

If it hadn't been for you, dear reader, I might still be living on the streets

At 16, Danny Forsyth lost his mother, his home and his way. He found his feet a decade later thanks to a job selling Sunday Times subscriptions

Katherine Forster

December 22 2019, 12:01am,
The Sunday Times

Media



Danny Forsyth urges employers to 'look past the front cover' when hiring
ANDREW HASSON

Share



Saved



If you have ever received a friendly phone call trying to tempt you to subscribe to The Sunday Times or to renew your subscription, because — perish the thought — it has lapsed, you may have heard the dulcet tones of Danny Forsyth. He began working as a telesales agent six years ago, when he was homeless.

He was just about getting by, sleeping in a friend's living room. He saw an ad on the classified ad site Gumtree for a job at Interact, a company based in Richmond upon Thames, southwest London, which works with Times Newspapers, among other companies.

"They saved me," says the 30-year-old in a smooth, deep voice made for telephonic communication.

You want to impress at a job interview. You might splurge on a new outfit. Get your hair done. Danny could afford neither, so cut his hair himself.

"There were some clippers at my friend's house but no power supply in the bathroom. They would only reach to do the right-hand side of my head properly. I had to put my whole body to a right angle just so I could get to the left-hand side."

Interact looked beyond the wonky haircut, saw his potential and hired him. He was so good at selling over the phone that at the end of his first week the team leader pulled him aside. "I thought I was in trouble but he said, 'I've put an extra £80 into your pay packet. We appreciate how well you're doing.'" It wasn't long until he was promoted to corporate sales manager.

It was a reversal of fortune for a young man who had struggled for almost a decade.

He grew up with his mother, Annie, in Surbiton, southwest London. She had “a myriad of illnesses” and was often in hospital. Then, one Christmas Day, she fell into a coma and never came out of it. Danny was 16.

After her death, he discovered she was not his biological mother. She was, in fact, his adoptive grandmother, the woman who had adopted his mother. She was no blood relation at all. “My whole world came crashing down. No one was who I thought they were. I felt like I lost everything. And a lot of questions will never be answered.”

With no relations, he dropped out of college and became homeless. His local council offered to house him in a young people’s hostel, but being “a nice, skinny boy” he didn’t go, knowing it was notorious for gang violence. “I’d been in there a couple of times and seen, like, bloody handprints along the corridors. I would’ve been eaten alive.”

He turned to friends and the kindness of their families, and spent years drifting from house to house, sleeping on sofas, in spare rooms and the bedrooms of teenagers at university. Jobs came and went. At 19, he and his girlfriend split up and a close friend committed suicide. Soon he was sleeping in parks and squatting in dilapidated houses in leafy Richmond. When asked about drugs, he simply says: “When you’re young and on the streets and squatting, you don’t have many options.”

Today, he rents a flat with his best friend in Kingston but can still recall “some horrible, horrible times, and numerous suicide attempts. I’ve apparently tried to throw myself off buildings and police have had to sit on me until other people have arrived. I’ve been found in doorways on high streets, semi-naked with no idea how I got there, and woken up strapped down in psychiatric hospitals.”

Even after joining Interact, life was “still rocky”. Once, at 4am, the bailiffs banged on the door of a friend’s council flat where he was staying. “I had to ring work and say, ‘I’m so sorry but I’ve been evicted; all my stuff is out on the street. I can’t come in today.’”

He was open with his new bosses from the outset and is grateful for their support and training, which has helped him reach the point where he now feels “extremely competent and confident. I’m not worried about anything any more.”

His transformation has been so successful that last week he began a new job, selling luxury cruise packages for a travel company. Interact says it couldn’t be prouder of Danny. They now often hire other talented young people who are sofa surfing or living in hostels.

Danny hopes more firms will be prepared to do the same. He admits looking presentable can be tricky “if you haven’t had a proper bath or a shower for a week”, but he urges employers to “look past the front cover and give people an opportunity to prove themselves”.

And his advice to others who may be down on their luck is: “Don’t give up. You will eventually get lucky and find people who will give you a chance for who you are, not where you come from.”

[@Forster K](#)