

INSIGHT - Investigation

# Stolen childhood

Thousands of young carers miss out on school, friends and fun as they are forced to look after family members with mental and physical health problems

by Keith Rossiter

A film about young carers has helped to turn around the life of one Westcountry schoolboy.

Joel Archibald, a 14-year-old Plymouth student, saw his grades plummet when he had to start looking after his ill father.

Joel became isolated and lost his friends at Stoke Damerel Community College.

But his life changed after the school's Year 9 drama class was chosen to help to make a film with the Kidstime Foundation, a national children's charity, as part of its Who Cares? project.

More than 30 of the students were involved in the project.

The film will go online later this year as a resource for other schools and for children who find themselves in a similar predicament.

Joel's story emerged during a workshop with the teenagers.

He finally found the ability to break his self-imposed silence.

And his classmates who appeared in the film said that Joel's story had helped them to understand their own roles.

"It has been an amazing experience," said drama teacher Catrina Garratt.

"Joel spoke so beautifully and from the heart.

"There were times when I was so intensely moved it really was quite profound.

"The young people were saying, 'Joel, we had no idea. We just thought you weren't interested in school'."

She added: "I was very proud of these young people and the care they took of each other."

She said classmates often do not realise that a young carer needs their help and support.

"We need to look at the issues of mental health in more detail. This project has been very intense for these young people.

"What is lovely for them is that it's something other young people can use.

"They have become the voice of young carers around the country who were happy to give their stories but didn't want to be filmed."

Once the film is edited it will be part of a package of online resources available from the Kidstime Foundation which provides information, resources and support for children and young people who are the carers of parents, or siblings, who have a mental illness.

The Stoke Damerel film will sit alongside an earlier movie

The aim of the Who Cares? project is to create an online learning package for schools about mental illness.

More than 30 of the College's Year 10 GCSE Drama students took part in four days of filming at the College and on location.

Students also created the script through improvisation sessions with the director.



Joel Archibald (Left)

### Real life: Joel cares for his Dad

Joel Archibald, 14

Joel cares for his father, who has physical and mental health problems. "I was 13 when Dad got ill," Joel said. "He had depression and chronic heart disease, and loads of other things."

"I had to cook every night, do dishes, clean up - everything I thought Dad would do."

"It wasn't so bad that I couldn't bear it. But I wasn't able to concentrate on school work and had really bad grades in English and maths."

"It was complicated in the beginning because no one knew that I was a carer." Joel said that until the film was made

I leave home. "There are good days and bad days." "Dad doesn't see himself as ill. He is always going to be stuck with it. But I find it easier to cope now."

"And my grades have picked up. "I have now heard of people having the same or worse problems, but never met them face to face."

His advice to anyone in the same predicament was: "Speak to someone before it's too late."

He said: "When you are in the situation you feel isolated and don't want to speak to anyone because you feel no one will help and you think you are the only one with those problems."

"Speak to a family member you can trust, or a teacher, or a friend you can trust."

He said young people did not get enough information. The authorities "don't really know how we feel. They should come and talk to people like us."

Posters and books could help to inform those in his situation. He believed the film would help.

"It's nice to see someone in your situation and watch what they do."

"When I saw the first Kidstime Who Cares? film, I thought that was me."

"That's what I'm hoping this film will achieve."

I didn't have any school friends. I was on my own every day. -JOEL ARCHIBALD

he felt isolated. "I didn't have any school friends. I was on my own every day."

"Sometimes I wouldn't go home until seven or eight because I didn't want to."

"But that has all changed because I have opened up and told my stories."

He said that after his input to the process, his classmates changed their way of acting.

"It has helped me to talk. It was easier to talk to a group than one-to-one."

"Now it's better and easier, but he won't get better. It will be like this until

Young carers are incredible and they rarely understand just how valuable the tasks they complete every day are to their families and the wider community

-PLYMOUTH COUNCIL CABINET MEMBER CLLR SUE MCDONALD



Students discuss caring issues



Abbie Roberts, Lauren McMillan, Rebecca Trim, Ellie Muttram



Ellie Muttram and Joel Archibald

### On screen: Ellie and Abbie

Ellie Muttram, 14

In the Who Cares? film, Ellie plays a young carer who has to take over caring for her mother when her older sister goes off to university.

"There were a few people in my school who had experiences of having to help with their parents and we took ideas from them."

"The hardest part was trying to understand how they would feel."

"When you take on a responsibility like this life at school changes."

Her advice: "Talk to someone and become more open. Don't try to hide the problem away."

"I don't think they should be embarrassed about their situation. It's not their fault. It's just something that happens and they should work around it and try to get help."

She said the filming was a good experience, but hard work doing take after take for scenes.

Abbie Roberts, 14

In the Who Cares? film, Abbie plays the friend of Ellie's character.

"As a friend, I was trying to be there for her but she got into herself more because of her mother."

"I had to act like I was losing a friend, which is hard to do."

"It happens in real life, if you don't know what's going on behind the scene and your friend is becoming more and more distant."

"Because the film is based on a true story, people will feel they can talk about it."

Her advice: "Just talk to your friend and find out what is wrong. But don't pressure them into talking. Just be there for them."

"I wasn't really aware of these problems before the film."

She said young carers needed people they could talk to and trust.



Scenes from the 'Who cares' film

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## The hidden problem



1 child in every 6 in a classroom has a parent with mental health issues.



840 young carers in Plymouth, according to city council estimates. Only 200 have been directly identified.



9,370 five to seven year old young carers in England, up by around 80% over the last decade.



166,360 children in England are caring for their parents, siblings and family members.



15,000 children up to the age of 17 are providing more than 50 hours of care every week.

## Who can help?

Visit YCNet at [www.youngcarers.net](http://www.youngcarers.net) for help and advice

### Helplines

**Devon**  
08456 434435  
[www.devoncarers.org.uk](http://www.devoncarers.org.uk)

**Cornwall**  
Kernow Young Carers project  
01209 204565  
[kernowyoungcarers.org](http://kernowyoungcarers.org)

**Plymouth**  
[www.plymouth.gov.uk/youngcarers](http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/youngcarers)  
Barnardo's Young Carers Service  
01752 856729  
Email [bycs@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:bycs@barnardos.org.uk)

**Torbay**  
[www.torbay.gov.uk/youngcarers](http://www.torbay.gov.uk/youngcarers)  
01803 208657  
Email: [youngcarers@torbay.gov.uk](mailto:youngcarers@torbay.gov.uk)

**Somerset**  
Young Carers Project  
0845 345 9122  
[www.somersetyc.org.uk/](http://www.somersetyc.org.uk/)

**Dorset** [www.dorsetforyou.com/406698](http://www.dorsetforyou.com/406698)