Welcome to the first ever issue of hbfnews, which is also our Five Year Anniversary issue. We will be featuring interviews with the people who make the Helen Bamber Foundation tick. In this issue, we go back to the where it all started in an interview with our co-directors, by Tom Lynham.

Helen Bamber and Michael Korzinski: sharing a narrative

Where did you meet and what attracted you to each other?

Michael
We were working at the Medical Foundation and increasingly sharing clients. I was breaking new ground, using touch and ball games or even running as part of treatments. Although this was new to colleagues many of my clients made significant progress over their hitherto intractable pain. Helen and I developed a dialogue around progressive therapies - growing, adjusting and adapting to clients’ needs - which cemented our relationship. The quote that inspired me was a doctor who said: “With the worst fears of the person’s physical health allayed, the process became talking them back to health”. But for people who have suffered such extreme trauma, words are not enough. One can not apply blindly the one-size-fits-all therapeutic pattern developed for ‘western’ cultures.

Helen
Words are very important, but there are non-verbal signs of pain in the body and the mind that words do not convey. When I first spoke to Michael I realised I had met someone who understood something beyond words. It was a breakthrough for the future development of our work.

Michael
The problem with traditional psychotherapy is that it does not use the whole person; the body, nervous system and movement. We are given a Stradivarius but we play it like a plastic fiddle. We have this incredible organism of neurology and physiology and we reduce it to a series of lip movements. We need to start with where the person is.

What happens to someone who is tortured, and how do you help them back to life?

Helen
When you are tortured, it is your body that betrays you. So how are you going to embrace and enjoy the body that has been defiled and rejected?

Michael
Torture forces us to regress. All the adult decision-making processes are stripped away - how you go to the toilet, how you eat, how you decide things for yourself.

Helen
You become like a baby - defecating and urinating where you lie. Many people who have been tortured can not relinquish the memory. But they can be helped to transform the experience to move forward. I worked with a man who had been savagely tortured - kicked with military boots and repeatedly hit with rifles. He was in constant physical agony. We produced the testimony and medical documents to secure his claim for asylum, but he was so deeply rooted in his torture I could not help him any more. I referred him to Michael.

Michael
The work Helen did helped him put things into words, but he could not link to the body. He was consumed by rage. His brother had been arrested and beaten to death by the police. He received a phone call ordering him to collect the body but it was unrecognizable. Guilt and grief were frozen in his body. I began by tossing little squishy play balls between us, but he winced with pain as if I was throwing a brick. We continued this simple exercise until it was not a threat, and he learned to breathe and relax. He had terrible nightmares of bodies caught on razor wires, washed by streams of water that people were drinking. But he could not speak to warn them it was polluted. Survivors’ guilt is a hackneyed phrase but it is true. He was living out his brother’s experience as if he were possessed. He was frozen in amber and I helped him reclaim his body and reconnect. The nightmare was replaced by a beautiful dream. He was standing in a pool of rose petals, holding his brother’s body wrapped in a white Muslim shroud. A horse flew down from the sky to spirit his brother away. At first it was a threat, but then he realised his brother was being taken to a safe place. It is about reclaiming memories of someone you have lost - as a whole person. It is always happening incrementally in the consulting room, and what Helen and I do is to catch hold of it in a way that has meaning.

Did you work on cases that crystallised your ideas?

Michael
We shared several cases in the early days that showed our work is deeply practical and rooted in the here and now. Two Chechen brothers were referred to us. The Russians were booby-trapping toys and planting them for children to find. The younger brother had picked up a Walkman which exploded, and he lost his arms and eyes. He came to the UK as a kind of poster child for all the horrors of the Chechen war. No one had really thought of what to do with him. He was claiming asylum and had no public funding, so he ended up as a failed asylum seeker. His older brother acting as his carer was also deeply traumatised. They were living on people’s floors who did not have the resources or technical skills to help them. He needed medical reports and referral to appropriate services - a whole litany of things. This boy did not fit into the Medical Foundation’s definition of torture. I thought My God; if this child is not the embodiment of torture I don’t know what is. I spoke to Helen and said we must take him on. And we did. We found solicitors and doctors, prepared a complete package of legal, medical, psychological and social support. And we were successful. The Home Office actually rescinded the decision and offered an apology. The younger brother has gone from strength to strength and looks like a blind and armless Marlon Brando - all the swagger and charisma of that kind of persona – I said to him - you are the reason why HBF exists.
Helen
I had a woman from Rwanda who had witnessed her husband and three children murdered with machetes. She was very badly injured in the attack and her foot was nearly severed. Grotesque death denied the people left behind the possibility to grieve appropriately. Over the years I have found ways to help people bury their dead in the absence of a body. I knew in this case I had to take a more unconventional approach. She arrived one day looking very distressed and said, “My children came in and sat on my bed at the YMCA and looked at me reproachfully”. And I said, “Did you tell them how dreadful the food is in the hostel? You should tell your children about your difficulties too.” She came back week after week still talking to her children, and I wondered if it would ever end. But then one day she said the children had gone, and did not look at her reproachfully any more. I asked her how she said goodbye. She said, “I told them you must do well at school, and that I can’t be with you at the moment, but will be in the future.” I felt instinctively she needed to bury them in the image that they were once - not in the image of their destroyed bodies. And she has moved on and became a carer.

So how did HBF begin to happen?
Helen
The Medical Foundation was changing. They wanted a more conventionally structured organisation that was different to what I thought it should be. Michael and I wanted to leave the safety of a rather protected place with a very tight definition of torture. We wanted to be freer to develop in our own particular ways. The more experience we have with with this population the more flexible we need to be because their situations are so complex.

Michael
We were not setting up a rival organisation. We wanted to progress our ideas and help the people who did not fit anyone’s remit. Everything we do comes out of the relationship and engagement with clients. We felt a need to create a small organisation that kept the work safe, but allowed us to explore fewer – but more complicated cases.

Helen
We left with 500 clients and were lent six consulting rooms for the best part of a year for free, and a donor who supported our vision offered to help us financially.

What makes the work of HBF so distinctive and how do clients benefit?
Michael
We are storytellers. We communicate our work - not through statistics - but through our survivors’ experiences. We do not know the end of the story; we process it, and figure it out as we go along. That is why it is effective - but also why it is difficult to raise money, and communicate what we do.

Helen
We produce the evidence by listening, observing, telling and recording the story, which takes a lot of time. We are standing alone with lots of very complicated narratives and we want people to stand with us.

Michael
We would like people to join us in the story - new people who hear us for the first time. The Foundation is an incredibly vibrant community doing radical and important work. People who come towards us - and the staff - become part of the story, they are not working here for the salary - they are sharing the narrative.

Helen
Barbara says: “HBF’s founder was part of one of the first rehabilitation teams to enter the Belsen concentration camp and help survivors put their lives together again. At over 80 she still works with victims of torture focusing on the most traumatised. I find her story inspiring and hope you will make a donation, however small to support her worthwhile efforts.”

So far, Barbara has raised £911 for the foundation, exceeding her target of £800 with a bang.

Meanwhile, Hannah and Ben Drewitt decided to forego wedding presents in support of HBF. They say: “We are lucky enough to have most things we want in life and have decided to give something back…the Helen Bamber Foundation works with victims of torture and abuse, helping them to move on to a new life and happier times. As we start a new life as husband and wife, someone somewhere, who desperately needs it, is also starting anew.” Their friends and family honoured their wish and donated £265 in celebration of Hannah and Ben’s marriage.

We are grateful and humbled by the commitment and sacrifices that Barbara, Hannah and Ben have made. Taking on a challenge and using your skills can be a really fun and creative way to raise money. You may be a group of friends looking for an exciting holiday with added value, or a student seeking to up your project management skills. This is your chance to get stuck in and be part of our supporter community.

For more info on how to connect your challenge to the HBF Just Giving page, please contact info@helenbamber.org

Inspirational challenges in aid of HBF

On the 11th of April this year, Barbara McLaughlan ran the Milan Marathon in support of the Helen Bamber Foundation in an impressive 3:58:54 – undercutting her previous record from Tokyo by a massive 21 minutes. This was not only a big personal achievement, but Barbara also had an important motive which made the challenge even more critical.
HBF’s 5 years in 5 minutes

In April 2005, Helen Bamber and Dr Michael Korzinski came together to form the Helen Bamber Foundation. An early supporter donated a suite of rooms in a central London location.

60 years of experience Helen Bamber and Dr Michael Korzinski brought with them to start HBF

However, with no big donors on board, no money to pay for staff, and barely any furniture, supporting the clients that came with them was a mammoth task.

500 clients at time of HBF start-up

Bearing this in mind, HBF’s journey from the early days of operation, to the organization of 62 staff and volunteers, and a £1,2 million turnover that we are today, is truly extraordinary.

1187 active HBF clients today

From the start, the Foundation has attracted highly skilled professionals from very different fields including clinical psychology, medicine, movement therapy, law, social work, human rights campaigning, the arts and even the military.

20-85 age range of HBF staff and volunteers

We employ full-time and part-time staff, but the majority of people who work for us volunteer their skills, which means we are able to maximize services to clients while on a tight budget. All staff and volunteers are offered supervision as well as professional development sessions in the areas of clinical, legal and social support.

The Helen Bamber Foundation’s holistic approach to working with survivors enables us to see the needs of our clients as a puzzle, where all parts must be in place for healing to progress. Our classically trained therapists work alongside body-mind therapists, caseworkers, legal practitioners, photography, music and arts professionals to offer an environment where clients feel safe and able to move beyond the identity of “torture victim”.

“The Helen Bamber Foundation, for us it’s our home, we feel safe. For me if it was possible to live there I would because I feel safe and loved” Female Client Jan09

68 clients currently signed up to a Creative Arts group

Another important part of our work focuses on public awareness and education. We liaise with a large number of decision-makers within government and NGO offices, legal and health practitioners and students, and members of the public.

86 meetings, interviews and talks as part of HBF’s outreach and education work in the last year

Some examples of projects we have driven or collaborated on over the past five years are:

- The United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking
- Journey, our experiential arts exhibition about human trafficking, has been in London, Vienna, New York and Madrid and is on its way to the Hague in October 2010.
- On-going discussions with the Home Office and the UKBA in regards to policy on survivors of torture and ill-treatment within the immigration system.
- Taskforce on the Health Aspects of Violence against Women and Girls, coordinated by the Department of Health
- Preventative anti-trafficking work with government and police in Cyprus
- Network on Human Trafficking in Relation to the 2012 London Olympics

This is a small snapshot of our work over the last five years, which is in constant development. Our diverse set of staff, volunteers, clients and supporters constantly bring new exciting initiatives, and we continue to develop the kind of bespoke approaches to promote the well-being of torture survivors that make us unique. Join us on our onward journey!

Upcoming events

JOURNEY is going to The Hague

The Dutch National Rapporteur on human trafficking has invited JOURNEY to The Hague to mark their tenth anniversary in October. Stephanie@helenbamber.org

‘Safe’ Photography Auction

21-28 November, 10am-6pm Westminster

This free exhibition sees a fantastic collaboration between Nick Haddow & Emma Thompson exploring where famous females feel “Safe”. Hosted by dePury auction house & Chanel.