**Transcript one-to-one chat (Thelma) 18/2/21**

ANDREW: So, I wondered if… we could maybe start at the beginning and maybe talk about how and why and when you came to work at [org]?

THELMA: Yip… erm… So, I fell into the care role pretty much by mistake. It wasn’t something that I had ever thought about. I was a travel agent for 22 years, erm, and I loved that industry, and my mum and dad were foster carers. I won a competition at work and it was for a trip to Disneyland Paris and I wanted to take their foster child – who was a wee boy – with, on that trip and, for me to do that, I had to go through the Form F that they do for foster carers. So, I done that to take him on that trip and it was their manager had said, you know, ‘have you ever thought about foster care?’ I was single at the time and I regarded myself as quite young and I was like ‘oh, no, I couldn’t do that – I’m not married or anything’ and he was like that ‘oh, that’s a real about foster care’. So, anyway, I went on to become a single foster carer and I done that for three years. I really enjoyed that but then I got to the stage where being a single carer, it was a *lot* of pressure… erm… and the placement that I had was really, was a wee boy that was earmarked for residential with the behaviours that he was displaying and my mum used to work at [org] twenty-odd years ago and it was her that says to me ‘you know, [org] are always looking for people. You should see if they’ve got any vacancies’, which I did. They did have vacancies and I got an interview and I got a start – so I’ve now been here for five years.

ANDREW: Oh, right, good – oh, that’s a good length of time you’ve been there then?

THELMA: Yip, and I love it. I absolutely love it. I like working with the children. I love the environment that we work in – it’s so different to what I’ve always known. You know, being shop-based and dealing with the public and everything like that? So, it’s just a whole different way of being, sort of being up here at [org].

ANDREW: Yip… and, would you say… maybe it’s both things actually, I was going to say – was it the experience of your *mum* being a foster carer or your own experience of being a foster carer that had an influence or are both of those things tied together?

THELMA: Erm… I think it was more my experience of being a foster carer. So, my mum and dad have fostered now for 15 years and we’re always a big part of their life and they become a part of our family… and they’ve never had the type of challenges that I had on my placement. So, I had a wee boy and he, it was his first placement, he couldn’t, he came to me when he was six and he couldn’t understand why he wasn’t with his mum and I identified, quite quickly into the placement, that he was in constant conflict with the feelings that he had for me as his caregiver at that time. Somebody that he enjoyed being with. Somebody that he could see was providing for him, but his loyalty and love for his mum? And I just felt instantly that foster care wasn’t the right setting for him. He knew who his mum was. He always wanted to be [with] his mum, he didn’t want to be with somebody who was taking on this role of mum and, for me, I thought, he would be better placed with a change of workers doing different shifts, able to start afresh every sort of shift with him… erm, so I had never known about residentials apart from when my mum worked here – and I was quite young when she worked here, wasn’t really interested in the work she done up here at that point – and I started researching what was available in our area, where would be a possible match, fit for him… and I had found [type] organisation that was just along in [another area] and I thought that sounded really ideal. So, I wanted to, he went to that service and then… I had a genuine interest for residential care – to what it provided because, actually, whilst a lot of people will think that foster care is the best thing for a child in care, there’s actually some children that I believe it’s not the best thing for them.

ANDREW: yeah, yeah… and, can you remember – taking you back here – can you remember your first day at [org]? Could you describe that?

THELMA: I can. I can remember my first day. It was… so, I think I probably cried in the car… because it was just such a big change and… it was nerve wracking. So, I remember turning up at the school and chapping on the door – they didn’t have the intercom at this point – so I chapped on the door and a little boy answered the door with a pair of scissors in his hands and he was like ‘what do you want’ and I was like ‘oh’. I just was lost for words.. erm… and it’s really overwhelming I would say. It, to come into a setting like this; to meet with the children who are instantly full-on. They’ve generally not got a sense of ‘stranger danger’ – you’ll know from visiting – they accept, you know, you’re an adult, you’re here, they’ll jump on your knee, they’ll give you a cuddle or whatever… erm, and to then also have to deal with meeting all the different adults as well. So, it was really overwhelming. I was made to feel really welcome and, I remember, I was based first of all in [bungalow 3] and there was two very, sort of, low-tariff boys – younger – and they just paired me with them and I think for the first, maybe, three weeks, I just played with them. Lots of imaginary play and, actually, it was brilliant because I was never asked to put in rules or boundaries; I was just known as Thelma and she’ll have fun with you and she’ll play with you and I really was able to build up really good, solid relationships with the five boys in that bungalow… erm, because, one boy, they had said ‘he’ll not even speak to you – he doesn’t like new people – don’t be offended, just stay away from him’ and I was like ‘oh my god, like, oh Jesus’… and, like, so I did. I was petrified to even to look at him! To be fair, he was a bigger boy and, so, I played with these two wee boys and he was *so desperate* to be part of that; to see what I was all about and he was actually talking to *me* within sort of 4 weeks of me starting at [org], which was unheard of for that wee boy in particular. But it was just something that he hadn’t seen before. He was used to people coming in ‘oh, I’m a staff member and I’m going to tell you what to do right away’ sort of thing… and I had the luxury of coming in, doing lots of play and, actually, taking a back seat and observing. So, I was really grateful for that start at [org].

ANDREW: uhuh… that sounds like quite a nice induction actually? To be…

THELMA: yeah, it was. The practical side of my induction was really good. The paperwork side wasn’t and I have fed back this and, thankfully, I think that [org] has evolved throughout the years and our induction programme is a lot better. So, when I first started, there wasn’t anything like an induction plan or… you weren’t assigned to person. It was just kind of, you arrived and you would get ‘oh, up to [bungalow 3]’ or ‘somebody will meet you there’ and ‘somebody will talk to you’. So, I spent lots of time during the day, when the kids were a school, of just sitting in the office reading the red files and, there’s only so much you can kind of read and take in and still try to be motivated. So, I was able to pass that feedback back to HR and things and then, obviously, moving into the management side of things, the induction programme is something that I feel quite strongly about. Because, if we don’t get that right, you know, you’re shaping their journey for their time at [org] and, if you don’t get it right within the first day, the first week, or the first month, then it’s probably going to stay with them throughout their time at [org].

ANDREW: Yeah, yeah and, potentially, put good people off I suppose as well?

THELMA: Yip, definitely yeah.

ANDREW: uhuh… so, that’s your kind of induction then and what about, was, what about training and stuff like that? I mean, obviously, we’re talking about DDP and some of this kinda thing, I don’t know if that was in when you started? If you had training in that or if it was a different training programme at the time or how that looked?

THELMA: Erm, so, it was DDP. I think I had been with [org] for about eight months before I got my DDP training. So, I would probably say that my training – and I think it’s still the same to the current day – is learning from your colleagues and modelling and mirroring… and sort of, they don’t say ‘you’ll be a buddy to such and such’ or whatever but, because you work in a team of three all the time, you know, you’re taking a lead from somebody else. You’re learning constantly, every day, on the job and there’ll be people that you’ll come across that you’ll maybe click better with than others and you’ll maybe be more comfortable in asking questions and things like that. So, when I was in [bungalow 3]… erm, each of the staff members were able to provide me with a different *part*. So, I don’t know if you’ve met [name]? She’s been here for like, 20 years.

ANDREW: Does she do the waking night shifts – is that right, is that [name]?

THELMA: She used to do the waking night shifts, yeah. So, she kinda showed me how to run a bungalow, which is a really important part of, you know… these kids, a lot of the time, come from… erm, chaotic homes and it’s important that at [org] it’s not chaotic for them as much as possible. So, she showed me, you know, the household tasks so to speak; the domestic duties that you should be kept up to speed with; the fact that, when you start at [org], you’re probably expected to cook a meal for nine people. Nobody had ever told me that at the interview process, that I’d be cooking for nine people… I was like ‘oh my God’! [smiling/laughing] So, she really took me under the wing with that and showed me that side of it… and then there was practitioners who were more in line with my age, who I kinda gravitated towards – that I really liked their practice and they were fun and playful. So, I just consumed myself with them every shift and learnt from them how to deal with, sort of, challenging behaviours and what best practice to use… and then I suppose, eight months later, when you do the DDP, it just kind of marries it all together for you? It makes sense, so to speak.

ANDREW: yeah… and see with that point then, I wonder how - cause one of the things I’ve been thinking about – I wondered how, about these processes, about ‘how do you become a [org] person’? You know, how do you become an experience practitioner or a person who’s comfortable in that environment? Cause, as you say, it’s quite overwhelming that first day…

THELMA: Yeah

ANDREW: How long does that process take? Maybe it’s still going on, I don’t know? How long does it take before you feel like, you know, before you’re able to do it without really thinking about it or you feel like you’re really part…

THELMA: So, so, for me, I think it took a year and, I don’t know how other people would think, but I think that, for me, joining [org] was an emotional roller-coaster. I was coming up against things that I didn’t even know happened. You know… erm, and it was emotional and I remember the first time that I witnessed a safe hold with a child… and I had to leave the room because I was crying… because… all I could hear was this child saying ‘you’re hurting me, you’re hurting me’ and watching him sitting between two burley adults and… I just, I just, I had to leave and it was emotional. And then, there was other instances where I would come in and maybe, some of the kids would be really challenging and I would go away at the end of the night thinking ‘oh, I’m rubbish at this job. I can’t do it’ and then other days I’d come in and be like ‘oh, that was really good. I was able to connect with the children. They were listening’ and I felt like that was… and I’d say that that dipping, peaks and troughs, went on for a full year, erm, before I actually felt ‘oh, you know, it’s clicked into place’ and I think, as well, that my confidence grew by other people. So, and it’s not right, but there was a lot of, people would look at the rota and it would be like ‘oh, we’re on with her’ [disappointed sigh] ‘she’s just new’ or ‘we’re on with him, he’s just new’… and I wanted to get to the stage when folk were like ‘oh, yes, we’re on with Thelma’ and that would be a good shift and I think when that sort of shifted, then my attitude up here [points to head] shifted and I thought ‘actually, I *am* good at my job. I can do my job and it’ll not matter who I’m on shift with, we’re going to have a good shift’ sort of thing. So, for me it was a year. But I know there’s still people here now, that I maybe speak to through supervision, and they’re maybe two or three years down the line and they are still feeling ‘am I good at this job? Am I not good at this job?’ So, it’s, I think it’s a very personal question and everybody will have a different answer to that. And then there’s other people that come and it’s just not for them?

ANDREW: Yeah

THELMA: And, you know, they move on really quickly.

ANDREW: Yeah… and, I suppose, that’s what you would want? You know, if it is, if it’s not for them that they would move on quickly rather than you know…

THELMA: Yip, yeah… rather than kind of dragging it out and prolonging the situation.

ANDREW: Yeah, a kind of honest, adult conversation about it, yeah, ‘I thought, I thought I could do this but actually I’m, you know, I’m…’ because, you know, it is a pretty full-on environment as you say. Yeah, and I’m just wondering there then, in terms of these peaks and troughs and how you feel about that – that’s really interesting, you know, that, that’s a, I think that’s true of… most human beings, certainly for me, you want to be good at your job as well. Was there something in terms of what your expectations were about what the work would be like? About how it would look, how it would work, interacting with the reality?

THELMA: Erm… I don’t think I actually had any expectations. However, when I was here, I felt ‘oh my God! This isn’t what, this isn’t…’ It just blew my mind what, what as a care worker, you’re expected to do. What you’re expected to go through on a daily, weekly, monthly basis… erm, I certainly believe that in this job you need a lot of resilience. Erm, and I think resilience hadn’t really been something that I had called upon in my life before? And I had been very much, I had worked in travel for 22 years, I excelled at every sort of target, I was a manager, I was at the top of the tree. I had a, you know, my name was known and I was very successful and then you come here and these kids couldn’t care less who you are, what you’re doing. They’re just wanting somebody, you know, that will not go away because they’re going to call you X, Y and Z and things like that. So, it was a real, a real life’s journey for me to be honest and I know that probably sounds a bit of a… cliché, soppy story or whatever. But, you know, I had spent so many years in the travel industry, living quite a glamorous life of travelling and dealing with people with money, and talking about all nice things… and even training in the travel agent was always brilliant. You would go on a supplier training course; you would get your goody bag at the end of the day; you’d get a three course lunch; they’d maybe bring in, like, head massage people at your interval or something; it was just brilliant… and then you come into an industry like this and you’re going on training and talking about child exploitation, you’re talking about autism, you’re, and it’s like, you never leave a training course feeling ‘that was brilliant’ because it feels really wrong to say that? And I feel that, sometimes, you know, this job, this industry and the sector that we work in, is such a *serious* sector that we do work in. We’re dealing with these wee children, their lives, their stories.. erm.. and, aye, it’s a big change for anybody. I don’t think you could ever prepare yourself for it.

ANDREW: hmm, yeah, it’s interesting yeah… so, it is such a serious industry and yet, you guys use a lot of play, a lot of fun, is that fair? It seems to come across when I’m speaking to staff that there is this element of…

THELMA: yes, yeah, yeah… so we work with the PACE model. So: playful, acceptance, curious, and empathetic and a lot of our children, you know, they’ve not experienced play, they maybe don’t know how to do it. So it’s up to us to show them how to play, how to share, and if… you know, we can bring a bit of fun to their life because… *these* kids are 10, 11 and 12 and they know what a LAAC review is, they know that they’ve got clothing budgets, they know that they’ve got social workers, you know, but they don’t know how to play Cops and Robbers in the woods? Erm, you know and… and that’s really sad and I think the more play that we can integrate into their life then absolutely the better.

ANDREW: hmm… and see if you were to think back and pick out an example, or a couple of examples of practice that you’re really proud of, that you think made a difference in that, even in that moment or whatever else, is there anything that you would, that would come immediately to your mind that you would think about?

THELMA: Erm… I think probably how I built my relationship with Barry, who’s still here, you’ll have met Barry?

ANDREW: Yip

THELMA: Erm… When Barry first arrived, Barry was… in complete crisis. He had arrived on Boxing Day and he was literally in crisis constantly and in safe holds. Two and three a day for a good 18-month period and it was only… it was certain people that were always called upon to support these safe holds. So, because of my curvaceous figure [laughing], I was always called upon to support these safe holds and… I always was able to do the repair work with Barry at the end? So, at the end of a safe hold with Barry, you would go through, like, a cycle of getting him a drink, getting him into his room, spending that time with him, settling him, not necessarily talking about what’s just happened but… moving him on, telling him that everything is going to be ok or whatever and I was able to do that. I don’t know how to this day. I don’t know why it was always me that always got kinda pushed… I don’t know if people were tired or they just wanted to move on from it. But I done that with him for about 18 months. Every night he would be in a safe hold, it would be me that would go in and tuck him in and do the repair work for him and… it’s just, our relationship now, you know, I’m probably one of the… the anchors in his life, so to speak, that, and that relationship started through something that was really quite traumatic for him *and* the adults and the positive that’s came out of that… and he’ll still talk about the times when he first came and… erm… how we’ve started our [org] journey together and things like that. So, I think that’s probably something that I’m really proud of because, actually, at that point, I probably didn’t have a real understanding of what I was doing to be honest. I was just going because I’d been told by my colleagues that that’s what I had to do and I was kinda just… going with the flow with things and now I can look at, actually, how beneficial that was to Barry and, to how we built our relationship.

ANDREW: Yeah, and he was pretty settled when I was there actually? You know, you wouldn’t know that, or I wouldn’t have known that… I know I’ve only seen him a few times when I’ve been up and about but, he goes between the bungalows and chats away to staff and was no problem, made me a cup of tea and all that, so aye…

THELMA: Oh, aye, he loves it

ANDREW: and that must feel like a… I don’t know if I’m overstepping the mark but I think that I would feel quite… privileged to be in that position that you’re in, to have been able to [THELMA: yip]… is that a fair…?

THELMA: absolutely! Yeah, definitely.

ANDREW: and I suppose that’s one of the things, we can often talk about the type of work you do but, there are certainly rewarding aspects to it as well, otherwise I suppose it wouldn’t keep you there?

THELMA: Yeah, and I think that staff… including myself, we have this wish to, kinda, fix everything… and we kinda play down the work that we do on a daily basis because we just do it and we don’t necessarily think about what we are doing. But, when somebody like yourself comes in, or other external visitors, and sees what we do and give that sort of feedback of, you know, what work you’re doing and how much the kids actually progress from day one… erm… it kinda gives you a bit of a reality check. To actually think ‘actually we are… it is a rewarding job’ and whilst we might not have, you know, I think sometimes we’re guilty of always wanting a collective group of 15 perfect Peters, so to speak… and to give them a so called ‘normal’ life but, you know, they’re living their best life that they can live at their time and we’re instrumental in that and I think that, all too often, collectively as adults, we don’t give ourselves enough credit for the work that we’re doing.

ANDREW: Yeah… I’m, I think a lot, cause obviously I’m interested in the everyday and, actually, you were describing earlier, you know, making meals, making sure it’s stable, making sure it’s predictable, it’s not chaotic, things are clean, clothes are washed and they’re looked… that’s care isn’t it? I suppose that *is* everyday care?

THELMA: Yeah, definitely

ANDREW: Yeah,

THELMA: and making sure, you know that a big thing for all the children is the food… You know… they’ve… most of them have come from backgrounds where they didn’t know where they didn’t know where they were getting their next meal and what were they going to be eating or whatever. So, I do a big push on the menu planning in Bungalow1. You know, they get to try different foods. There’s always, like I do the shopping, the menus, I always make sure the fridge is fully stocked because, actually… them… me going into an empty fridge I just think ‘well, I’ll go to the supermarket’ but them going into an empty fridge – is that then a trigger to how things used to be? So, to make sure that, you know, that they are, we are meeting their basic needs at all times.

ANDREW: Yeah… and I wonder, I wonder, just, talking, you know, personally, you just probably took it for granted, actually, you know, that my mum washed clothes and got me to school and did all of these… but, what that does is it tells you that you are loved, that you’re looked after and whatever else so, you’re trying to replicate that?

THELMA: and even, yeah, and even down to, like, your mum or day, or my mum or dad or whatever… doing your hair every morning before you go out to school. You know, some of these boys have never had that before… because, they’ve not had somebody that cares to all the little details in life… and he boys in Bungalow1, not every morning, some mornings they’re just not up for it, but there’s other mornings where they’ll all stand and let me, or other members of staff, do their hair in the mornings and they’ll go out feeling a wee bit smarter, looking a wee bit smarter than normal… and it’s tough for them because I think, as they get older, they start to kinda connect the dots a wee bit. That, actually, ‘my mum and dad should have been doing this for me’ or ‘my gran and grandpa’… erm… and then I think we get a bit of a kick back from that as well? There’s a lot of resentment, of well ‘why are you doing that for me and they couldn’t do that for me’ as well? It’s a *real lot* for a child that’s looked after to take in and to try and make sense of.

ANDREW: Hmmm… yeah, and I’m just… erm… I suppose it’s… do you just have to stick with that then, you know, this ‘kicking back’? You just have to understand that and roll with the punches to a certain extent then?

THELMA: Yeah… and that’s where the resilience comes in. I remember… So, when I was at school, I remember, if anybody called me fat it was like the end of the world. I’d be in floods of tears, running home to my mum and dad – ‘oh’ – and it was the end of the world and then, within a week of being here, I realised that, actually, they were either calling me it or somebody that was a size six and it’s just words and it doesn’t matter to them. So, when you’re getting the kick back and they’re telling you that they hate you and they don’t want you to be anywhere near them or whatever… In 20 minutes time, they’ve worked through that and they’ll come back. It’s quite a fast past of life at [org] and we move on very, very quickly because that’s what they need. So, just because, you know at ten past seven in the morning you’ve been this that and the next thing, by 9 o’clock in the morning that’s, we’ve forgot about that. We’ve moved right on and you do have to have, you have to be resilient, you have to have a thick skin and… you have to be able to kinda laugh at yourself and… cause if they think, if you show, I suppose it’s if you show a bit of a weakness to them… like, I’ll be, I’ll happily be emotional with the kids if it’s in the right context. So, for instance, at the weekend there was an incident where one of the wee boys who’s had a teddy that he carries about all the time, from birth… erm… one of the other boys ripped it up and it was really upsetting for him and I was actually just as upset for that wee boy and showed that emotion but, certainly when it comes to like name-calling or something like that, you can’t have emotion – you can’t show them that that’s… cause they’ve all been brought up with probably getting name-called and not so nice things happening to them.

ANDREW: Yeah, and developing as social actors about ways to try and take some power back? Cause I suppose it must be quite a disempowered position to be in, to be a child and everybody is making all these decisions about where you live and where you go and what you…?

THELMA: Yeah and that’s why most of our children will decide that maybe food is where they’ll have their control… or, bedtimes I where they’ll have their control because it’s one, it’s the things that they can actually ‘no, you’ll not decide I’ll be eating chicken for my tea tonight – I’m deciding’ and, you know, that’s where all that come from and I think it’s really hard for staff to sometimes accept that and work and work around it. But we’ve got these children that, every single aspect of their life is decided by an adult and normally, it’s an adult that they’ve got no relationship with whatsoever. So, it’ll be like their social worker who they ‘hate’ or they think they hate. It’ll be [org] it’ll be whatever. So, they need to have control *somewhere*?

ANDREW: Yeah… well, we all do don’t we? We hate it when we feel a bit out of control, don’t we? So they’re just human beings like the rest of us. Listen, that’s us up to the 30-minute mark so, obviously, I don’t want to take up too much of your time. I know how busy you are Thelma. [phone ringing in Thelma’s office] I really appreciate you taking the time to speak to me.

THELMA: No bother

ANDREW: Is there any you need to ask me? [phone continues to ring] Are you going to have to take that [call]?

THELMA: No, no, I think we’re all just looking forward to a day where you can actually be in and spending some time with us… it was nice having you up at the bungalows

ANDREW: Yeah, I really enjoyed it and I really enjoyed meeting the kids as well. I was… like you say, I had all of that planned about how I was going to explain research and then I was in the door and it was ‘can you play Lego?’ and leaping off the couch and you’re like ‘oh, right, ok’… erm, but they were great and I’m looking forward to doing, I’m wanting to get involved in all the outdoor activities and see how that goes because that’s a big part of [org] and you can’t really do that [points to online box]… online you know? So, I’m really looking forward to getting back there as soon as possible. I think, erm, Ruth and I are going to try and speak to the Health and Safety guy at Stirling Uni because, the Social Work students are kinda considered frontline workers and so I think they’ve kinda, going to be alright. We’re going to speak to them and see how things are going. So, we’re hoping that we might be able to try and wangle the risk assessment because it’s really the Stirling Uni risk assessment. I think, you know, they don’t want to have a situation where they’ve ‘told’ me to go to work and then I get COVID and sue them, do you know what I mean? So I think it’s that kinda thinking that’s going on, you know that…

THELMA: and it’s completely understandable

ANDREW: and I think all the staff have had their vaccinations now, haven’t they? You’re all getting vaccinated?

THELMA: Erm, I think we’re, I think the majority of us have been vaccinated. I’m due my second one at the end of March so…

ANDREW: Cause I might mention that in discussion with the Health and safety guy, you know, the staff have been vaccinated, I’m young, well I’m not that young now, but you know what I mean, I’m not in a high-risk group or anything like that as well. Ok, I’ll let you go. Listen, thanks very much Thelma.

THELMA: Thank you so much. Have a nice day

ANDREW: Take care

THELMA: See you later, bye bye