

MAGAZINE

CONNECT

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SV Operator, Gary Hayes, in a raw and emotional interview on life before Nationwide Platforms and living with PTSD

TRIGGER WARNING: Please note that this article includes detailed stories regarding mental health, PTSD, suicide, and traumatic experiences such as the 7/7 London bombings that may cause some people to feel distress. If these topics are likely to cause you distress then we advise to please refrain from reading on.

GARY HAYES, LONDON EAST SV OPERATOR

Life with PTSD

“Unknowingly the signs of PTSD would start to impact on not only my policing career but ultimately on my family life to a point where I went to take my own life.”



In light of the upcoming Mental Health Awareness Week in May, London East's SV Operator, Gary Hayes, sits down with Communications & Engagement Officer, Shannon Bulmer, to share his story on life before Nationwide Platforms. In this raw and emotional interview, Gary touches upon his time working in the emergency services that later resulted in his PTSD diagnosis, as well as the start of his journey in helping others also suffering from similar mental health issues and traumas.

← Gary Hayes - SV Operator, London East.

HI GARY. FIRSTLY, LET'S GET TO KNOW YOU. FOR THOSE WHO DON'T ALREADY KNOW, WHO ARE YOU AND WHERE TO DO COME FROM?

GH: My name is Gary Hayes; I was born in Stepney East London in 1966. My family and I moved from Stepney onto the Isle of Dogs and then in the early seventies we moved to Dagenham. I am the eldest of four siblings and both my parents were born in Hackney. In 2013, I was diagnosed with chronic / complex PTSD.

BEFORE JOINING NWP, YOU HAD MANY YEARS WORKING IN THE BRITISH TRANSPORT POLICE WHICH PLAYED A HUGE PART IN YOUR DIAGNOSIS OF PTSD. TO GIVE AN INSIGHT INTO THE TYPE OF JOBS YOU UNDERWENT, WHAT SORT OF WORK WERE YOU EXPOSED TO?

GH: I joined the police service very late in life in 2003 after having served in the 3rd Battalion the Royal Green Jackets in the mid 80's, serving in many locations around the world and also in the Territorial Reservist 4th Battalion the Royal Green Jackets for almost 8 years within the recruitment and training areas. I also worked within the close protection world looking after many A-list celebrities during the 90's and organising and providing security for many Royal film premieres in London's Leicester Square. However, it was being a police officer that exposed me to regular trauma.

During my service I attained a lot of varying skills. Most of my time was spent as an Acting Sergeant doing jobs such as running police posts, reporting to an Inspector or serials on the ground at specialist events like Notting

“As a leader, we all need rest!”

Gary as a squaddie on a tour to the Falkland Islands, 1987.



Hill Carnival or organised protests. I also have experience as a Specialist Search Officer (missing persons, Royal Family, crime scenes, terrorism, murder investigations), DVI (Disaster Victim Identification, forensic body recovery), response driver, public order, plain clothes ops running specific teams around various crime initiatives, anti-terrorism team, taser officer, CID attachment and Coroner's liaison officer.

No one day was really ever the same, even when out on the beat in ya big hat! I dealt with a lot of suicides on the railways - probably around 200 plus - each bringing their own unique story, from body recovery, to searching the deceased, to delivering a death message. Alongside this when out on patrol, you would encounter other serious and challenging situations such as acts of violence against a person, resulting in serious injury from knives, acid, or other uses of force. I've dealt with people collapsing and requiring CPR until further assistance attended and road traffic collisions where



↑ Gary (back row, far right) with his Anti-Terrorism specialist search team at the Olympics in 2012 with their associated bomb dogs.

those involved experienced life changing consequences and casualties.

AS YOU'VE MENTIONED, THROUGHOUT YOUR CAREER YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO VARIOUS TRAUMATIC SCENES AND EVENTS THAT HAVE ALL BEEN ACTING COMPONENTS TO YOUR MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES. IN 2005, YOU WERE PART OF THE FIRST RESPONDERS' TEAM ON THE 7/7 LONDON BOMBINGS. THIS PARTICULAR TIME IN YOUR CAREER IS A STANDOUT MOMENT FOR YOU IN REGARD TO YOUR PTSD - COULD YOU EXPLAIN THIS FURTHER?

GH: In late June of 2005, my wife was heavily pregnant with our third son, she was also a police officer having around 15 years of service with the Metropolitan Police. Our son was born a week early. At that time, I was part of our then counter terrorism team based in Central London.

July 2005 was about to change the lives of many. 52 innocent people lost their lives and hundreds injured. I was on paternity leave when the bombings happened, however I called one of the teams to confirm what had happened and as we spoke, we were bombed again. I returned to work the following day, spending two days at Charring Cross before I was informed that being an ex-infantry soldier and having been an acting sergeant, I was to attend the Honourable Artillery Company based in City Road London where I was to lead a team helping to identify the deceased from the four bomb (crime) scenes.

Working at the temporary Mortuary was tough, the

deceased would arrive in various conditions, all with terrible blast and burn injuries and some with rapid decomposition due to the length of time spent on the scene before recovery and the extreme heat. My wife was posted at that time to Holborn police station, not far from my then location. Had our son not come a week early my wife would have most certainly been on the Aldgate Train that was caught up in this act of terrorism.

I would spend between 12 -14 hours a day with the team and then travel home. One day I was taking one of the youngest victims through to a small family viewing area so his father could pay his respects. Beforehand, one of my team informed me that the gentleman coming had recently lost his wife and that this was his only son. When I entered the temporary place of rest, flowers had been placed onto the deceased young man along with a condolence card. As I placed both the flowers and the card into the body bag, I caught site of the few simple words of love from a bereaved father to his son - it broke me.

I had to get some air and pull myself together. Thoughts of my new son and my other two young sons came flooding to me and the thought of this poor man going home to nothing will haunt me for the rest of my life. I was overwhelmed with guilt and a feeling of worthlessness. From all the trauma I had dealt with, I was to be broken by words on a condolence card. From that point onwards, and unknowingly the signs of PTSD, would start to impact not only on my policing career but ultimately on my family life to a point where I went to take my own life.

Continued...

YOUR PAST JOBS HAVE ALL BEEN WITHIN A VERY MALE DOMINATED PROFESSION I.E. SQUADDIE, POLICEMAN AND NOW AN NWP OPERATOR. AS YOU ARE ALREADY AWARE, THERE IS A HUGE STIGMA AROUND SPEAKING UP ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH, MORE SO FOR MEN. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS AND DID THIS STIGMA STOP YOU FROM SEEKING HELP OR CONFIDING IN SOMEONE WHEN YOU INITIALLY STARTED SUFFERING WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES?

GH: On reflection I wished that I had spoken to my partner at the time and stopped being the 'hero', the 'big man', the 'alpha male'. We would turn up to fatality after fatality and we would just get on with it, completely numbed to the horror before us. As supervisors, and dare I say people that others looked up to, to show any sign of weakness was simply not the thing to do. We attached so much stupidity in relation to stigmas and worrying about other people's perceptions of us that the last thing you would do would be to talk to someone.

I would often have probationary officers attached to me for supervision. On dealing with a traumatic job, I would always ask if the officer was OK, yet never express if I was doing OK myself! It was just the way it was, so wrong. I would never come home and discuss with my wife the details of my day, just too harrowing. Instead of talking I turned to drink to keep both my flashbacks and my nightmares at bay. It just made my whole situation worse, and I was falling down in every aspect - if only I had recognised the importance of talking to someone instead of burying my head in the sand and finding other ways to avoid the obvious. Trauma was slowly consuming me, and I was allowing it to do so.



Gary in the police force.

HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH MENTAL HEALTH AND PTSD AFFECTED THOSE CLOSEST AROUND YOU?

GH: In the early days prior to my full clinical diagnosis, my home life was just crumbling away. I was constantly arguing with my wife and if my two eldest boys dared to breathe out of place I was screaming and shouting at them. Two young boys both under ten years of age having to deal with a very unpredictable dad. I was never violent towards my family, that would be saved for the football hooligans, protesters or those breaking the law; I was just an incredibly angry man and my temper was very short. It almost came to the point of divorce. However, over time and since leaving the job, I have rebuilt my relationships with all my sons and my wife, and I get timely reminders from them should I start regress back into some of my old ways. Learning to manage my triggers and other areas around my mental

health is a huge reflection on the hard work of my family and friends and clearly myself on recognising those signs. Hindsight is an amazing thing; you learn to live with and manage your PTSD as it is not yet curable.

AS A RESULT OF YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH TRAUMA, YOU TOOK IT UPON YOURSELF TO START UP YOUR OWN NOT-FOR-PROFIT SOCIAL ENTERPRISE, PTSD999. AS A CO-FOUNDER OF THIS ORGANISATION, WHAT DOES THIS ORGANISATION MEAN TO YOU AND WHAT ARE YOUR AIMS WHEN PROVIDING THIS SUPPORT FOR THOSE IN SIMILAR POSITIONS?

GH: I am extremely proud of our organisation PTSD999, an organisation set up with volunteers and some high-profile patrons and supporters. We are the only organisation that assesses those that come to us for help by using the best trauma focused therapists around and then engaging with that individual in a programme of treatment that suits their needs.

This is all funded by people within the emergency services or those wishing to fundraise for us. The average cost per assessment is £200 and treatment thereafter is between £130 to £150 per session, so in essence that's a lot of fundraising! Nobody receives payment of any sort other than our clinical team; I use my allotted annual leave to give presentations around the country and to attend related functions or government related lectures at which we or I often find myself presenting at. My phone is always on for those wishing to talk to somebody who understands their situation. I have maintained this for the last six years, encouraging people to talk and reassuring them that they are not alone.

This is applicable 52 weeks of the year and clearly working for NWP often stops me taking calls during the working day, however I pick these up along with any emails of an evening - it's a tough call but being there for those in need has, on occasion, saved lives.

Covid has really impacted us, like so many other organisations, but we have been very inventive in the delivery of our presentations. We now engage with many forces and fire services via Teams or Zoom presentations and continuing to use our social media platforms as a means of engagement and never turning anyone away should they contact us. We are soon to be submitting our charitable application to The Charity Commission for our full charitable status, ensuring that we are able to maintain the highest of standards and the stand-alone service that we provide, we don't sign-



Gary Hayes (left) with PTSD999 President and friend, Graham Cole OBE (right), at the NEC Birmingham during the Emergency services show.

post, we treat! Our long-term aim is to be the best within this environment.

FINALLY, FOR ANYBODY WHO IS STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH, WHETHER THAT BE PTSD, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, OCD ETC., WHAT WOULD YOUR ADVICE BE FOR THOSE WHO ARE APPREHENSIVE TO SPEAK UP AND SEEK HELP?

GH: It's all too easy to say but the answer is to TALK to someone. Often the main causes for people not to talk is trust or fear of judgement from others within your workplace. Many employers just tick boxes in relation to mental health as it's a requirement to do so, the emergency services are no exception to this. Having an employer that puts time and effort into its duty of care towards its employees is paramount and for those on the ground, this should be reciprocated. Gaining trust when talking about mental health in the workplace is also key to the success of having that **OPENNESS**, understanding the needs of the business is as important as understanding the needs of those seeking help. Don't suffer in silence, there are organisations out there willing to listen and help.



Gary with his wife and two eldest sons receiving his Chief Constable Commendation for the work undertaken in the Mortuary as an acting Sergeant.

PTSD999 at this time is set up to assist those currently serving or having retired from the emergency services along with close family members - who knows, perhaps when we gain our full charitable status, we could be presenting to you at NWP?!



PTSD999.ORG.UK

WHAT WE DO

We are the only organisation in the UK that supports all members of the emergency services, both serving and retired, voluntary, family and friends.

PTSD999 is unique in the way it provides support; the majority of its trustees, administrators and most importantly doctors and counselling staff have served in the Emergency Services and/or Military and suffered PTSD or have close ties with someone who has. This enables us to understand exactly the unique un-written bond that ties us all together. We are also the only organisation in the UK that provides Trauma Response Awareness Training that includes simple, complex and vicarious Psychological Health and Safety assessment and treatment of PTSD.



Visit ptsd999.org.uk for more information or to donate to a great cause!

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