

Episode 1 ‘Becoming a Support Group Leader’

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley (Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs)

Guest Speaker: Mel McPherson (My Support Day)

Introduction:

This is episode one ‘Becoming a Support Group Leader’ with Mel McPherson. We will be speaking with Mel about her journey and how she started the support group My Support Day, how they have continued to support families throughout the Covid pandemic and even starting a new service called All in the Family in the first lockdown here in Scotland.

Interview Begins

Rebecca:

So hi Mel, how are you, how’s your week going?

Mel:

Yeah my week’s going really well, pretty busy as you can imagine running up to annual leave. But aye, no it’s going really well this week.

Rebecca:

Excellent! Okay so we’re pretty much here to talk about you for a good wee bit of time and sort of all the success we’ve seen with you with My Support Day and of course All In The Family. So can you tell us a little bit more about you and how you got to where you are today running a support group?

Mel:

Yip, so my kinda journey I suppose started really quite early on in my life. I was surrounded with immediate family who all had issues with substance use whether it be alcohol or drug dependency. So that kinda carried right on until late on in my adult life, the effects it had on my family were really profound to the part where you know...three of my family members are no longer with me. I felt the really hardest part was the loss of my brother in 2000 and that hit me really really bad – didn’t really accept his death for quite a long time. I would say quite a good few years had went by. And how it was dealt with around about the death and people’s reaction to it because his addiction to substances and...you know...it was quite public as well so, that was really hard for me and had a massive effect on my mental health and wellbeing, it was massive...it took me quite a while to get back on my feet and they always say your life begins at 40 – now they’re saying 50! I’ll take 50 because I’m heading towards that kinda range soon but no, I suppose on my 40th and around about when I turned 40 I took quite unwell and I suppose looking back on it with the hindsight it was probably stress related...not eating properly, not sleeping probably hardly at all, total anxiety always building up. Just everything I suppose that you know...years and years of tolls of dealing with someone else’s addiction and the stresses and everything else that comes with it.

So I got myself back on my feet and sorted myself out and got myself in a really really good place and that came with a lot of work from the doctors and counselling and stuff like that. Kinda....decided no,

something had to change, I can't be the only person that this is affected so profoundly. And to hold that in for so many years you know, 20-odd years and I hadn't addressed the issues that had faced me through somebody else's addiction. So I decided to go and join an Open University course as you do! And I went to go and study a BS honours in Psychology and in that I decided it would be quite good to get some work experience.

But I knew the field I wanted to work in...I always wanted to work with people who had been affected by someone else's addiction so I started digging about, doing a wee bit of research and I was absolutely shocked that there was nothing locally in South Lan and in fact if you looked even further into it nothing really much in Scotland.

When I came across Scottish Families I asked to do...I'm sure it was a scoping exercise for something to do with the NHS, can't even really remember what it was but I was like I'm totally up for that because it was all about people affected by someone else's addiction. But again my health didn't take too great, took a wee bit of a dip so I sent my apologies but on the back of that email I got...kinda on my feet I was quite brazen ehm, I remember it was December 2018 and saying I'm really sorry I couldn't come to that but is there any chance I could come into the office and perhaps have a chat about doing some volunteer work. You know, my parents always said I had a bit of a brass neck in me when I was younger. And I always hear this saying among homeworkers 'shy weans don't get cakes' so I suppose I kinda went with that ethos and I was offered to come into the office in January 2019 because things were starting to wrap up.

So of course I took that, went in on January 6th I met the lovely Susie McClue and we kinda gave them the basics of what we were doing. We had a chat and was initially started out as I was looking for doing volunteering on the telephone or stuff about the office or any projects going on and she mentioned that Corra funding does start-up grants if I was ever interested in running my own support group. They do those start-up grants. She was like 'I'm not forcing you into anything just now but go away and have a think about it!' By the time I was down to the bottom of the stairs outside I had phoned 2 people already asking them if they wanted to start up a support group. And I think that was the Monday and I'd seen Susie, and by the Wednesday a previous colleague agreed to come on board and you know...My Support Day just kinda uptook.

I remember kinda linking back in and saying no I'm going with this can you send me the funding form. All that was filled in. I was asked to go on and access...it would be really good training for us to go on and do CRAFT training. And I'm kinda going CRAFT training? What making stuff? What's that gotta do with helping people? But when it was explained it was Community Reinforcement and Family Training and gave me a bit of info on it, we went on the training with George Charlton. Well whose no ever bold with George! I've yet to meet someone who...he's so unique...but he gives such a fresh outlook into the training. I was totally bought in. I remember reading into it and going that's a bit of American buff. Someone like me whose been brought up predominantly in Glasgow and moved to South Lan kinda later on and I'm like what's this all about? But when the training kicked in it was like a massive light bulb moment and I was like that so works because people kinda did that sort of stuff to get me in a good place and it was just a massive lightbulb moment. So we took that approach with CRAFT and we ran with it on My Support Day. We started in April 27th 2019 and kinda this is where we are now and we use that approach and we use it through talking all the time. Just talk about you know how communication and maybe doing it this way or suggestions or kinda guiding people into doing stuff differently which is all about looking after...it's really predominantly about them looking after themselves and their own self-care.

Aye it's been a quick journey from where I first started with a conversation for my own volunteer work but the support that came at the back of it with Susie was just absolutely brilliant and she took me through it step by step and you know, the initial start-up funding with Corra.

Aye that made me a good budgeter I think. I realise I can make £1500 go quite a long way, I'm quite resourceful. So no it was really good and now it's been like we're heading for our 2 year birthday and it's a bit like my goodness, the quickest 2 years of my life but it's probably been one of the best 2 years.

Rebecca:

That's amazing. I love it through it's like full Scottish Families treatment just as soon as you appear through the door. It's like yes! Here's all the things you can do! Because I even remember meeting you in the office a couple of years ago and it's just amazing to see where you are now. Still there, still supporting people and still doing amazing it's just absolutely brilliant.

As you said you're coming up for your 2 year birthday now so you've supported many families now and many people, and of course before the pandemic you were running a lot of groups. We sorta usually hear about support groups and some people say it's not for them or they don't feel that they want to attend a group, it can be quite a challenging thing. It can be quite a scary thing to go into this setting where there's other people and then sort of have to share your story and some people are quite good at that and find a comfort in that and some people can be quite restricted or just not really feel comfortable doing that because sort of when we hear in the Scottish Families support services, you'll hear that some people are more comfortable in one-to-one sessions and then our Family Support Development Officers will encourage them to go into groups.

So if you can tell us a wee bit about going to a support group from the leader's point of view. Sort of what it's like, what's your groups kinda like and how you've been helping people.

Mel:

Firstly just want to start off with I totally understand. People feel more comfortable, especially if you're a person that's been affected by somebody else's substance use because your trust is at zero, it's at rock bottom, you do not trust anyone. And I'm just speaking from a personal point of view, my personal point of view. I didn't trust anyone, I didn't trust any services, my kind of knowledge around services was support – what support? What support? You know, so my trust was totally shot there.

I didn't trust people outside because for me it was like I was just their gossip or I was that person they would whisper about behind their back. And I use that phrase whispering a bit lightly because I could really hear what they were saying when I was walking by them, so maybe they need to try hiding their whispering a wee bit better! But your trust is at zero and I totally understand that and this is where it's like a safety thing with people and I know from me, when I speak about families getting their recovery because I'm really a strong believer in it's no just the person that has the substance issues that get their recover, families are entitled to get their recovery as well as them.

So when I kinda refer to recovery I refer to my recovery through somebody else's substance use. I mean I had to have those one-to-ones, whether it be going to doctors...I had 2 people that I only trusted, only 2 people. One of them was my husband and the other was his mum who supported me at the worst times ever that you could ever imagine. It would've been easy I suppose for that family to give up on me but they never, they stuck by me. Because at times I wasn't easy, I couldn't

understand my emotions or control how I felt and things were out of my control so I suppose sometimes I wasn't easy to handle at times. And I'm not embarrassed to say that because that's just the effects – the knock-on effects it has on your life. So I totally understand when people say they need to engage with that one-to-one, it's a trust issue, they have to start somewhere to build that trust with a support group though.

I would say the first level is we have to work on someone's trust and get it there that they feel comfortable and safe. It's all about getting people feeling comfortable and safe. It's really important. But then there's the next step and I always say it's reconnecting because I totally disconnected from the outside world, I had no connection with anyone. Wouldn't speak to anybody, I would either walk with my head pure high up like in the clouds because if I looked over the top of everybody's heads I wouldn't need to look at them or I'd look at my feet, there was no in-between. I couldn't connect with people because I felt I didn't fit in with anyone really if that makes sense. So for me it's reconnection, if we don't start building connections with other people we can't move on. We need to build somewhere that trust and that connection.

When people come into the group... I get like television perceive it so funny. They'll all sit in a circle and we'll all talk and aye sometimes we do because that's the way the room layout is set. But genuinely when I first started out with my Support Day with two bags for life, Aldi's bags for life. I'm no promoting Aldi, but aye supermarket bags for life! And in them was my kettle, my cups, my teabags, everything. I'm pretty sure it was George when we did the training for CRAFT said to me all you need is... if you can offer someone a cup of tea and a biscuit and be there to support them that's all you need to do. That's all you need to do! And I remember that and I was like I was a wee bit tight and I'm like I'm buying cups so I can reuse them and wash them again, I'm no buying paper cups! But I made sure they had a wee biscuit and a box of hankies and people would come in and for us, I would open it up and I'd go...whatever, how my day's been and then we'd go so how's everybody else been? And it's just a really open chat.

I remember in one session, I think... this is a support group session and we're here talking about Love Island. But you know what? Who cares? You know, these people come here, the guys come here to access support and that's what they wanted to talk about. Because probably they weren't talking to anybody outside, they weren't engaging with anybody, so who else are they going to talk to? Doesn't matter if we're talking about Love Island, to their loved ones, things like that because the conversation would always get around to that. But for that moment, that enjoyment for them for me was let's talk about Love Island or Coronation Street. And you know, I'm not a big fan of Love Island and I even say to them I don't even know what you're talking about, I absolutely hate it. But in comes the conversation about how things have happened and what you naturally find is it's no me that's taking the group, it's very peer-led so you'll have someone sitting next to them that's been in similar circumstances. And then they'll start talking about how they cope with it, if they found something that worked for them then someone will say I tried this and it worked for me or I tried this and it didn't work for me and what you find is they start creating their own wee community and they start being very peer-led.

And all I'm doing is creating this really safe environment for them to come in and absolutely reiterate that whatever gets said in the room stays in the room because for me trust is a massive thing. My trust was broken so many times that I'm so vigorous with it and I remember somebody saying to me, you know, before I'm kinda where I am now, is like somebody mentioned GDPR and I was pure like what's that? Well where do you document people's names and their numbers and I'm like in here! [points to head]. So if anybody can get in my head then good luck to you because you don't want to know what's in there! So all these kinda structures and what I kinda used to say to

people is I don't write anything down, I still don't write anything down, there's no need for me to write anything down. So from there we used to listen to what people were looking for so I really found that a lot of the times we'd have conversations about... I don't even know what it is I'm looking for, I wouldn't even know what that drug is. So on the back of that I would scurry away and find information so when people came in I could tell them the information. The group really ran itself, it's so relaxed.

I can't tell people how they feel but I made that environment safe for them to come in. If they were having an off day and wanted to have a rant about something then you are in a safe environment to have that rant. I'm not going to sit there and judge you and probably have been in that position a 100 times like where they are, but if they can't come in and rant and get rid of how they feel inside themselves what else are they gonna do with it? So we've kinda run with that. A really safe environment, no one is here to judge you and it's really really relaxed.

We have conversations and aye there's loads of tears and loads of things get said in the room but there's also times where the connection is so good between the people and the support group that they realise oh such and such hasn't been here for a few weeks has anyone checked in on her? I'll check in on her. And what they end up finding is they start creating their own community and it's doing that peer-led recovery I suppose. We hear about it very much in the recovery sector so why can't we have the same for the families because they so need it. More than anything to get them through those really bad times.

I'm quite a laid back in My Support Day. Nothing is kinda off the table and I just go that's fine, that's how you feel the day, I'm no here to tell you how you feel. But we're very much here to support them and I say I'm no here to give you the answers but we'll support you while you're finding them. Could be weeks where they don't want to talk and just sit in there with company and that's fine as well. But there's no rules really. I'd just say confidentiality is just one of them but there's no rules, there's no like you have to follow this or this is what we do. We don't run with any sort of ethos. We just talk and when we talk – everything we sorta say back is always CRAFT, the seven components of communication is woven through every conversation we have. Because they get it. They can't sit down with a sheet of paper, they don't have the attention span, they probably haven't slept for god knows how many months and I want them to write down in a sheet? They'd probably throw it at me, so we just talk about it.

And I always use this, the way I look at it, they're coming in at us with an empty toolbelt. And I've always said this since the beginning, but we're going to give you all the tools you need in life. Because it's being sustainable for them. And people come in and they just run with it, they run with the support we give them with the ethos of CRAFT and they totally get it. But there's other people that take a while to get there, we don't know the levels of trauma they're sitting in so who am I to say if you've no got that after 3 months like you're never going to get it. It's just about being really person-centered for everybody as well I suppose but aye, it's about giving them the tools so they can go out in life and cope with very certain situations that come up. So aye, we're so laid back in My Support Day like I'm horizontal sometimes but...it's just...that's what people like about us I suppose.

Rebecca:

It's really that going above and beyond for people and being there for people and that's really, as you're saying, what people need. They just need somebody to listen and somebody to really listen to them because you hear a lot from people when they reach out for support for example, if they're going to their GP or something, they don't feel listened to. And it's just, it's that kinda support that's

needed, they just need to be listened to. As you said, that's such a needed aspect of it but even listening to you there speak about that, what we say in Scottish Families is we almost say our team is like sponges. And you just soak up everybody's emotions and everything they're needing and it can be very difficult to be a support group leader and we know that so much empathy, really as I said going above and beyond and doing everything that you can to support people so, sadly we've sort of seen over the years peer-led groups that are no more because it can get so much for people and you need to look after your own mental health and wellbeing. So, as a support group leader what would you say would be the positives or the negatives of being a leader?

Mel:

So, the positives...oh my God it's like how long's your list? It's like a kids Christmas list, you know what I mean? How long is that roll going on for? Oh my God, the positives for me is when I went in and started My Support Day I was like see if I just help one person, that was me. I was quite happy to help that one person because I knew the effects it had on me over 20 plus years, took me not the best places, probably did things that you know, weren't great for my loved ones either. But you do what you think is best in that moment in time. And I think for family members they beat themselves up about, they talk about it, see that stick you've got? Want to put it down and stop battering yourself with it because you only did what you thought was right at the time. Because if you don't know anything else then you don't know anything else. So I guess for me it's like if I could help that one person, and I always keep that in my head, it's like, just help that one person because that one person helped and stuck with me. It's a bit like when someone gives that to you inside yourself you want to share it out to other people I suppose. So for me the positives are you're totally helping someone. Because they can't get into an even worse situation than where they are and they're connecting with somebody and they're talking about it and no holding it in.

Secondly, I love it when they come through the door and this sounds, I don't know, when they come through the door and I don't sit here with rose-tinted glasses on...we're probably their last port of call that they're ever going to come to and I don't dress it up any way. And I'm alright with that and I think that's why I'm here. When you see them moving on, it's just, you just notice it it's the small things. Perhaps somebody has come through the door and have had no, not that they've no let themselves go and I'm no meaning that in any bad ways but it's like, see when you're no thinking very straight, clearly in your head? It comes out in all many different ways. It's like, when you see them and they've maybe came in and they've no bothered with their hair like putting a dye through it, says me my roots are about six inches down my head but I'll put that down to covid at the moment! You know, no makeup on, it's just stick the first bit of clothing on and come in. And it's they small changes when they start coming through the door and...maybe put a bit of lippie on this week. And then you see people coming and they've got their hair done.

And before they'd come through the door with their head down and now they're standing taller and then you start getting those cracks of smiles out them that they've probably no done for weeks but the first weeks or months even. And they come through the door, they then move on and what they're doing is they're actually supporting somebody whose perhaps just walked through the door and you just see them growing as a person and getting more confident, to me that's just brilliant. I'm a very people watcher, I love watching people right. I'm quite a nosy person and I just love watching how people go about things and for me to see people change and get stronger. With just giving them that space and that place to have a breather and get the right support they need and get them connected into other people. For me, that's like one of the biggest things of being a support leader, I suppose.

That's me personally, I love that bit, I love seeing people kinda moving on and going onto things that they thought they could never do. We hear people say I used to draw all the time, or I used to write, and I'm like okay...and one of things we always say to the guys is write a list of stuff you used to do but don't do anymore. From having a cup of tea...right there's a growing joke in My Support Day, I never finish a cup of tea because I'm always too busy right. I've got a thing about I have to be on the go all the time. So it's an ongoing joke and when I actually finish a cup of tea I'll take a picture and actually send it to everybody and it's quite funny and they're all like oh she finished a cup of tea!

But it is they small things like have a cup of tea, have you taken 20 minutes out even just to lie in a bath or put a face pack on? And it's all they small things, and that's how we kinda build them up. And it's great to see when perhaps when somebody hasn't done something in such a long time, they say I've done that and I can't believe I've done that or I've went out and haven't checked my phone for that half hour or that hour and it's nice and refreshing and you see they changes coming in. Because you can see it, how it changes that mood in somebody, just they small changes. So me I love that, I love seeing that about people. They small changes come in and I suppose that keeps me where I am.

I mean there are negatives of doing a support group. It's hard work! No even going to deny it, its hard work. If somebody says no I do it for the loved one...it's hard work. It is hard work. And it can be frustrating at times because we're looking for the answers perhaps that we can't give them and sometimes it's hard to get your foot in the door with some different sectors.

I remember first starting out with My Support Day...one of my best assets I think is persistence, and you have to be persistent. Just because somebody said no to you first time, maybe second time and third time they still say no but I'll just keep going back. For me there's no problems, there's only solutions to every problem so there's you know...my granny used to always say there's more than one way to skin a cat and there is! You just keep at it, you need to be quite persistent as a leader and I know that can grate a lot of people down.

One of my biggest shocks was people who didn't understand about family support. You know, I'd go out and I would speak to services and they would kinda just...you'd have that *what?* look about you. Like family support? Like, no we should be supporting the person. And I'm like but you're asking family members to support them while they are accessing recovery, nowhere near recovery, what do we do with the people if they've lost someone? Do we just forget about them? Just leave them to get on with it.

So for me, it was like, I was a bit dumfounded that people were dumfounded that you were supporting people that had been affected by somebody else's substance use and that used to get under my skin quite a lot. But, me growing as a person, perhaps maybe 10 years ago I'd of pure had it out with them and had an explosive conversation perhaps. But now I'm like no we just need to educate them, and educate them that it is good to support people. Because if we support them, what we're doing is we're putting them in a good place and they'll actually be good if...and hope that their loved one will get into recovery or they don't, but they still need to get into a good place in their life. That feeling of being stuck is the worst feeling, I was stuck for 20-odd years and didn't know what to do. And it's the most horrible and frustrating feeling being stuck because you don't know what to do about it.

So, it was quite hard for me finding services and they were a bit, some of them were a bit resistant at the beginning and having a...well I don't say where we come into this, but I'm like, you're just no

getting it. So for me I found it really frustrating but I learned that I actually developed quite a lot of patience through that. So you have to be quite patient.

Another thing is we know sometimes family members can come in and access us, maybe the once or the twice, and then they don't come back. And you as a person, it sits with you, because you know that they so need that support and if they engage in that support...my goodness how much better could you make their...you know, better? And how much could they be better within their life with the right support. But you need to have that bit of acceptance that as well, they need to be ready to access the support. I suppose, so for me, it's quite frustrating when you get sometimes you get someone who engages with you once and twice and then just drops off the radar. It's really, really hard to deal with. My first time dealing with that...and you do take a bit personally. Is it me? Am I no doing something right? It's no about you and you just have to take that away from that and remind yourself that they're just no in the right time and place to get the support they're needing. So you just leave the door open. I've learned that, just always leave the door open, and if you need us come back and access us as a service and 9 times out of 10, people that have dropped off will come back at sometime whether it's 3 months or 6 months and they're normally ready...they probably weren't ready at that point.

So there are loads of lows and negatives. It's hard work. It's loads of hours that go into it. There's been many a night that I've sat up to the wee small hours of the morning doing stuff because I'm like it needs to get done. Deadlines. Funding. Got to say, when you start out your support group if you're no a charity – really hard. Really hard. There is no a big vast amount of funding that you can get as just a support group that's no a charity. So I found that really hard. And that's probably where....now when I get money, I think, I sometimes feel scared to spend it and I'm like no you need to spend it, because if you don't spend it the funder will no refund you again! So it's quite hard...went from one extreme to the other, so it's quite weird.

But I did find it really hard. We ran really on a shoestring budget for a year, just that first initial Corra funding that was £1500. A lot of places we went to visit, could we run our support out of here? We were met with a bit of resistance. So it was quite hard. I find that's the negatives. But for me, I just looked at it as a challenge. Wasn't a negative. It was a wee challenge and I'm like right okay! Nothing's ever came to me smoothly so why would this be any different! So you just got to kinda, look at it slightly different but I would always say the positives of seeing people and how they grow and move on...it's nice to see that they then start supporting other people. That peer support. It outweighs everything for me. Anytime. Any positives...any negatives...always outweighs it.

Rebecca:

You mention it as well like...on your shoestring budget for a year. And when you're talking about My Support Day now....we're moving on to the big theme of, of course – Covid! Which I'm sure we're all sick of hearing about and sick of talking about...but in a weird way, this whole, this past year, cause now it's nearly been a year. At the beginning... so sort of March 2020 when we went into our first lockdown I remember our Helpline Development Officer said she was putting together the service directory because a lot of treatment services and support across Scotland sort of shut their doors and didn't really know how to manage this.

But I remember our Helpline Development Officer...she said the only family support available right now is us in Scottish Families and My Support Day. So you clearly stopped face-to-face sessions but immediately moved online. And by phone and stuff like that. And also of course we then seen the

partnership between Scottish Families and My Support Day where a new service was created – All In The Family.

During 2020, this big amazing new group, this service that appeared in a year that most of us want to forget. But that was huge, so do you want to talk a wee bit about that and sort of maybe we can talk about the pandemic itself and sort of how it's affected both you and the people you're supporting?

Mel:

Oh my goodness when the pandemic happened I...you know, I remember it was a Friday before everything went into lockdown on the Monday. We just finished a support group and I had a call from my kids nursery saying she was extremely unwell so I went down and she was, she was really ill. Got her home but then I got a call from the high school and ehm...my oldest was the same. And at that point you know, my two children had contracted coronavirus which was quite scary. I remember phoning The Beacons and letting them know and within that it was like right we're shutting down, because we knew it was on the cards anyway and everything kinda shut down on the Monday.

In that lockdown, oh my goodness, the calls that came in through My Support Day's phone were just...it was just a no go for me to stop the service. Right, because the way I was looking at it was nobody knew how long this pandemic was going to last for. We knew it was serious because the whole world had shut down basically. But that doesn't mean to say that people are...you know, are going to stop drinking, in fact they're probably going to hit it more. People are going to stop taking drugs...you know, that's not going to happen. And what I was finding...you know, it was always my concern on that Friday going oh my God, like, everything is going to go mad and what I found the calls started coming in. And it was like, lapses, relapsing, in the same house and it was just not a...it was a no go for My Support Day, it was just absolutely nope, not happening.

First I was like...the phone was just on right, and Sunday right through to Saturday and I had a wee scurry about thinking there's gotta be something, there's gotta be something right? Then I saw people were talking about Zoom online so I went away, had a rummage around Zoom, took a crash course on YouTube about Zoom and within 7 days we were up and running online on Zoom and running two...I think at the time we offered two support sessions to begin with and the phonline sessions. And I remember the first session with the guys I'm like right we're going to make it a bit longer cause it's slightly different and we're going to talk you through this, me not knowing what I was doing with Zoom at the time. And it was so funny the first hour it was like I'm on mute! No, you're on mute! Can't hear you! No your camera is off! No your camera's off – I can't hear you! And I think that was the whole first support group session, it was quite funny.

But the guys got the gist of it and I was really aware that we were probably kinda one of the first that was up and running. And it was no a case of oh I'm the first, it was the case of I can't walk away from my family members because this is going to be the worst for them. The worst. And you know you've got people going yes! working from home! and everything but I bet you're no saying that now cause I'm not! And I took myself back to when I was younger as a child, I had nowhere to go. But I was in a house with people who were alcohol-dependent, substance-dependent, and there was nowhere for me to go so that totally raised awareness in me going oh my god, I knew how I felt back then as a child it's no different to an adult because how are we going to control this? So it was never a no-win, you know, a no-go.

I knew that we put in for the funding just before Christmas for us to do this partnership – My Support Day, to do the partnership with Scottish Families which I was totally, couldn't believe it. I was going off my head. I was like a big kid in a sweetie shop. It was like I'd won the lottery and I just remembering thinking right that'll no happen this year! And that was my first, and I was like I'm fine with that I'm still going to keep doing what I'm doing I'll keep moving forward. Because it was never a – I'll just stop doing what I'm doing because of what's going on, it's no really you know, it's no really for me, how can I do it? It wasn't about me it was about the families. You have to put what you think aside and I'm like there must be a way about this!

When we got told we got accepted for the funding oh my goodness! I think all my neighbours must've heard me screaming from inside my house. They must have been like she's went a bit mad with being at home or whatever, but I was so excited....my two kids were like what's going on. It was the best news ever for me and I've got Laurie Lee and Lisa Kerr. Lisa Kerr is now part of My Support Day and Laurie Lee came in from Scottish Families to lead on All In The Family. It's just a great wee team, I couldn't ask for a better team.

It's been an unusual way to start a team....no meeting them in person and meeting them online. Even doing interviews online it was a bit bizarre it was like right okay. But you have to get over that, that's something that was out of your control. But then it came like we need to have a launch and we were all looking at each other like how on earth are we going to launch a service in the middle of a pandemic? It was quite for me like, if we get accepted for this my launch is going to be amazing and people are going to be face to face! I was ragin! That we couldn't have a face-to-face launch and we were going to do all these spectacular things and kept a wee pocket of money aside to do all they wee extra things and that and I was like for gods sake! But we done it, but for our attendance for a launch was amazing because I think people were zoomed out by the time we launched in October.

Aye, we were just persistent about it phoning people like 3 times a week and all that. But our launch was really well received. Its been challenging to do a service in Covid without a doubt. I'm under no illusions that we're perhaps no capturing what we'd have if we were in The Beacons and face to face with people which is frustrating to me because I think my god, there's still people out there that really need the support but Zoom isn't for everybody and I totally understand that but it's no for the want of us going out and engaging you know, and hopefully we'll be back out really really soon. I'm just...you know, in my head, I'm just going to town when we go out I'll be like that mad wee Duracell bunny, they'll be like gonna sit down, there's no places we're not going to try. And Laurie Lee and Lisa totally the same, they're just chapping at the bit to get out. So aye, it's been like here's a great service, here's a great opportunity for you but we're gonna put the reigns on you a wee bit so it's a bit frustrating for us and I'm like ahh.

But even on the back of it, the back of All In The Family, we've secured money which is again really exciting. For me I have hundreds of things that rattles about in my head and it's like what ones can I make reality so we secured a bit of funding again from Corra for us to develop 12 family first responders cause initially in the first...All In The Family project it was 4 and that was built into it. And I just kinda was a bit cheeky and pushed it right up to the 12 back to that, shy weans don't get any cake. I just pure pushed it right up which is really exciting for me because what we're doing is we're developing this whole kinda new programme that I'm no aware that anybody does that we're training families to take control of their own communities almost. Very peer-led. And I can't wait to get in all around about that, it's kinda giving families the platform that they probably should've had years ago but they've always been really back-footed, family members I think. Been a bit of an after thought and a tick box exercise and it's like no, you're just no getting this.

So for me I'm majorly excited, we're gonna be sitting in The Beacons first responders all the way out and they're going to be taking control of everything so for me that's exciting as well. So I can't wait and you can imagine me when I get out this wee mad Tasmanian person whizzing about so aye, I think Laurie Lee and Lisa will need to put me on a lead for a wee bit but I'm no doubt they lassies won't be beside me cause we're all just chapping at the bit now and we're like it's been a year, right time to kinda give it a rest now.

But aye, it's been amazing. Covid for me has been amazing. It's been challenging but again it just shows you, you know, if perseverance and resilience if we can get through Covid and launch a new service in the middle of Covid, then what we going to do once we get outside? So I'm quite excited about it, I'm not being defeated by Covid.

Rebecca:

Yeah, and it's incredible to hear just how well the service is doing especially because we know how much of an impact Covid has had on families affected by alcohol and drugs. We've done the reports, we've thrown out the statistics, we're showing people that, so it's just brilliant to have you and Lisa and Laurie Lee supporting all the families in South Lanarkshire!

So, I think you've really just wonderfully spoken about support groups and how valuable they can be and how helpful they can be. What would you say to somebody themselves who would be interested in taking the same journey you did and starting a support group – what would you say to them?

Mel:

Don't overthink it. Just do it. If somebody came in and said to me in 2019 when you walk through the door of Scottish Families this is what you're going to do up to then right... I've had some amazing opportunities and I work with the most amazing people and I'm really grateful for the people that I work with from yourselves at Scottish Families and you know, meeting Susie and I always say to them go and speak to Susie McClue she'll guide you in the right direction! She'll kill me for saying that. Susie will keep you right!

I've had some amazing opportunities, I sit on a working group for parliament for the Whole Family Approach which is a – I think for me that was a pinch moment for me. That was totally, I remember coming home and saying to my husband and he was like aye right, you're having a laugh! You! Parliament! Going to talk to them about Coronation Street! You know, it was like a going joke but it was definitely a pinch moment for me I think.

And the way that I keep doing it is I don't overthink. I don't think...you know, I've got this amazing stuff that's ahead of me. 12 people to train as first family responders. I'm under the illusion of how much work is going into it, all the training and everything that goes into it. I'm under no illusion but I don't overthink it and I go with my gut instinct a lot of the time. A lot of the time people will challenge me and my way of thinking and how I do stuff, especially sometimes without people realising they're like ah it's just a family member and I'm like no wait a minute here! You know? So aye it's like you do get challenged doing this a wee bit but I would just say, you've got to go with your heart. Go with your gut. We all have they moments of self-doubt.

There's been many a moment I've had moments of self-doubt and I think I'm crazy, like who am I kidding? But you just need to park them and put them aside and remember why you're initially doing it...what the reasons are that you're doing it for. That's to help and support other people. Aye don't overthink it and keep it really simple. Don't complex things. I sit on things sometimes and

people overcomplicate such the simplest solutions. We're no going out to do all singing and dancing with family members, what we're doing is creating them a safe space for them to talk and air how they feel and feel reconnected again with somebody because it's better than disconnection cause it's so isolating. And just don't overcomplicate it and just take it like it comes. I take it as it comes every day. I try and no look at my diary until a Sunday night cause it'll scare me some weeks. But don't be phased by it. Because what you'll find is people genuinely want to support you and they want to see you succeed and if you're kinda struggling like, have that person there and like I'm feeling a bit like this, but generally people are here to support you. I would say just do it. Just do it. Don't think about it, just do it. There's no problems. There's solutions to every problem and you're doing it for the right reason of supporting people.

Rebecca:

That's lovely, thank you so much. Now if there's anybody listening that wants to get in touch with your service in South Lanarkshire do you want to tell them how?

Mel:

So the All In The Family service in South Lanarkshire you can contact us via email at allinthefamily@sfad.org.uk or if you want to contact myself about anything to do with My Support Day and if you're thinking about doing your own support group and wanting tips you can contact me through melmcperson@thebeacons.org.uk.

Interview Ends

Exit:

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at helpline@sfad.org.uk. We also have webchat and further information on our website www.sfad.org.uk.