

The night VOYPIC was born by Laura

So here's how I remember it. It was 1993, I was 14 years old and living in Rathgael Training School having worked my way up through the care system. I always was ambitious!



I remember being invited to attend a meeting in Whitefield House, something about young people in care being listened to and having rights. Maybe it was because I was already a bit of a mouthpiece, a barrack room lawyer, maybe the staff thought it would be a good idea to channel my energy into something positive, who knows, but thankfully I was encouraged to attend and one of the staff members, Maeve, brought me along.

There were about 50 young people in the room that night, from children's homes all over Northern Ireland. Vivian McConvey was there too, one of the hosts for the meeting.

And that was the night VOYPIC was born.

After explanations of what it was all about - giving young people in care a voice, an opportunity to be heard and to make a difference, they asked for volunteers to form a steering group. And guess who put their hand up? Yes me, the mini-activist!

The Steering Group met regularly and we had a weekend away in the Share Centre to talk about the major issues for young people living in care. It was hard work - honestly - but the craic was great too!

We visited young people in children's homes, listened to them, produced newsletters highlighting the things that mattered to them. I've looked back over some of those early newsletters and it is interesting to see what was important to me and other young people then - seeing our files, being really listened to in our meetings, how we were looked after by staff in the children's homes. I remember being disgusted that one of my children's

homes had a yellow bus with 'Be Wise, Immunise' painted on the side. That was our transport, not a normal wee car. Talk about drawing attention to us!

In those early days of VOYPIC, the young people were well supported. I particularly remember Vivian, Liz, Miriam, Denis and many others including the financial support given by NIVT. We couldn't have done it without those professionals within the care system who really did care.

Looking back on how it all started, it's great to see how much has been achieved in 21 years. From borrowing rooms to meet in, VOYPIC now has offices all over Northern Ireland. From starting with a small group of volunteers, VOYPIC now employs lots of staff but continues to rely on volunteers and care experienced young people; as an organisation it has never forgotten how it all started. From being that small, quiet voice, VOYPIC is now the respected spokesperson in all matters affecting young people in care. VOYPIC really has made a difference for young people who are looked after, they have been given a voice.

And on a personal level, I believe I have gained so much from my involvement with VOYPIC. As a young person in care, I had my say and was listened to, I helped other young people put forward their issues and opinions, I made life-long friends and gained the confidence to get involved with other organisations like the Youth Forum and Prince's Trust. I even got the chance to meet Prince Charles and lobby politicians, not many can say that!

Happy 21st birthday VOYPIC, it was a privilege to have been there at your birth and to watch you grow and mature over the years. Let the party begin!!