



PHOTO: JUDITH HERWES

Julie's search for her brother involved visits to prison and hostels

WHEELS OF CHANGE

In searching for her homeless brother, Julie encountered pain, tragedy – and ultimately hope. She tells Helena Drakakis why she ended up cycling to Paris in aid of The Big Issue Foundation

When Julie rode down the Champs Élysées under the brilliance of the Parisian summer sun, her mind was fixed firmly on her brother David. Completing the London to Paris 250-mile cycle ride – in aid of The Big Issue Foundation – was not only a formidable achievement for the 31-year-old, but another chapter in her own personal journey.

Julie's story has taken her from despair to hope, with each twist and turn unlocking a piece of her late brother's life.

Julie met David when she was 15. Separated from their parents as a baby and placed into care, David returned – aged 23 and addicted to heroin – to find his family. He had spent many of the intervening years bedding down in London squats and doorways, on filthy floors and among discarded needles.

"We got on really well," says Julie. "We developed a bond, and I would visit him in London. He would take me to the places he slept. He sometimes sold The Big Issue."

When Julie was 18, David was imprisoned in HM Prison Belmarsh. Her shoulders shiver at the memory of her visits there. "It was a harrowing experience," she says, "but I do remember the day he came out. His shoes were falling off, so I took him to Covent Garden to buy a pair of Dr Martens."

David got clean in

prison, but one trip to pick up his dog from a dealer following his release re-acquainted him with the taste for heroin.

"Sometimes when he was okay, he'd go into a hostel or he'd have temporary housing, but each time things went wrong or he was evicted, he would plunge straight back," says Julie.

David had a son, Arran, but on the day he was born the baby's mother – also an addict – abandoned him in hospital. Unable to cope, David had his first overdose and was not expected to live.

"I rang to see where his ashes were... but someone else had picked them up"



"He'd slashed his arms, and taken a concoction of drugs. His son had been born an addict and with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. He was placed into foster care.

"David did recover and tried to get clean in the hope that he might get his son back. He did really well but Arran was adopted," she says.

Then, suddenly, the contact stopped. For two years Julie waited to hear from David – a call from a mobile, or a visit – but it never came. When she moved to London to work as a veterinary nurse, she resumed her search.

Her first port of call was the Big Issue vendors in Victoria station. Some remembered David. She brought pictures, and then the penny dropped. Wasn't he the guy who died? The one who overdosed?

She traced David to a variety of hostels, but there was no record of him. Eventually, she found his death had been registered. He had been cremated at Lewisham Crematorium, south London.

"I rang to see where his ashes were. I expected them to be scattered at the cemetery, but someone else had picked them up. My search began all over again."

David's son's adoptive parents were the missing link. They had travelled with Arran to attend David's funeral, and pick up his remains. They had wanted him to be a part of Arran's life, and for father and son to eventually meet.

Julie wrote them a letter, which was passed through the adoption agency who had first found a home for Arran. "It was the most difficult letter I have ever had to write, but they invited me to meet Arran.

"I was expecting a drawn-out process, but on the first day they asked me: 'Do you want to pick Arran up from school?' That was pretty emotional, but now I'm like an additional member of the family."

Julie sees Arran once a month. She's more like a big sister than an aunt, and when he asks about his parents she is there, along with his adoptive parents, to fill in the blanks.

Within the last week, she has learned that Arran's birth mother has also passed away.

"If it hadn't been for the Big Issue vendors I would never have found Arran. He talks about me at school, and I love visiting him. He is the positive I can take from this."

Julie completed the three-day London to Paris bike ride in July last year, raising £1,300 for The Big Issue Foundation

ON YOUR BIKE! SUPPORT THE BIG ISSUE FOUNDATION WITH A LONDON TO PARIS BIKE RIDE

The Big Issue Foundation is a registered charity that provides essential support services to Big Issue vendors and the wider homeless community. This year's London to Paris bike ride will take place from July 23 - 26. For more information, visit www.bigissue.org.uk or call Jay at The Big Issue Foundation on 020-7526 3453. There is an event information day on Saturday, February 28, at York House, Richmond Road,

Twickenham TW1 3AA. Everybody is welcome to attend between 10am and 3.30pm, but you will need to confirm beforehand – email jonathan.hunt@bigissue.com



LONDON TO PARIS: WHO'S GOING?
Olivier Stockman, film producer, London

When Olivier Stockman first bought a Big Issue from a vendor outside his local supermarket, he asked the man how long he'd been selling for. The

reply was "nine years" and it knocked Stockman for six.

"I realised that I had been walking past this man and ignoring him. My eldest son is nine. I felt quite shaken by it. By chance, the magazine fell open at an advert for the London to Paris bike ride and I believe it was the omen I needed."

Chris Leach, teacher, Birmingham

For Chris Leach, the London to Paris bike ride is not just fulfilling a personal goal, but is shaping up to be a community event. Having been

diagnosed with bladder cancer last year, he needed a focus. But the head teacher of Matthew Boulton Community Primary School in Birmingham is also involving his school in fundraising.

"The Big Issue is a cause that touches my heart, and I needed a positive focus. It's also my last year as a teacher and I thought I'd go out with a bang," he said. The 54-year-old is involving the children in helping him collect sponsors, and is planning a school cycling day with children and parents that will run at the same time.