



Liam

“My Life at Standish is built on the idea that anyone can be who they want to be – and Liam has now got the confidence to say ‘this is who I am’ here – and elsewhere.”

BACKGROUND

Liam serves a Stable Door Café customer a delicious sausage roll from the batch they helped to cook, and is now plating up. They smile and bring them their cutlery, making a mental note of how many sausage rolls are left for that day's service. "I'm really enjoying this," they say of their apprenticeship at My Life's Stable Door Café. "I want to build a career now and this is such a good start."

That Liam is so happy, confident and hopeful about their future is thanks to a combination of their hard work and the nurturing, encouraging and settled environment that My Life Learning has helped to provide. It has not been an easy journey to this point for Liam; adopted at nine weeks old, Liam has struggled with significant personal family issues and needed support throughout their education journey. They didn't like to mix with people or even make eye contact with those who were unfamiliar. They were, through no fault of their own, insular and shut off from the world. Their self-belief and enthusiasm for life were at rock bottom.

It wasn't until an autistic spectrum disorder diagnosis when they were 17 that Liam could begin to understand themselves a little better. They began a course of counselling, which, as their mother Sharon remembers, opened up a whole new viewpoint. "Finally, it felt like someone actually understood how Liam felt and thought," she says.

Soon afterwards a link worker put the family in touch with My Life, and they went to have a look around our inspiring 84-acre site at Standish. "We did the My Life Learning tour with Clare [Roberts, Membership, Pastoral Support and Support Planning Lead]," Sharon says. "Liam was chatting away to her, and when we were going home in the car, Liam's exact words were: 'Mum, have you spoken to that lady about me?'"

"I hadn't - it was the first time I'd met her. But Liam told me it was like Clare knew what they were thinking. And I knew then that this was the place for Liam."

Liam began coming to sessions three days a week at My Life Learning, My Life's specialist Further Education college. Initially, the aspirations were simply that Liam could meet people outside the family home, but Liam quickly wanted to further their qualifications and gain experience that would help get them into work.



HOW MY LIFE LEARNING HELPED LIAM

To start with, Liam was keen to work towards a Level 2 Qualification within an animal-based sector, as one of the reasons they were keen to come to My Life in the first place was the farm-based provision available. My Life always puts in place a structured plan for each learner, and Liam's pathway on their two-year programme was also to improve their level of English and Maths and get their skillset and knowledge in the animal care sector "job-ready". We all wanted to get Liam to the point where they could apply for a supported internship with a relevant employer in Year 2.

Just as important, though, was the opportunity for Liam to work with or in the company of other people who would be positive peer models. My Life Learning put specific actions in place to help Liam develop initiative, cope with change and improve their expressive and social skills. Given the opportunity to socialise both on and off site, they quickly made excellent progress in their communication and interaction, their confidence and self-belief improving hugely. That also meant they were able to manage emotions and anxieties far better.

It became clear that Liam was making huge strides at My Life in Standish as they saw it as a safe and trusted environment. The next step was to support Liam to develop their confidence and self-belief in the outside world of employment. In their second year, they began work experience with the agreed goals of following instructions, completing tasks and ensuring Liam asked questions when necessary. Liam achieved this independently on numerous occasions and was able to carry out tasks and responsibilities independently in the workplace, with their job coach able to take a step back and allow Liam to develop their confidence and initiative.

As we noted at the time, "Liam is a hardworking, enthusiastic person who always asks questions and is eager to learn new skills."

Alongside this work experience, Liam also showed a really positive attitude to their studies in English, focusing on improving skills in spelling, punctuation and grammar, and showing steady improvement in solving punctuation problems. Liam responded brilliantly to vocational practical studies,

becoming very able in all sessions - with excellent contributions in the Animal Care sessions. "Liam is increasingly confident, willing to engage with both staff and peers, always volunteers to speak in front of the group and works well in a team," we said, which, given where they had come from, was wonderful to see.

As Liam's time in My Life Learning was coming to a close in 2020, they completed several hours work experience at the onsite cafe, Stable Door. Liam quickly became extremely fond of this nurturing environment, and then began to shadow Head of Catering and Hospitality Paul Plumbley two and a half days a week, while continuing their studies. Through the various lockdowns they also worked a lot with Paul, and it was clear that Liam was ready to progress to a more formal working arrangement rather than a purely educational one.

So it was fantastic to see Liam begin an 18-month Catering and Hospitality Apprenticeship at Stable Door Café in April 2021, with an additional day of college work at a local FE College. My Life are still on hand

to assist where necessary though, including pastoral care.

Best of all, Liam now understands themselves a lot better. This year they have felt ready to identify as non-binary, a journey which everyone has encouraged Liam along. My Life at Standish is built on the idea that anyone can be who they want to be – and Liam has now got the confidence to say 'this is who I am' here – and elsewhere.



THE APPRENTICESHIP

When it became clear that Stable Door Café could offer Liam an apprenticeship, we worked really hard to ensure their 18 months would equip them with all the skills needed to be a success in the future. We implemented a training programme which would quickly enable Liam to be at the same standard as the other members of staff – not just to increase employability but to allow Liam to be an equal to colleagues in the café.

Liam takes on all the roles a staff member would be expected to do, including cooking, service, stocktaking and ordering and gets a broad range of experience rather than being pigeonholed in one area.

“Paul Plumbley is excellent – he has this great skill of being able to train people up to the same standard as him, but he also has been something of a role model to Liam,” says Sharon. “Liam knows what is expected, and does everything to make sure those expectations are met.”

WHAT MY LIFE LEARNING DEPUTY HEAD SUE CADMAN SAYS

"I was talking to Liam about their apprenticeship recently, and they said to me: 'I've now got the money to buy the clothes I want to buy.' And that was really nice to hear; Liam feels like they've earned it. They're definitely on the journey now of getting to where Liam wants to be. I don't think our vision is that Liam stays at Stable Door forever, but that they get the courage and confidence to spread their wings elsewhere. I think the fact that Liam is coming to work on their own too, is really, really good. Their networks are widening."





WHAT LIAM SAYS NOW

"I'm really enjoying the work at Stable Door Café and I'm really glad I did the work experience here first as I think I might have struggled otherwise. We all share the tasks of the day each morning so it's really varied work too, one minute I might be making sausage rolls, the next I'm serving customers or answering the phone. We help each other out in that way.

My Life has been so helpful to me because I've always worried about being thrown into a job with no preparation. Because I got that preparation here, I knew I could come into work, be around people who I felt comfortable with and get stuck into the job. It's a great place to work and I have to say it makes such a difference when you get paid at the end of it – I'm saving up for a holiday.

I want to build a career now and this is such a good start, I think an employer will see the apprenticeship as something that's a real positive on my CV."

WHAT LIAM'S MOTHER SHARON SAYS NOW

"My Life changed Liam's life completely. They're not the same person that started here – they're more confident, they'll look people in the eye. Liam is just a different person and to be in the catering and hospitality industry coming from the way they were at first, was never in our wildest dreams and that's come from the support they've received from My Life.

When Liam got their first wage slip from the apprenticeship, they couldn't believe it. But they've grafted for that money and I am so delighted for them. They've had a lot to deal with in their life, but in the last six months in particular they have completely blossomed and we can begin to think about how they might live and work independently in the future.

Liam's head's screwed on, basically. They know what they want and how to go about it. And that is just fantastic to see – and a complete relief for me."





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