

A bit about my background—secondary school was a challenging time for me. I experienced a lot of instability, constantly moving from place to place where we ended up living in a hostel with my dad, waiting for a permanent housing placement. During that period, I struggled to stay on track. I often found myself in trouble at school, lacked motivation for my education, and felt disconnected from everything around me. While those difficult circumstances played a part, I've come to realise now that our paths are shaped by the choices we make each day and taking ownership of those choices has been a key part of my growth.

10 years ago, I decided to volunteer with CHEXS. Initially, I did it just to get out of lessons, but from the very first day, it became more than that. I found a place where I felt truly seen and safe, a place where I could talk about my struggles. Through the activities like repainting wooden fences and bird watching houses, planting flowers in fixed flower beds around the borough, I not only gave back to my community, I felt more confident doing these tasks in public and learning life skills. After a few months of volunteering, I was asked to come back to mentor primary school kids, it was a rewarding experience that offered me personal and professional growth and a greater sense of purpose. I was able to develop my communication, empathy, and leadership skills while making a positive impact on a young person's life.

On the third and last year with my time with CHEXS, I had the opportunity to go on a wildlife camping adventure away from home for a few days with people from other schools in the borough with CHEXS. It was a life experience I would never forget and to this day I still talk to the people who were on the trip with me, people who I met for the first time during this adventure. Throughout the experience, there were many hardships we had to overcome individually and as a team, hardships such as; carrying your own belongings what felt like your body weight on your back and if that wasn't hard enough, hiking with it for hours, learning to read a map, setting up camp, building exercises but most fun of all, activities I never thought I'd touch because I would've been too afraid. Walking from tree to tree at near tree top height, starting fires (under supervision of course). Among everything we had to do, we had the opportunity to sit around a fire with marshmallows talking about our pasts and futures. What we endured and what we aspired to be. It was a chance to be open, to feel safe without fear or judgement.

This was an experience I truly needed—not just me, but everyone who was part of it. We grew closer, formed lifelong friendships, and discovered parts of ourselves we hadn't known before. Along the way, I built life skills that helped shape the kind of people I wanted to become. How to become a leader, to properly lead a team to execute work efficiently. How to form friendships, to come across as approachable. To keep persevering, having something to work towards and being able to think about others.

Before my GCSEs started, we got a housing placement. I only learned about this after I finished my A Levels but during this time the moving process was hard and stressful.

From a hostel to a 3 bedroom house in Enfield, it was hard for a single father who was working with 3 kids but Pete and Julie was there for us. They helped us with beds, wardrobes and essentials that we needed. Things without that would make life at home hard especially during exams.

With Pete and Julie's support, I achieved the GCSE results that I'm incredibly proud of.

During Sixth Form, I successfully applied for a job at Tesco, where I impressed the interviewers with my volunteering experience at CHEXS and the valuable skills I had developed. Despite having no previous retail experience, I was offered the opportunity because of the time I had dedicated to my community and the personal growth that came with it. Within just eight months, I was promoted to Team Leader.

After finishing Sixth Form, I made the bold decision to apply for a Software Engineer vacancy on the Elizabeth Line—a move that would change my life. I was told, even before the interview began, that I was the youngest applicant they had for this vacancy. While that added immense pressure, as it also meant I had no industry experience, but I approached the interview with confidence.

I shared with the interviewers my lack of formal experience for the job but made it clear that I'm a fast learner, eager to apply my skills to something meaningful and real. I promised to always give my full effort if given the opportunity. 1

Two weeks later, I received a call: I had been offered the position, along with five others. It was an opportunity not many get.

Within a year, I was promoted to a Senior role, leading a small team—including individuals twice my age. Together, we made significant contributions to the Elizabeth Line, most notably the Auto Reverse feature. This feature allowed trains to reverse without the need for a driver to walk between ends of the train, saving time and enabling more trains per hour to run in service.

I now work for TfL on the Piccadilly Line upgrading the line ready for the new trains.

I messaged Pete a few weeks ago on LinkedIn to tell him that throughout the last 10 years, every big accomplishment I made, I thought of him, Julie and CHEXS. That without them, I wouldn't have achieved most of the things I have today. A successful career at 19, a mortgage at 21 and my beautiful family at 23.

Pete replied "I'm proud of the man you've become." And to me, it meant the absolute world. From a kid who contributed to his community to now contributing to the country's infrastructure and raising my own family.

Pete, Julie. You gave me a helping hand when I was 15 and I will forever be thanking you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much.