



The Work of Direct Transitioning Help: Helping Service Personnel Transition to Civilian Life

Sergeant Gemma Gardner enjoyed a successful career in the army, earning a decent wage and living in a comfortable house with her family. In 2014, everything changed. After 15 years of service, Gemma was discharged from the army on medical grounds. Unable to walk without assistance, and in severe pain, Gemma found that the life she had built began to disappear. Suddenly, Gemma had to adapt to providing for her family on a reduced income and living without the moral support of the colleagues she had once trusted with her life. Gemma began to suffer from depression, eventually suffering a mental breakdown. Reflecting on this time in her life, Gemma explains that after leaving the army, she felt like she had entirely lost her sense of purpose and identity: "When I heard those words: 'Sgt Gardner, thank you very much. You are now Mrs Gardner,' I felt like my whole identity had been taken away."

Gemma's experiences might sound surprising or unusual, but unfortunately, they are not uncommon among service personnel in the UK. In fact, the importance of helping servicemen and women transition to civilian life is now acknowledged at the highest levels of government. In 2014, Lord Ashcroft, in partnership with the Ministry of Defence, published the Veterans' Transition Review. The report concluded that "transition is important for the Armed Forces and society as a whole, not just the individual." A separate report by the Forces in Mind Trust in 2013 came to a similar conclusion.

Determined to turn her life around and keen to help others like her, Gemma decided to take action. In August 2015, Gemma founded Direct Transitioning Help (DTH) - a not-for-profit foundation, with a

mission to support service personnel and help them make informed decisions about life outside the forces. Gemma began working with the servicemen and women of the 2nd Battalion Duke of Lancaster's Regiment at Weeton Barracks in Preston. Through these workshops, Gemma and the DTH team began to provide impartial information to service personnel, with the help of local professional volunteers, in the areas of law, finance, skills mapping and housing. During these sessions, Gemma and her team spoke of the importance of planning for transition, while still in active service. Gemma explained: "When you sign up at the age of 18, it is all too easy to forget that 22 years, the usual term of commitment, can go by very quickly. The time to think about leaving the forces is while you are still serving. The servicemen and women I have known are active, motivated and highly skilled individuals – many of them are natural leaders. It makes perfect sense to start giving careful thought to how you will use these abilities in civilian life."

During a DTH workshop at Weeton in 2016, Gemma and her team became aware of the importance of families, particularly wives and partners, in helping service personnel to make a positive transition to civilian life. The session was attended by former soldier, Andy Reid. Andy became the victim of an IED while on patrol in Afghanistan in 2009, losing both legs and his right arm in the attack. During the session, Andy emphasised the importance of family during transition: "If it hadn't been for my partner, my transition out of the army would not have been successful. She gave up everything to support me while I was serving, after I left the forces, she found that she needed her identity."

This workshop also highlighted the importance of managing the expectations of servicemen and women planning for transition. Stacey Nunn, the wife of a former soldier, described the challenges that her family faced during transition: "I was surprised by the types of issues we encountered, many of which we were totally unprepared for, because we had no idea of what to expect. An example of this is employment - my husband had no problem finding a job, the challenge he faced was that he was over-qualified for the jobs that were available. We had thought that the initial challenge might be bringing an income, actually it was finding a job that he could thrive in long-term."

The workshop at Weeton also raised another important issue when it comes to transition, that of finding affordable, comfortable and appropriately located housing. During the session, Andy Reid went on to explain: "We hadn't anticipated how difficult it would be to decide where to settle once I left the army. Staying near our friends was not an option, as they were still in active service, and therefore likely to move away. In the end, we decided to settle close to our families, where we knew we would be supported." Building on the learnings of this workshop, Gemma and the DTH team have recently formed a partnership with housing provider, Step Forward Housing, a UK provider of affordable new build housing for current Armed Forces Personnel and Ex-Armed Forces Personnel.

Pleased with the initial progress of DTH and aware that there is much more work to be done in the area of transition, Gemma and her team have exciting plans for the future. In particular, the DTH team are keen to see support for transition provided to personnel while they are still in active service, as part of their personal development. This approach allows personnel to engage with services that are already in existence, while they are still serving, rather than leaving the forces with no support in place. Such preparation, Gemma believes, also plays a vital role in mentally preparing personnel for life outside the forces. In addition to this the DTH team are championing the importance of building transferable skills, in preparation for transition, in order to provide service personnel with the confidence to make their own way in civilian life.

In 2017, DTH aims to gain charitable status and expand their services to include a programme of support workshops at the Lancaster 'Phoebus Centre.' The programme will cover a range of issues related to transition, including running a household, managing finances, legal planning and budgeting, as well as other practicalities relating to adapting to civilian life. Gemma explains: "The ultimate aim of these programmes is to enable servicemen and women, and their families, to make informed, independent choices about their transition and ultimately to take back ownership of their lives."

**If you would like to find out more about the work of DTH or think you might be able to help their work, please contact Gemma:
gemmagardner@directtransitioninghelp.net**