

# The Journey to Me

by Simone



At the start of August 2020 I joined the Music Relief Foundation Parent Forum with trepidation and nerves. It was an unusual feeling for me because I had mostly been confident when entering new settings. In fact, my day job demanded it. And with three children who have varied social calendars, I always found myself meeting new parents etc. as the children embarked on their various hobbies. So why was this different? Why the nerves?

Maybe it was because I had worked from home since the start of lockdown in March? Maybe it was because I hadn't seen my own friends and family in person in a while? Also, I hadn't been wearing my make up (aka mask) since working from home and not going out, so perhaps confidence was low? Maybe it was because I didn't know the other parents and had no idea what to expect. But as soon as I joined the very first call, I realised that I need not fear or have any trepidation. I was warmly welcomed by Magdalene and all of the other ladies (men were invited but hadn't joined).

The thing that jumps out from my very first session is when Magdalene asked me to describe myself. As I would later learn, I did it in typical fashion, describing my various titles as Mum, Wife, Sibling, Employee etc. Like most, I did not instinctively describe my true self. That evening, I finally came up with a few attributes I would use to describe myself, such as being passionate and creative. However, one of the key benefits of the group for me has been that I am now able to do describe ME naturally and almost without thinking.

For the first few sessions we spent time getting to know each other and learning about the different challenges. We spoke. We listened. We learned to pause. We took time to breathe. There was no judgement, just mutual respect and an empowering support system. And it was calm. Always fun and always conversation and smiles and laughter.

I remember the first time Magdalene said we would be singing. I laughed out loud because I was nervous. I explained that I loved to sing. And whilst I would sing in shower and sometimes at church, I knew for sure I was no Beyoncé. Magdalene was patient and she gave assurance. She taught us all techniques to help us find our voices, by singing and breathing from our core...

Over time, as a group we also discussed the pastimes we used to enjoy and activities that reminded us of our happy space. We talked about how could we reignite passions that had faded with the passing of time and the increase of responsibility. I remember the group explaining various interests, such as art, poetry, sports, writing, singing, business acumen, and dancing etc. It was enlightening and powerful to hear about the abundance of creativity and talent was within such a small group of women. And I could see when others spoke, and as their faces and voices lit up, how much enjoyment was felt from these various pursuits.

As a result, Magdalene soon set a challenge for us to work on individual projects that would help us find our true selves. We all had the assurance the group would support and advise us as we went through.

It was a challenge some weeks, carving out time for myself in the midst of all that was going on at home and at work. But sometimes the challenge was actually within myself. As much as I really enjoyed speaking to the group and getting involved, I had my own hurdles to overcome and sometimes I did feel out of my comfort zone. I think I also felt guilty about taking the time for myself, especially in the early days – I mean we were in the middle of a pandemic right? Wasn't it selfish to put myself first?

But as the journey continued, I have recognised it isn't selfish at all. In fact its essential. And anytime those thoughts come to mind now, I remind myself of the flight attendants who always instruct to put on your own oxygen mask first- only then are you in the best position to help others.

Whilst I didn't make all the sessions, its been fantastic to see the projects as they have progressed. Granma (as she is fondly known) had written a 'lockdown' poem, for example, and it really resonated with me. Nicole's drawing of the beautiful eye – it looked so real and so deep and Lisa's idea board and memories of times gone by when we were kids that played various games outside.

I decided to sew an outfit. I had done sewing frequently as a teenager and really enjoyed it so wanted to use the opportunity to make a skirt with some material I had laying around. When I took the time to really look at the fabric I decided to challenge myself further and instead make a pair of trousers and a top – free hand. It took a few weeks, but I was so pleased with the results. And afterwards I was speaking to a friend who owns a shop about my project when she asked me and my daughter to sew some bonnets for her to sell in her store. It was such a confidence boost. It helped me spend time with my teenage daughter, who has similar passions to me when I was young and most importantly was a great distraction from day to day trials.

I'm glad I was able to persevere and I'm really excited about showcasing the final result to the group who have also been along the journey. I would recommend that anyone who has the opportunity join the MRF Parent Forum tries it out. It's a fantastic support network. Whether you are there or not, Magdalene is always there to talk and to listen.

It's a platform where you can learn more about yourself and gain an appreciation of the challenges other people face. And importantly, it will help to develop your confidence and empower you in ways you never even thought possible before you joined. I'm still on my journey, and this group has been just the SatNav I needed.