

## FW

I feel I owe so much to the opportunity of being apart of this enlightening project some years ago. My journey started as many other young people chosen to attend this expedition. There is something magical that can be found in darker times of a young persons life during this journey. A period of my life was out of control. I was angry, unforgiving and hostile. I was also lonely, confused and wanted to be cared about. I felt like I had nothing. Over the years I fell deeper and found harder and faster ways of self-destruction. I gave it a good run but lost control and found myself in serious trouble when I was 19. I had an application sent to the YMCA and was granted shelter. Originally I was classed as high risk and was rejected as I needed more support then what they could provide. I became quite unwell mentally and had put my body though alot of abuse. I suffered regularly with panic attacks throughout the day, sometimes in clusters and the nights were considerably worse. I couldn't cope with being awake and couldn't sleep due to paranoia and fear. After a hospital submission I was given the details for St. Luke's, a counselling service for drugs dependency. One of the most beautiful women I know Joanne became my councillor. She fought for me and i was able to have the rejection lifted from the YMCA. They agreed I could stay there on special conditions which my councillor supported. My weekly sessions were increased. I had to attend each session. I also had to attend an anonymous group which she ran each week. I had to pass weekly drugs tests for all substances. I was placed on a female floor, had no visitors and was placed on a week-by-week rolling contract. The final condition was the one i struggled with most of all; engaging with support staff. Slowly my life began to change. Of course it took alot of professionals, alot of time, dedication and tears. Over the period of the year I had started to find some of myself again and learned how to be ok. It was around this point i began to trust my support worker. Eva was one of the strongest women I've known. I owe her many apologies. I tried wherever I could to give back. Eventually, I became grateful. I joined some anonymous fundraising and did this privately with staff at the YMCA. I was recognised as someone with something to give and something who deserved a chance to do something extraordinary - My support worker Eva put my name forwards for the expedition to South Africa.

The tour itself was eye opening, gave insight to some of the most intriguing paths of life and showed a beauty in true hardship. The YMCA shelters we visited, the AIDS refuge, the Drakensberg mountains, the culture and stories of the valley around camp fires was truly inspiring. I learnt alot on this trip. I was very inspired by a lady I met. Her name was Penny McKibbin. She had a natural way, wonderful story teller and was as intense as me except with honest wisdom and 50 years worth of life experience. I found some peace in her words around the camp fire and watching the sunrise every morning that week in a place called Umngeni Valley. This is one of my favourite places in the world. I felt I had forgiven myself for many things and learned that my home would be within me. I will always be truly grateful for this life changing, life inspiring and in some cases life saving project. Angus Wingfeild managed our tour with such decorum, mediation and respect, he became a hero to many of us during the month we spent in South Africa. This felt like a life-time and ended so swiftly. When I returned I knew the project was over but the journey hadn't. I had been given a second chance. I had options. I saw the world as it is today for a 20 year old girl - full of opportunity. I could sit alone with my thoughts. I began to sleep again, soon it was like clockwork. Every morning i woke up with energy, so much so I didn't know what to do with myself most of the time. I started playing music, writing, I reconnected with my beautiful mum and younger sisters and started to repair the heartache I caused them... I have never suffered another panic attack since that trip. Isn't that amazing. I got three jobs, worked around the clock, saved every penny. After 6 months i had bought myself the most incredible gift. Freedom. I waited 2.5 years to get permanent accommodation. I was offered the keys at long last... I rejected them. I packed my belongings, bought my ticket and went back to Africa. I almost couldn't believe I'd made it and Penny was there waiting for me at the King Shaka International Airport. I was 21 and volunteering for WESSA to contribute to this beautiful nature park. I shovelled tons of rock and stones to build roads in the valley. Sheered plants to make

pathways safe and slept under the stars whenever I could. I wanted to repay the people here and the land for what they had shown me. I wanted to say thankyou somehow. I travelled many places over these years. Always looking for something extraordinary. I found myself in a fishing town in the Northern Territory Australia some months later. It took 5 days to steam out and beat sea sickness. If you have experienced this with a tiny boat toilet and rocky waters, I am sure you can sympathise. We were a team of 3 fisherman / 2 fisherwomen and our skipper. I will never forget the change a persons mind goes through in these circumstances. After around 2 months of being at sea I found a message online from Angus. This was one of my most treasured feelings. Angus asked me to return as Tour Leader for the upcoming trip. This may have been my first time I felt so very proud of myself. I never did return as Tour Leader as I was travelling far away but the recognition always made me feel apart of the cause. From here i moved between third world countries and fit in with the other lost and wondering souls. I found myself and a great sense of existence - i also found many others along the way. Some of the poverty stricken places I visited aren't as poor as they were. Some of the local people who were struggling, have one less thing to worry about and some of the children who were made to beg all night at the age of three didn't have to work so hard when I was there and people I met along the way. I remember all their faces so well. They gave more to me then I could ever give to them. I have been back in the UK coming up three years soon. I have a lovely home, a beautiful partner and I manage homes for kids leaving foster care. I have the most beautiful memories and I am still friends with Penny McKibbin! I think there was a time I inspired her too. I would never have achieved any of this, i would never have learnt to love and be loved the way I do now, most of all I would never have left and gave whatever I had to give to all the people and places I visited in the 6 countries over the 3 years I was away. I wouldn't be continuing to try the way I do now at 27 - if it wasn't for the first opportunity I had ever been given. This is so more then an expedition