

Hello.

It is my absolute pleasure to be here tonight at this important event. My name is Cath Hill and I am proud to say that I am a Social worker, previously working in Child Protection and Youth Offending for Lancashire County Council, now a Senior Teaching Associate at Lancaster University. I am especially proud to introduce myself as one of the founders of Manchester Survivors Choir, who you have seen singing earlier and who are an incredible group of people, who I am honoured to tell you about this evening.

On the 22nd May 2017, I took my youngest son, who was 10 at the time to his first pop concert. It started as a wonderful night filled with singing, smiles, great music and a special energy in the arena, because of all the fabulous young people at the concert all enjoying seeing their idol and loving the experience. As we all know, everything changed at the end of that performance. I consider myself to be one of the lucky, unlucky ones. We were not in the foyer, but involved in the panic which ensued after. We were so fortunate to leave with our lives and not endure physical injury, but have experienced the psychological scars which occur when you fear for your life and survive when others have died. Unfortunately, we found ourselves caught up in a further Dayesh attack in Spain just three months later, when the terrorists responsible for the Barcelona attacks were found and then attacked residents of the small holiday town of Cambrills. This time we were fortunate to be in bed at the time, but woke to find the hotel under armed guard as one terrorist remained at large. This was a terrible year, that changed mine and my son's, in fact my whole families, approach to life and our safety for ever.

As I struggled to cope after our return from Spain, one of the issues, which I found the most troubling was that in Manchester, despite my training and professional expertise in working with children in crisis, I prioritised my own son and his wellbeing and myself. When I could see that there were hundreds of children separated from their parents, who were traumatised and in shock, I did not stay in Manchester to help. I always imagined that I would be the type of person who would help, but when the unthinkable happened I just didn't or couldn't. The reason I confess this to you, is because it is from this feeling of guilt (which was on so many levels) that I found the strength and perhaps more importantly the focus, to turn the discussions survivors were having about setting up some sort of peer support group, in to a reality.

So, why a choir...? Those of us who were registered victims of the attacks were added to an online forum which was set up in partnership with the police and other support agencies. On that, we recognised that we all had something in common (other than the huge thing we had in common of course), which was that our kids loved music. That's why they were at the arena that night. People were posting about their kids struggling to engage in singing and dancing, as they had done before and through discussion it was suggested that maybe we should start our own choir. I was also painfully aware, through my own experience of trying to get mental health support for my son and I, but also from reading other people's stories on line, access to mental health services for young people affected by the attacks was limited. There were some examples of wonderful support offered by amazing professionals, but it was a postcode lottery. Sadly, as those of us who have worked in children's services know, child and adolescent mental health services were already struggling to cope under

the pressure of austerity and cuts to funding, but then when an attack happens where young people are targeted, it creates a huge influx of additional people requiring services and in some areas, there was just not the capacity to offer, timely services. So, I knew that rather than simply moaning about this, I needed to be pro-active and if I didn't use my social work skills on the night, I could do now.

So, I got one thousand pounds of funding from a local company, Vibe Tickets. Next, I found a choir leader. Not being a singer myself (at all!!), I knew we would need a professional to lead us. Thankfully I found our wonderful Sarah Adams through an internet search. The moment I spoke to her about what we wanted to do, I knew she was the right person. She understood community arts and totally got the ethos of the group.

Another young woman found us a space in Manchester and then we invited people to come. We had our first session in February last year.

15 really brave people turned up on a very wintery afternoon. I'd say it was pretty awkward at first. People were nervous about coming back into the city, people were anxious about having to tell and therefore re live their trauma, and although we had communicated on line, we had not met in person. I remember thinking, you know what, I can't make it better for everyone, but I can give them a big hug and tell them how wonderful I think they are and how pleased I was to meet them. Hugging has become one of our things, we always spend the first 5 minutes of any choir gathering simply going around greeting each other with a hug!!

After the initial shaky start, the choir just grew from strength to strength. Each week more people asked to join and we were soon up to a regular 35 people. What worked is that we had a positive activity to focus on. Once the initial hellos and hugs were done, we would crack straight on with singing. We would spend an hour focusing, learning harmonies, laughing when people sang in the wrong place and being united in song. I will always remember after we learned our first song, just looking round and saying, "Oh wow, we're actually REALLY good!!". I probably shouldn't have been surprised, we are blessed to have some amazing young singers in our group, but still, it was a wonderful icing to the cake.

Ah, yes cake is also VERY important to us. So, every session I brought a cake. I asked a local cake company to make us a bespoke cake for our group, so we had a cake with bees on it, musical notes and we'd have little sandwiches and tea (basically afternoon tea), after we sang. This just snowballed and members would contribute too and I have to say we have some very talented bakers in our group. For example, 12 year old Ava who makes wonderful bee themed cupcakes and Andrea with her Bee themed tiramisu. This is such an important part of our session, it brings us together to share our stories if we want to, or to share the challenges we have faced that week, or to simply get to know each other socially and enjoy being around people who just get it.

We started with 15 members and now we have grown to 80 members. We are a cross generational group, with our youngest member being 9 and then we have parents and grandparents. Our group has been affected in different ways from people who have lost a

loved one, people who witnessed the attack, people from emergency services affected and people who were injured. All of us bear the psychological scars of that night.

We send out a message of hope, that out of something evil can come something positive, which is about love, community, peer support and relationships.