

Patrick

*How MyLife helped
Patrick to smile again*

Prepared by:

Jane and Mark, Patrick's mum and dad

Mandy Gibbins, Karen Platt and Martin Lowe, Patrick's Support Workers

Jamie Acton, Personal Trainer, Banish Gym

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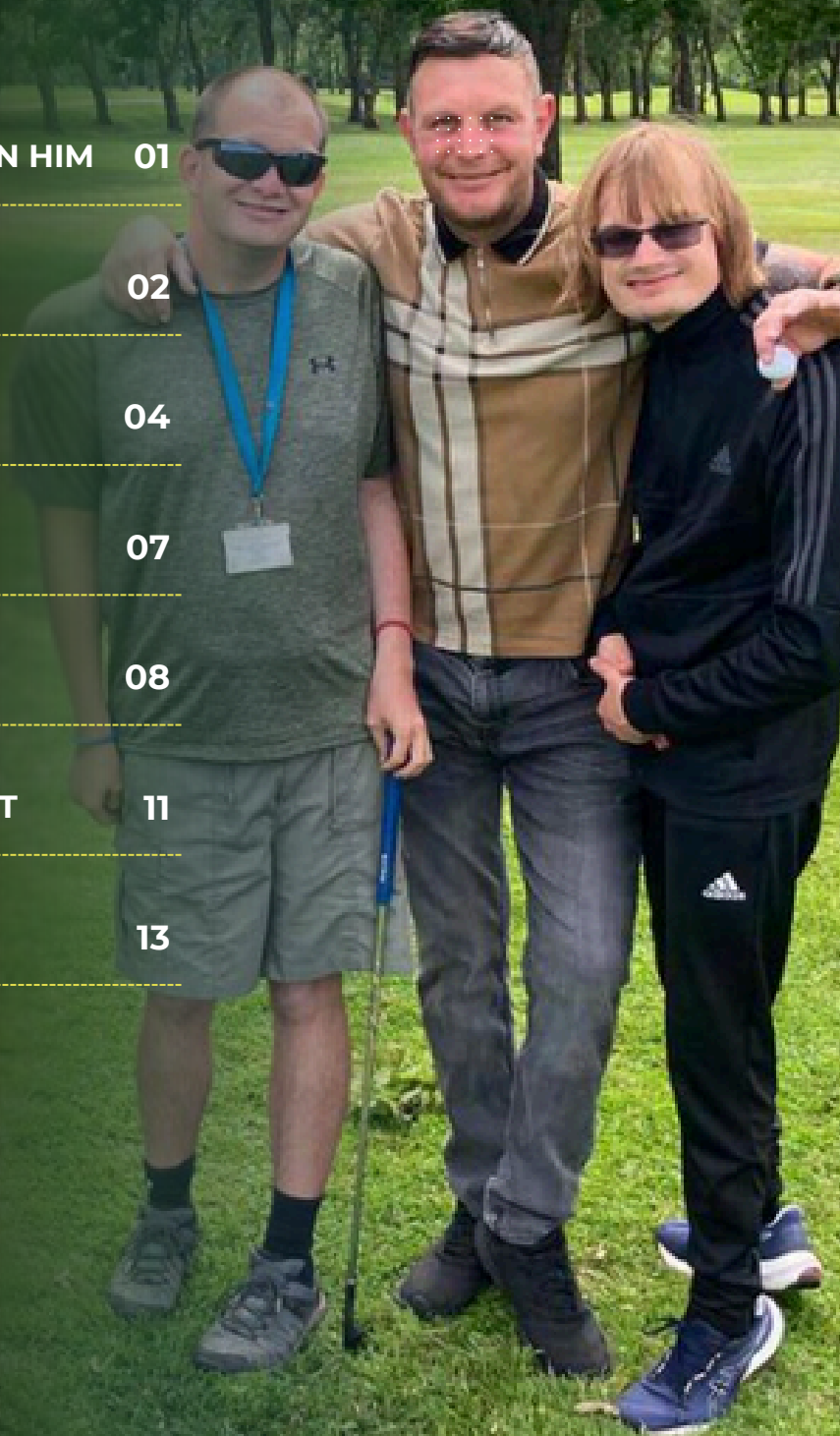
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The Happiest I've Ever Seen Him

"He's the happiest I've ever seen him," smiles Jane, Patrick's Mum. "He is absolutely desperate to get to My Life in the morning, and he's always talking about My Life when he's not here. He's doing really, really well."

Patrick's story is a classic example of someone who has been given the tools to thrive with the right person-centred support.

Just over three years ago, he began My Life Opportunities, our daily programme of meaningful activities for all ages and abilities, including people with special educational needs and disabilities.

He's now become part of the fabric of My Life itself with his enthusiasm for any task at hand as well as his ability to connect with people and form valuable relationships.

His involvement with My Life's football team has been genuinely transformational over the past 12 months too; it's been a huge confidence booster for Patrick to not just feel part of a team but realise that he is making a positive contribution to its success.

It's not an exaggeration to say his world and networks have been widened and improved too, with far more involvement in his community.

Patrick is also taking part in My Life's public Party In The Tent nights, hanging out with friends and just enjoying their company.

All this from someone whom Jane says hadn't smiled for ages. Who had been markedly affected by the isolation that the COVID lockdowns had brought. Whose friendship groups had changed and dwindled. And then, when he did begin at My Life, was unsure and anxious.



Patrick's Story

Patrick has actually been coming to the My Life site since he was a child. He regularly took part in the carriage driving sessions at Thompson House Equestrian Centre, proven to help improve confidence in children with autism and develop relationships with animals and horses.

As someone who is largely non verbal - though Patrick can communicate and say some words - it has always been very important for his parents that he's in an environment where his innate sociability can be encouraged and harnessed, not least because his understanding is a lot higher than it might outwardly appear.

"He's so popular with other people because of how gentle, sensitive and caring he is inside," says Jane. "He wants to fit in."

Karen Platt, a My Life support worker who is involved with the football sessions, can see how this has manifested itself on the My Life football pitch; here it was about unlocking potential in Patrick to see himself as an athlete and teammate. He now takes part in group warm-ups, counting confidently to ten as the team stretches and prepares. "He's amazing," says Karen. "You can see how proud he is."

And that's a marked difference from how everyone felt when Patrick's education journey came to a close four years ago. It became a critical time for the family.

"We've always been pretty hands on and on top of things," says Jane. "I actually thought that once he left education things might be easier, but it became a lot harder. We were getting pushed to a place near us which was basically an old folks' home for disabled people."



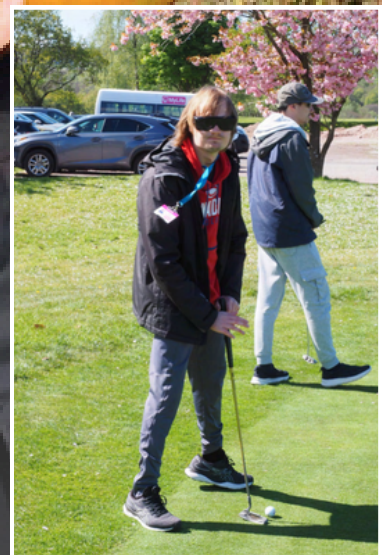
But because the family had watched My Life grow as an organisation at the same time as Patrick, the point at which they could formally explore coming to My Life Opportunities was, as his father Mark puts it, like a "lightbulb moment".

"Even the way My Life's staff spoke to us was different," he remembers.

"It was about what Patrick could do, not what he couldn't. There was a genuine feeling that they just want to get the best for people and see how each person can thrive. It could be in animal care, dog grooming or horses. It could be drumming or playing football. It could be cooking or going to the gym."

"What was immediately obvious and we really liked is that they weren't just going to take them out bowling or to a cafe where ten of them would be walking behind a facilitator on their phone. You do see that a lot. This was about offering opportunities that would benefit Patrick as he got older. Learning life skills.

And most of all, always being active and doing things rather than passively filling the day."



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- Mark, Patrick's Father

How My Life helped Patrick thrive

When we first eased Patrick into **My Life Opportunities** it was about giving him the confidence to try new things and the reassurance that he could build on the skills and interests that he already had.

The only way that can really be achieved is by giving Patrick skilled and targeted, person-centred support that works for him and his family. By listening to him and responding to his wishes. For example, we learned that at some other provisions if he wasn't able to communicate what he wanted to do, he'd just be left in a corner.

Patrick expresses himself through music and cooking

"At the beginning he got really involved with My Life's drumming session," says Mandy Gibbins, part of his **My Life Support** team. "He signs, and is very smiley when he was enjoying it - and when it got too loud he showed this by covering his ears and maybe walking away from the table for a short time before returning. We think that Patrick being able to express his emotions in this way was a real positive.

"He could struggle with concentration in baking and cooking, so we had to keep drawing him back in to keep him focussed, and understand what he enjoyed - in particular the textures and smells of this session.

"Yes, 1:1 was definitely needed to watch him with knives, hot items and gripping of bowls. But by assisting him, we were able to ensure he got the most out of it."





Patrick's progress through team connections

It has been My Life's football team which really helped Patrick thrive. Initially a group of My Life members with just a few players who simply wanted a space to play sport with their friends, it quickly grew into a dynamic community of up to 20 participants each week. Players of all abilities, each with a unique background and journey.

The sessions are highly adaptive. Whether a player uses a wheelchair, requires staff support, or simply needs some time and space to engage, there's always a place for them on the team. No one sits out. No one is left behind – which is something Jane immediately noticed.

"We went along and watched the session one time because we heard how well he was doing, and it was genuinely incredible to see him doing things that he'd never been able to do before - and by that point without being prompted as well."

"You can just see the hard work Martin and Karen have put in to making this feel like a team where everyone is special, and it's a big confidence booster not just for Patrick but for them all."

Patrick's learning and speech have improved too - and Jane says it's definitely because he feels comfortable in this team environment. My Life's Martin Lowe, the football team coach and support worker agrees.

"Patrick loves being with his friends and has progressed so much, and even helps with the team warming up, and counting in the exercise drills," he says. "He is becoming more independent and vocal with his signs, and some speech. He is trying to say all his teammates names when he is passing to them and his fitness is getting better."

"He can now run more with and without the ball and he does the whole session with a big smile on his face."

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- Jane, Patrick's mum



Physically too, there have been marked improvements because Patrick is exercising more - he has scoliosis but is now standing much more upright.

All of which is not to say there haven't been bumps along the road. Jane says that there are still some behavioural issues to work through at home - possibly completely normal for a teenage boy moving towards being a young man but still requiring some guidance from an occupational therapist. There have also been visits to My Life from Patrick's speech therapist, nurses and social workers from Lancashire County Council.



Collaboration that sets a new standard

My Life believes in and encourages this multidisciplinary and collaborative approach as it helps everyone understand how to get the very best for people who need support.

"Actually, the social workers couldn't believe what My Life does when they came here," says Mark.

"They said this should be the way all services should be. One actually said they would seriously consider leaving their job to come and work here!"



"The staff are on top of their game. What you often see with people who are nonverbal is that they're not spoken to. Here, every single person treats them as important, speaks to their face, and greets them in the morning."

- Jane, Patrick's mum

Patrick's Outcomes

Jane says that the things Patrick is capable of now after at My Life are genuinely unbelievable - and My Life staff have also been delighted by Patrick's progress, too.

"I'd never have expected that his speech, his communication and his signing would improve so much; he has learned more in these last years at My Life than he had being at school or college," says Jane.

"His confidence, the ability to be doing things and not only that, he's the happiest I've ever seen him."

Mark also says they have seen massive jumps in his wellbeing, happiness and life skills, just because he's so confident in the My Life environment.



Party nights bring out Patrick's confidence

This has been particularly evident when Patrick has come to My Life's Party In The Tent nights, a series of inclusive event for the entire community. Patrick was a little nervous to try it, but once he did, he was in his element.

"Some of his friends and support staff from My Life were there as well," says Jane, "and as soon as he saw them, he was off, leaving me and Mark to ourselves on the table! But that was great - you could see how his independence was coming on, and we left him to his own devices. He just loved it.

"What you could really see is that the My Life members were really looking out for each other and looking after each other - and someone like Patrick feeds off that. He even got invited by one of his female friends to one of the party nights, which was massive for him and they've since been to watch football together.



Patrick grows stronger every day

Outside of My Life too - the carriage driving has continued, but there's also horse riding, swimming and his gym work, which is a continuation of the sessions he does with Jamie on site in the gym at Thompson House Equestrian Centre.

My Life is able to build these sessions into members' bespoke My Life Opportunities programme.

Because of his scoliosis and tight tendons, it's always been hard for Patrick to tap into the benefits - both physical and emotional - of exercise. But with Jamie's guidance at the gym, Jane says he's come a long way with that as well.

"There's so much going on for them at the gym, and it's been really important that, like with the football team, the members do the gym sessions together and they all feel the same. That has done so much for Patrick - he can not only do more physically but it's been really beneficial to his state of mind too.

"He's part of the community there too, and he makes a beeline for it now," she adds. "He comes out of the gym and he's the same as he is after a football session - really happy."

And Jamie at the gym agrees.

Patrick's Gym Journey

"I've been coaching Patrick for nearly 2 years now," says Jamie Acton, Fitness Trainer at Banish Gym, Thompson House Equestrian Centre. "Initially he came to me with a very poor posture, his scoliosis was causing significant impact in the way he moved particularly with his gait during walking.

"He could not run without losing balance. He also found it difficult to step over small objects without aid due to weakness in his hip flexors and general instability throughout his body.

"Not only has Patrick significantly improved in terms of performance but quite noticeably to the eye his posture is much better, more upright and hips more aligned with his shoulders. He also has much more muscle definition in his back and legs which will help to offset the sheering forces previously impacting his spine.

"When Pat first arrived he struggled to put his arms straight above his head without any discomfort. This was causing his shoulders to internally rotate and increased the tightness of his pectorals."

Now Pat can:

- » Navigate a host of obstacles, stepping on, over and around them one after another whilst travelling at speed without losing his balance and without aid.
- » Sprint on a treadmill for 30 seconds without stopping.
- » Carry 65kg of weight for 500m while keeping balance.
- » Kneel on a balance ball and balance without aid for 20 seconds.
- » Step safely on and over a 25 inch box unaided.
- » Jump a metre and land without support.

Patrick's Gym Journey

We worked on this and now **Pat can press a 10kg weight with straight arms above his head.** He can also **hang with arms straight from a bar for 1 minute.** His shoulders are far more retracted predominantly due to the increased strength in his back but also due to much alleviated tension in his chest.

Another major inhibiting factor we found was his incredibly tight calf muscles. This was expressed to such extent that he was unable to put his heels on the floor whilst standing.

"We worked on this, and it has improved significantly but we still have some way to go. I use manual therapy and stretching techniques to try to increase the length of the muscle tissue.

"Alongside Pat's general strength and fitness, we have worked on his wellbeing from a holistic perspective. For the time I have coached Pat alongside the physical dysfunctions expressed, I also found he struggled to relax and be calm which I believe will have negatively impacted his physical issues and general discomfort.

"So we have spent lots of time practicing breathing and being calm with light stretching plus the use of multiple manual therapy techniques which has allowed Pat to now be able to relax with much eased tension in his body as he chooses.

"Pat loves the gym and he has been a pleasure to coach. I hope to see lots more improvement over the next few years working with him."





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- Jamie Acton, Patrick's Personal Trainer

What happens now... and next

It became clear that Patrick was benefitting so much from My Life's approach that an extra day would be really advantageous. This is not always a straightforward process to fund, but My Life worked with the family to try and find a solution - which came with the gradual introduction of group sessions rather than 1:1 support at all times.

It's a tricky scenario to navigate as Patrick has the right to - and needs - 1:1 support for the majority of the time. Any reduction in that support at any point obviously brings with it the anxiety for the family that 1:1 has been the key to building his confidence in the first place - but My Life worked hard to bring Patrick into group sessions where we knew he would feel comfortable and enjoy, given our experience of working with him.



The trial worked well and Patrick actually does four and half days at My Life currently, which is proving really beneficial. There is still one-to-one support in the mix, but we've been able to work with the family and authorities to ensure the right support and funding is in place.

"I admit, we were panicking about it," says Jane. "I think Patrick is becoming more self-aware, which is great in lots of ways, but it does mean we have to be understanding of what anxiety means for him. A lot of it is to do with not being able to get across in words what he's thinking, which can make him frustrated and angry. That's why he needs 1:1 support in the main - but you can see in the My Life environment he's so much more relaxed and confident. He knows the routine, and he knows the people."



Support that feels like home

"My Life were very reassuring and asked what they could do to help rather than leaving it to us to sort out. All Patrick wants, all we want really, is a sense of normality. He does have the ability, it's just not been interpreted and harnessed elsewhere like it has at My Life. He'd live here I reckon!"

It's a joke, but there's a kernel of truth in what Jane says. My Life does offer short breaks and respite care in its chalets, which the family are now keen to explore in the future given their experiences. And they have begun to think about how My Life Support might be able to help him live in his own home in the future.



Patrick's safe space

"Patrick will live with us until we can't look after him, but we've always thought about what will happen when we're not here," says Mark.

"I mean, I've retired early to bring him to My Life and we'd both do it all again because he's the most important thing in our lives. We wouldn't have it any other way.

"But My Life is like Patrick's safe space. The most important thing when he left education is that he was happy, and he is here. It's turned out better than we ever thought."

Patrick's Fulfilment Index

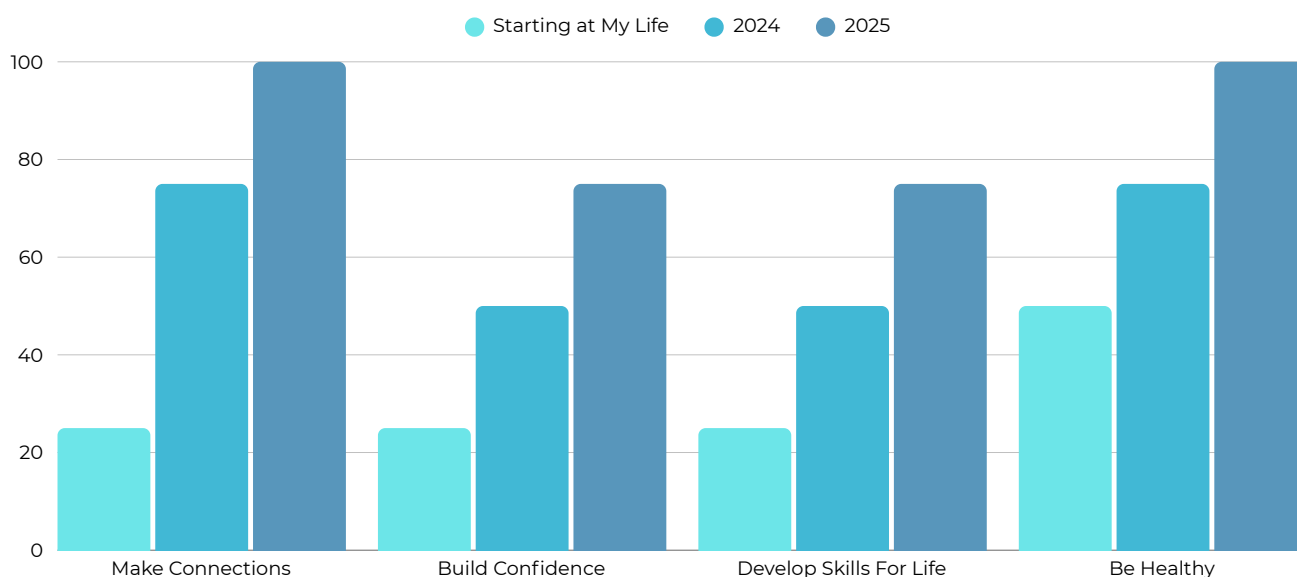
My Life is committed to employing regular reviews and reporting to understand how the people and families we work with and for are using My Life, how they are feeling, where we can improve and where we are performing well.

In My Life Opportunities, we have four outcomes for people that we continuously work towards, with everyone's buy in; Making Connections, Building Confidence, Developing Skills for Life and Being Healthy. We find that within these four headline areas there is so much to focus on and build in to our personalised pathways for people.

In Patrick's case, committing and referring to these outcomes over a number of years enables us to track the impact of My Life on Patrick and his family.

We're delighted to see improvements in all metrics by comparing how he was when he first came to My Life with how he is now.

There's still room for improvement of course, but there always is; My Life Opportunities is all about giving people the space, chance and safety to grow and develop as people.





Contact:

Tel: 01257 472900

Web: www.my-life.org.uk

Email: info@my-life.org.uk

**My Life Opportunities Standish
My Life Support
Stable Door Cafe**

Thompson House Equestrian Centre,
Off Pepper Lane,
Standish, Wigan,
Lancashire
WN6 0PP

My Life Opportunities Leigh

My Life @ Future Steps,
Leigh Sports Village,
Sale Way, Leigh,
Lancashire
WN7 4JY