

# Listening Point

**Susan Dale** explores how the project set up to support the community of Machynlleth has touched her life, spirituality and work as a counsellor

**M**any readers of *Thresholds* have emailed their support over the last 12 months as the story of April Jones' abduction and murder has unfolded and has been shared through my editorial. Now, a year on from the murder, it feels a good time to start the process of reflecting on the project. Here, within this short article, I thought it might be helpful to others for me to share something of my own personal journey into enmeshment within a community and trauma in ways that reached across boundaries of professional, personal and spiritual, yet held strong ethical boundaries which enabled others to attain wholeness.

I use the word enmeshment, which is not one I would usually use in the context of the therapeutic frame. Normally my counselling and supervision practice is carefully bounded work, outside of my local community of faith and neighbours. It could be seen as a word with negative connotations in respect of the therapeutic, but, there are occasions when I feel we need to ensure that the boundaries we hold are flexible enough to embrace those we work with. These emerge, I feel, from the ethical principles which underpin our therapeutic practice, in my case the BACP *Ethical Framework*, and are the very sap which runs through the branch of every therapeutic endeavour. There needed to be an extraordinary level of flexibility when tragedy and trauma struck the small town in which I live and where I was also someone affected by the trauma, but had some experience and professional skills to assist. It was an ethical dilemma that needed to be worked through with great care; was it OK to become involved in a project supporting people with whom I lived and knew in a different role, within a community where I also had a church connection, and indeed where I was also affected by the issues arising?

When April went missing, there was a knock on the door at 9.45pm from people who were already out searching. From that moment life here would never be the same for me. I resisted the urge to go out into the night and scour the hills; as a visually impaired person with no night vision, and unable to walk far, this I thought, would not be the way in which I could help. I wept, however, because I wanted to be

out there with the others. Then, along with all of those living here in the community, I waited, and waited, each helicopter-pass over the bungalow shaking the very core of my being; terror was engulfing all of us and it went on for weeks, then months.

In some ways I felt frozen, de-skilled; unable to 'do' anything. Meeting a police welfare officer, who had at that point been working 12-hour days supporting the search teams, was another defining moment. There was a need for action within the community, and I could not remain in my professional practice 'bubble' outside of that need. I felt driven to step forward. I had professional skills, I was also director of counselling for a small charity which could possibly host and assist any project set up to support the community. Strangely, God, and prayer, usually so much part of my life, seemed far away. If I had been consulted about working within another traumatised community, I would have felt very differently: I would have stepped in as the outside professional. This, however, was more complex. I am a Christian, my husband a retired church minister, who sometimes takes services locally. My psychotherapeutic practice has always, however, been in secular settings; the careful boundaries created to keep me, and others, safe would need to be taken apart mindfully, and with thought to those ethical principles I hold so dear.

In November 2012, five weeks following April's disappearance, I put a call out within community networks for people who were 'good listeners'. To my amazement 20 arrived for a meeting in the local church parish rooms. I stepped forward in faith, and knew that there was no way back now; I had committed to being part of this town enmeshed in this tragedy, but with my professional, rather than community member's hat on. I knew however that this hat would need to be rainbow coloured, embracing my faith, my work and my own reactions to the trauma of a child going missing from our midst.

The funding for the project came swiftly from the Church of Wales, the Welsh Presbyterian Church and the Iona Community, plus additional donations from others wanting to support us here in Machynlleth. It was a project

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under the wing of a small charity, the Churches Counselling Service in Wales, originally set up to support clergy of all denominations across Wales. I took on the role of project co-ordinator and manager and thought through carefully what might be helpful. I was not convinced that a simple 'send in the counsellors' approach was the right one; people did not seem to need 'counselling' at that moment, but they did need to talk, and to talk to people who would really listen.

We opted for a model which provided a drop-in centre where people could just pop in for an informal conversation and a cup of tea, a helpline manned by myself and another counsellor, and a free counselling service where people could be referred for some more formal support. Volunteer listeners and counsellors were recruited, and policies and ways of working made clear. My husband delivered, along with other volunteers, flyers, advertising the service, and we were launched on 15 December 2012. The drop-in centre originally was the parish room, lent to us by the local church. Various people brought books, jigsaws, wool, art materials, and made posters; people's kindness and generosity were quite overwhelming. The drop-in centre was somewhere where there was a simple rule: 'What is said in the drop-in, stays in the drop-in', and the ethos was one where we demonstrated towards each other and our visitors the core conditions we as counsellors are so fond of: acceptance, empathy and non-judgmental positive regard. We started with ourselves – we were also part of the community – and had our own thoughts and feelings about what was happening, and it was through this engagement and resting with each other that we were then able to reach out to others, and our relationship as a team has become a strong one.

As the weeks turned into months and a trial approached, we realised that for the church to continue with its normal functions in the parish room, we would need to find a new venue. Then a miracle happened, a small purpose-built centre became available on the Bryn-y-Gog estate where April had lived. It had originally been a small shop, which had been converted to offices some years previously by Powys Council for a project that was now coming to an end. They offered it to us at a peppercorn rent. At first we were tentative about moving there; would it be too close to April's family for them to feel comfortable? A message came back from the police family liaison teams that they would be glad

for us to be there. Walking forward in faith, we moved in the week before the trial of Mark Bridger, the man accused of April's abduction and murder, started. Within the space of 24 hours it transformed from office to a beautiful drop-in centre. The council had left us many items to use if we wanted them, such as a fridge, kettle, printer and stationery, desks and chairs. Volunteers and visitors brought flowers, paintings and tablecloths that cunningly disguised the desks as tables. Rocking chairs appeared for the inner room which could be used for counselling, and the two volunteer counsellors based there are now well used.

We were up and running, and have not looked back. The centre is light, often full of laughter as people of all ages join in knitting, art and other activities, police visit alongside young mums and those who are elderly or infirm. Since opening our doors last December we have received 422 visits from people to the drop-in centre, received 120 calls to the helpline, and 14 clients have received a course of counselling, not to mention over 1,000 hours put in by the team of volunteer listeners. There have been many tears, anger, much laughter and lots of fear, but we are together, and sharing the load. The only unwelcome guests have

been the press who have regularly 'made camp' in the car park, but have not crossed the threshold. Outside our window is 'April's Bench', donated by prisoners at Shrewsbury prison, and what has come to be known locally as 'April's Garden', with all of its pinkness. Someone posted a note through the door anonymously yesterday with the words 'thank you for being here; this is a sanctuary'. Currently many of the volunteers are writing about their experiences, and we hope eventually to build a resource for other communities who face similar tragic circumstances.

On 26 September this year the town held its breath again as, at last, after all the waiting, the family of April were finally able to hold a funeral service for their beloved daughter. My enmeshment continued as I acted as an usher in the local church, wept with the family over the loss of their daughter, offered words of support to clients who were also present, then went to the drop-in centre where we sat together in our grief and in our love for each other and drank tea and ate the cake that someone had made for us.

Listening Point is now at a crossroads, moving towards becoming a community resource rather than a project, and of course the issue of finding funding again raises its head. My view is that it will take a generation for the events here to

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be fully processed and for us to recover from trauma, but I am very hopeful because the resilience, compassion and generosity of the people I find myself working, and living with, amaze and astound me afresh each day. I am also at a crossroads where I need to deeply examine what it means to me to be a therapist and supervisor, but what it also means to me to be a Christian, a friend and a full member of the communities which make up the place I live. One day, hopefully, I may be able to write something on the subject, but at the moment it is too early and too jumbled in my mind. For a while I need to stand back and try to fit together the jigsaw – I have a reputation at the drop-in as being the 'queen of the sky' as I find that the pieces with patterns and edges do not attract me as much as the varying shades of blue which can only be pieced together over time, with great patience!

For more information about Listening Point, email [listeningpointmach@gmail.com](mailto:listeningpointmach@gmail.com)

**Susan Dale**  
MBACP Accred. Machynlleth

