in London, it was quite difficult then. You had to leave after 8:30 and weren't allowed back to the hostel till about 5:30. You'd be lucky if you got your sheets changed, and for meals you'd get a piece of toast and a little bowl of cereal in the morning, and then you'd get your evening meal. And that would be it. There were no courses for you to do.

Some homeless people won't speak about what it's like to be homeless. Anything for a warm meal some nights. I've lost count of the hostels I've been in: London, Swindon, Oxford where I finally settled. For instance you get blokes driving along in their lorry, and they offer you a couple of fags and try to take advantage of you. And it's not just blokes, sometimes it's women. It's everyone for themselves out there. Most homeless people resort to shoplifting. Or you get people from the

army, they know how to deal with it the safest way: they get a tent, move off and live in the woods. But if people aren't from an area they're told to move on, because you have to be living somewhere for so long to get a place. I don't agree with moving people on: they should look at people's circumstances more, for instance what they've done and how they're doing. Maybe people should look into other people's minds. There's loads of people on the street that have psychiatric problems from their family that have built up over the years, but all people see is the outside of that person, not the actual inside.

I was a nurse for about ten years. I worked for the terminally ill. I felt that I had something to give them. I never did exams in school, so I had no qualifications. Back then, you could get your qualifications while you were working, so I started as a basic carer and worked my way up to NVQ level 2 and 3, and then became the senior care assistant. I loved doing that job. It meant the world to me. I was working eighty hours per week, on £3.25 per hour.

But after a while it got to me. In the nineties, standards were pretty bad. The scandals are only starting to come up now, but I've seen a few times where old people were treated badly. It was terrible. For instance I walked in on a nurse who was shoving a bar of soap down an old lady's throat. But because I didn't have any qualifications I couldn't say a lot about it. After a while I couldn't make sense of it. I tried my hardest to help out, doing seventy, eight hours per week, but it wasn't making any difference. I couldn't give any more than I had, so I left the job in the end.

I came to Oxford for the second time six years ago in April. I met my girlfriend Tracy then. It was really good at O'Hanlon House then. We met at a quiz night. We were on opposite teams. Both our teams won, and then Tracy asked me out. People at shelters are always jealous. They say "Ah, it'll never work out. You can do better" and all this lot. And I tell them that I'm happy just as I am.

[Here Andy was prompted by Tracy to talk about his achievements]. I don't like talking about myself because I feel that I'm not worth it. I spent a year at The Knowle, which is a psychiatric hospital in Abingdon. That's enough to send you off your mind anyway. Plus the people in there were schizophrenics. I wasn't schizophrenic – they just sent me there "for a rest" – but I ended up losing it in there. If you ain't mad there you soon become it. In the end, I settled down and was running groups there. I was running a cooking group: we assume that everyone knows how to boil and egg but they don't because of what they've been through. I used to teach people how to make shepherd's pie, loads of things. And I'd teach people how to meet people and make friends, because that's a really important thing in life; or how to not be afraid; or how not to be ripped off on the streets. I'd see what they'd like, chat to them, and then I'd talk to the staff, and they'd ask me to help that person out on this or that sort of point.

I won an award because the staff thought I was eligible for it, for running groups: relaxation groups, talking groups about anything that people wanted to talk about, exercise groups. I had a huge file to keep track of it all. One day the staff invited me to this place and asked me to bring the file. There were loads of people and food. The staff told me that me and fifty or thirty other people had been nominated for a special award. All the top homeless were there, and there was only one award. Then the man at the microphone asks "Is Andy Joel there?". I said yeah, and he called me up on the stage, and he gave me an award and a badge. I really enjoyed getting that award.

I went away to a camp at Minehead for a week. It was free, with lots of rides and it was a good laugh. But I had £1000 waiting to be cleared at the bank, and it cleared two days after we got there. It was just too strong for me. I ended up getting drunk and getting into a fight with a couple of bouncers down there. The staff at the camp were telling me what I could and couldn't do, and I hate authority. I got kicked out of the camp and was put in jail overnight. I got sent home a day early, and someone had to take me all the way from Minehead to Oxford. So that was the end of the holiday. I was gutted. I went down a destructive path, ended up on the streets again, drinking.

I was a drug addict for a quite a few years. I don't regret it. At the time I would have died or gone insane without drugs. You need faith in yourself, and when you're taking drugs it's like you're in a bubble. You feel good and protected and more with yourself, like you have a comfort blanket. You forget your homelessness for those four or five hours, and during that time you can talk to other people without being afraid, and you can go to places that you wouldn't normally be able to go. It's OK for someone to just pass you and give you a fiver and tell you to get some help, but we do need it sometimes. It's pretty tight, and we just carry on.

Of course in the end you get addicted. I went to rehab, and then got myself out. It took a good few attempts. I was on methadone for about a year, and then I ended up in hospital because of my pancreas.

I'm dying of pancreatic cancer. I went to a place in Abingdon because of my cancer. I had half of my pancreas taken out, I had quite a few other things done to my body, and I was sewn up basically like you'd sew up a chicken. It felt uncomfortable. Now I'm on morphine and many other tablets. I have to have my morphine just to stand up and walk, but people who see me in the street don't understand that. They think that because there's one fake, everyone is putting it on. I also have diabetes type 1.

I dislike power and authority. I think that some people can't move on because they haven't been treated right, and aren't given the chance to speak about their situation. It's always "say this, say that". People don't see the other side because they don't want to listen. If authority was run by someone who had lived on the streets rather than reading about it in a book, then I'd listen to them quite happily.

I'm soft at heart and get on well with people. I like chatting to homeless people. I seem to treat them better than anyone than anyone that I've met in authority. Often when I see someone new turning up at the night shelter, aged 17 or 18, I try to get to know them and try to help them out. But say I used to be scoring drugs and somebody would say that they'd help me and then rip me off, they'd only get one chance.

I've got a circle of friends that I go see maybe once a week. I can't get out much because of the illness. People only see me when I take my morphine and my other tablets, and they say "yeah, you're doing alright". They don't see what Tracy has to put up with behind closed doors.

My girlfriend Tracy and my two dogs, Freedom and Baby, have kept me going. I bought Tracy four fish and two rats, because she likes animals. Tracy bought Baby for me, and I bought Freedom for her. I really think that I would have ended it all by now if it wasn't for them. I asked Tracy to turn off the machine in hospital when I was seriously ill.

I get £260 per month. We just about survive on the money. Tracy got some furniture and the washer through a grant. The bed that Tracy bought a few months ago – she sleeps in the living room and I sleep in the bedroom because of my illness – that bed broke because it wasn't well made.

Tracy has been doing up her flat. She's been in it for six months now. Tracy doesn't get help from the government, so she has to pay for it all herself. It was terrible when she got here. Evidently there used to be about twenty taxi drivers sharing this flat. There was dirt all over, the doors were terrible, there was no paint on the walls. She redecorated the kitchen and put in a washing machine, now she's painting the hall and the living room. The living room will be mushroom with a top border of dark red, to match the lampshade. She bought tiles for £1 each on sale, grey for the kitchen and wood laminate for the living room. I tried to help her.

Tracy and I are getting hitched just before Christmas. We're going to have a pagan wedding by Carfax Tower. It won't be with rings, just with handkerchiefs. All I want to do with my life is, before I die, to go on holiday anywhere, just for a week, and just really relax, me and Tracy. We've applied for different funds to do that, but there's always a catch in them. I've never been on holiday ever.

If I could change one thing, it would be how the system pays out. Sometimes you get people claiming off the Social when they shouldn't be, but then there are genuine people out there who rely on someone getting nicked and their money getting taken off them, and that money goes to the government, and then the government pays out.

As I see it from my eyes, you notice after a while on the streets the different ways people look at you. Most the time people make you feel unwelcome. You feel guilty for things uncomfortable, even sitting in libraries, shops etc., i.e. going into shops to buy things. Security is watching you, because not who you are, but the way you're dressed, or even unshaven, dirty trainers etc. I bet I'm not the only homeless person to feel like this. Paranoia is an illness a lot of homeless people end up getting. They end up on medication and one thing goes to another. Why is it that we fight or rip each other up to survive in the end on the streets, and in life itself?