

Sunshine after Rayne

Rayne O'Brien runs a care leavers forum, raises money so they can eat together, and has helped improve healthcare for them. All the more remarkable then that she was once a care leaver herself, dumped in a council flat with no money or friends. By **Kelly Mattison**. Photos: **Aaron Bray**

When Rayne O'Brien was taken into care at age 13, the worst thing about it was being separated from her siblings.

"One of my brothers was ten years younger than me so he was only three," she says, "I had never seen or spoken to a social worker in my life before this night. I had no idea what was going on."

Instructed to take only her school uniform, which she carried in a bag for life, she was placed in an emergency foster placement and spent the following years in and out of care. At 18 she lived in supported lodgings for a year, which was "basically like renting a room in someone's house" and then was "dumped in a council flat" a year later, losing all her friends.

"They all lived with their mums and dads so they didn't understand why I couldn't come out and party. As soon as I had the flat my priorities had to change. I had to decide to spend £50 on a night out or a tin of paint and some cushions for my flat." She had to be forward-thinking about gas, electricity and food too because otherwise "you end up sat in the dark and no one cares".

O'Brien, from Stockport, adds: "I was never jealous of my friends. I mean I wish I had what they had but I'd never wished for them not to have it. I knew they were lucky to be in that situation, to have a mum and dad, but they couldn't see it from my point of view. If my electric went off my meter, I literally had no one to ask."

Now 28, O'Brien inspires and educates other young people navigating the transition from being a child in care

to a care leaver. "I have lived the skint care leaver in a run-down council flat life struggling to pay the bills and make somewhere home so I've got many tips and tricks on how to do things on a budget."

I am interviewing O'Brien in her flat and it's far from run down. Everything is a soft grey colour that she has painted herself, including the concrete stairs leading up to the hallway. It is immaculately presented, and uplifting quotes hang from every corner. As we speak her black pug Bean sits curled up on her knee and she tells me he's her "best mate".

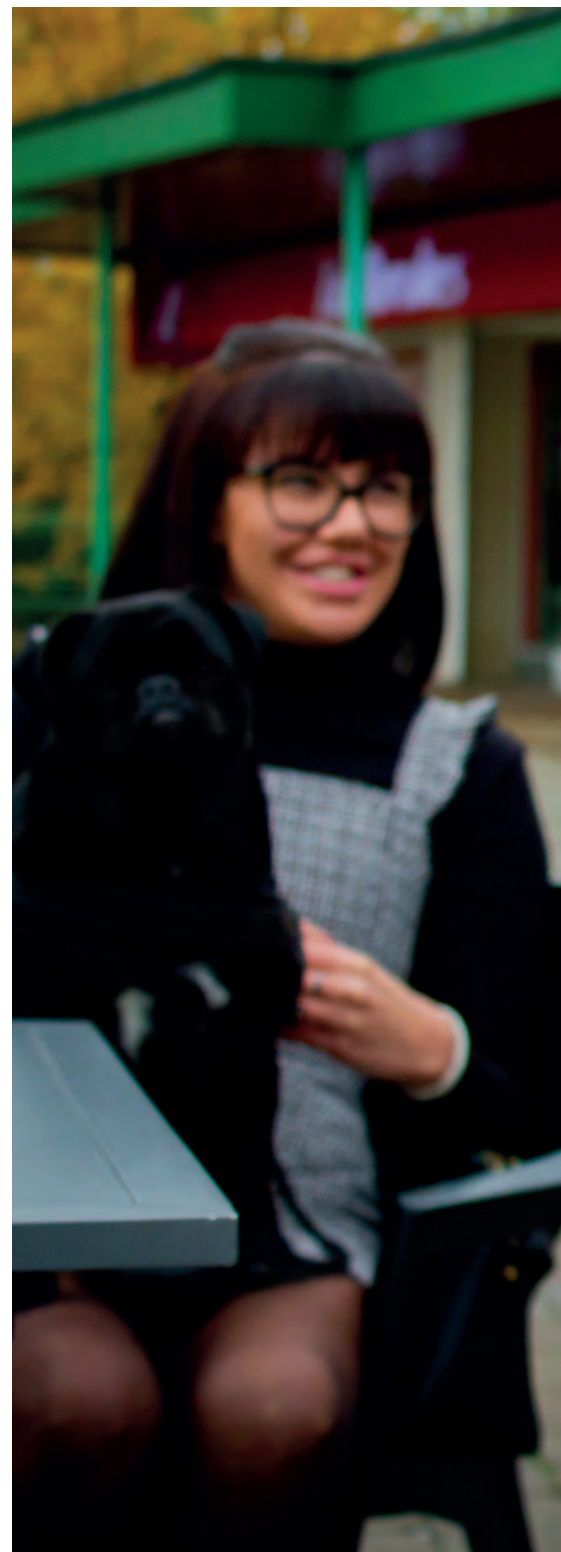
"You can talk to people when you've got a dog. I've literally met all my friends because of him."

Since leaving care O'Brien has worked in pastoral care in high schools and volunteered with her council to help set up and run a care leavers forum in Stockport. She has also contributed extensive time to a leaving care charity in her area and helped to run a Christmas dinners scheme for care leavers.

Her life experience has given her great knowledge of services to help young people and how the systems work. After the first lockdown she founded her own project for care leavers, young and old, to reduce isolation.

"I've always been drawn to help others. I want to pass my knowledge on."

She set the group up after she saw a Facebook post from the manager of a café and chip shop announcing she had a small amount of funding to feed a local group. O'Brien commented: "What about



care leavers?" and before long had set up a meeting with the café manager, Nicola Wallace Dean, who agreed to fund a weekly meal from the chip shop for care leavers living in the surrounding area.

Chereece Bateson is a 20-year-old administrative officer at her local job centre and a care leaver. She attends O'Brien's group following a move from Warrington to Stockport – with no prior knowledge of the area.

"A lot of us care leavers don't have that extra couple of quid to treat ourselves,



Cherece Bateson with her baby, Kay Keane, and Rayne O'Brien with her pug. The three women have become firm friends

even to a meal at the chip shop," she says. "Rayne understood that some of us can struggle to get food, so it was nice for us to get out and eat together. It really was a treat for us all."

When the funding came to an end O'Brien crowdfunded so the group could continue to meet weekly. With the money she made she bought vouchers from the restaurant so she could continue to provide food for the group.

Bateson says it isn't just about the food but that attending the sessions gives her

a confidence boost and a place to go without any social care involvement.

"Some of us don't feel comfortable with social care workers because of their titles. We may think they have hidden agendas or they're just there because they're getting paid. By not having that professional involvement it made us feel more comfortable to talk and gave us a sense of belonging. If any professionals did come, they were from the doctor's or charities and they were just like everybody else."

Through her voluntary work O'Brien has built numerous long-lasting connections and it was after a period of isolation and her own personal struggle that she connected with Kay Keane, manager at the Alvanley Family doctor's practice in Woodley, Stockport.

"I went on a 'Wednesday walk' through the GP. It's like a wellbeing thing, and it's all old people who go," laughs O'Brien. "I wanted to start getting out more and that's how Kay and I met."

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A journey from their isolated village to Monrovia — Liberia's capital — meant a ten-hour journey by motorbike. Even if they made it to the hospital, suffering Sangai would probably have died.

However, thanks to MAF pilots Roy Rissanen and Steven Biggs, they were flown immediately to the capital — saving 9 hours. 'On Friday afternoon at a remote village,' Roy recalls, 'I picked up a baby

who was infected with a flesh-eating parasite. She was extremely ill.'

Fortunately, following a safe landing, MAF drove mother and child straight to ELWA (Eternal Love Winning Africa), a hospital run by Christian missionaries. 'She received regular treatment to remove the parasites,' reports nurse Margot, 'and she's such a little fighting champion.'

Without MAF's speedy light aircraft, it's unlikely sweet little Sangai would have survived. However, thanks to MAF she is excited to be able to celebrate Christmas back home with her family.

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Keane describes O'Brien as an "amazing person," who has changed how she views care leavers. When we speak over Zoom, she says she is unsure whether or not she should be embarrassed when she admits that until she met O'Brien she didn't know a thing about care leavers.

"I had no idea that at 18 that's kind of it," she says. "I know social services don't just leave them and there is care leaver support until they reach 25, but equally I don't think I understood that at 18 they're in a flat on their own, possibly in a new area, not knowing anybody."

Meeting O'Brien prompted her to think that as a GP practice they could do more. The Alvanley surgery promotes itself as a collaborative practice, which means the service works in partnership with their patients in the community, with a focus on not what's the matter with their patients, but what matters to them.

Since their encounter Keane has attended several of O'Brien's sessions at the chip shop and hosted talks at the group, motivated by a desire to break down barriers in case anyone attending was "frightened" to come into the surgery. She invited attendees to ask questions about anything they were worried about and asked them how she could do more to help. She spoke openly to the group about sexually transmitted infections, alcohol, drugs, diabetes.

"I wanted to go and sit with them in their space and reassure everyone that we will never judge you and if you come into the practice to register you will be met with absolute kindness."

"I returned home from hospital with my little girl to find Rayne had cleaned and decorated my flat."

Together, Keane and O'Brien have pioneered a scheme that enables the looked-after child status on someone's medical record to automatically change to "care leaver" when they turn 18 so that additional support can be provided if needed and GPs can be more empathetic. "We are a veteran friendly practice, so we signpost them to different things," explains Keane "But when I dug around after meeting Rayne and listening to her story I realised there is nothing to flag someone up as a care leaver."

This change of status can also help financially, says O'Brien.

"I have seasonal affective disorder and I need to take vitamin D but sometimes I can't afford to buy it monthly so having 'care leaver' on my record enables a GP to think, okay, she may need a prescription



O'Brien in her flat. She is keen to pass on the homemaking skills she learnt early to other care leavers

for this, and to have that understanding that I may not have anyone to ask for money."

Bateson says the best thing for her about attending the group was meeting O'Brien, which means she now has the support of an older, wiser care leaver to guide her along. This was especially important when she gave birth.

"Rayne was a massive support to me and was with me every step of the way. I returned home from hospital with my little girl to find she had

cleaned and decorated my flat and taken care of my cats."

O'Brien had hung a pink banner up and balloons. It was Christmas time, so she put a tree up and left two presents on the windowsill as a surprise.

"It overwhelmed me. As a care leaver I don't have people to rely on so even having one person who cared, it meant a lot to me."

Another highlight for her was being introduced to Keane and other charities, such as suicide survivor organisation A Man About A Dog, which gave talks at the group meetings.

O'Brien's willingness to help others stems from the awareness that she would not be here if it wasn't for those few people in her life who stepped up for her, and she repeatedly mentions a pastoral

manager at her high school, who was "like a mum" and fought for her when she entered the care system.

"She saw me every day in school and it wasn't a job to her. If I messaged her at 9pm she'd reply so she obviously cared about me. I contacted her recently after getting my social care files and she met me for a coffee to talk things over. I'm so thankful to her. She will always have a special place in my heart."

It's taken a while but O'Brien says she has now built her own small but solid support system and describes having a friend to ask for help in times of need as a luxury that "normal" people take for granted. She tells me about one close friend.

"I know if I rang her now and I needed her to be at my house she'd be here. She's painting the bathroom right now but she'd come covered in paint, and she knows I'd do the same for her – that's a good friend. For years I've looked for that and now I've found it. I've always been the good friend, and no one has ever returned it whereas now I feel like I've got the right people."

Keane and O'Brien are continuing to collaborate and are currently compiling a list of abbreviations used when a child is leaving care so that GPs can be better informed.

"Care leavers here are the children of Stockport, and Stockport needs to look after them. I just want to do our bit to help and put our arms around them so it's not so scary." ■