

Me and Charlie: interview with Laura Carruthers



By [Oscar Bentley](#), Editor (2018)
Wednesday 13 June 2018



Image; Laura Carruthers

How did you know Charlie? I met Charlie through the lacrosse club in my first year. He's one of those people where I don't actually remember meeting him, all of a sudden we were just friends. I think my experience was quite similar to a lot of peoples' in the club that he took it upon himself to make sure everyone felt really welcomed and he knew that it wasn't just you come you play you train, it was everything else alongside it, and he always made sure he'd go to team bonding and team socials. He was one of the first people I think I met at university who I remember being really good friends with, and that stayed that way for the rest of my three years here as a lacrosse player.

What kind of friend was Charlie? He was definitely the joker of the group, he took it upon himself to make everyone laugh and feel welcome on the team. He would usually push the sense of humour to the brink a bit at various different points in time, but he always knew where the line was, and it was very much tongue in cheek humour and he almost used his humour to make other people feel at ease. He was a really caring friend in many ways, he wasn't happy unless other people were laughing and he always used to like to be that person who made everyone laugh. That's the main thing that I remember about him, but he was actually very sincere and immensely loyal, if you were friends with Charlie he would do anything for you go above and beyond to make sure that you were okay. A very loyal friend in many respects.

What was it about Charlie and York that lead him to run for activities officer? I think he'd engaged with so many different parts of student life. Sport was a really crucial part, but he'd also done various bits in different societies, I think he'd also done Drama and PantSoc as well, and it really was for him the epitome of University is what you make of it and so a huge part of that was student groups. I think he saw activities officer as really an opportunity to give back to people and keep making other people's

experiences better, and that was certainly the logic. I actually helped him run his activities campaign back in the day as prep for my own run a year later, but I remember talking to him of doing the classic questions like “why do you want to run?” and it was very much that sense of giving other people a good time and making sure that they get the best experiences and this job is about that. As I think Mikey’s done this year, it’s about what you can give to other people that makes a difference, and that was what Charlie was thinking of.

What mental health issues did Charlie face? He had a combination of anxiety and depression which I think it forms a bit of a brutal circle which tends to increase isolation and loneliness which was quite hard to see. He’d struggled from an early age, he lost his mum when he was about nine, As soon as you move away from home you don’t have that support network, you don’t have your friends, you don’t have your family, you change GPs, all of that kind of stuff. It’s a totally foreign environment and it’s really easy for people to fall through the cracks like what happened to Charlie.

Do you think there’s a culture of men suffering in silence because it’s considered to not be manly to talk about mental health? Yeah absolutely. I think there’s a huge stigma that is really deeply embedded in our culture, and it’s one of those things that I think we’re beginning to make a bit of progress. People are speaking out about it now and it takes that one person to start to say I’ve been feeling like this when actually you realise the problem is a lot wider spread than we admit. Boys in particular are brought up from such an early age that it’s embedded into them that they have to be the strong one, and for some reason some people have made the jump between strength meaning you can’t talk about things and admitting they’re wrong, when I think a lot of personal strength comes from admitting that things aren’t going okay but continuing to fight through them, that to me is strength. We’ve entered into a little bit of a warped perception of that, and I think that we’ve explored quite a lot this year, particularly in sport, this idea of not admitting that anything is wrong equals strength, when actually that’s not the case.

If people are feeling as Charlie was what do you think they can do? There’s no clear answer and obviously it’s something I’ve mulled over quite a lot, you do have a lot of thoughts like what if and what could have been, and the classic answer that everyone keeps saying at the moment is to talk but I think that’s a hard answer to give, and it sounds really easy but it’s actually very hard to do. One of the things that we know is that when we say talk, people usually mean talk to your GP talk to a healthcare professional, but that doesn’t necessarily help and can seem really daunting. It’s a huge step to take to admit that something isn’t right, so usually that means talk to your friends, your housemates, your parents, it might not feel like that is a solution because it doesn’t mean that you’re automatically going to feel better but that is absolutely the first step on a road to recovery. Charlie was never able to really articulate what he was feeling to anyone and I think if he’d been able to make that jump even just to speak more openly to his friends then we wouldn’t be having this conversation. When people say talk to someone about it, it sometimes annoys me because I know how much that step is, so try and build up the strength in your own mind to talk to someone you can really trust. To help you in whatever capacity, I think that’s the mark of a good friend in my eyes, and I think that everyone kind of recognises that friends are there through thick and thin, so build up the courage to be able to have a conversation with just someone you can trust about it and let everything happen from there. There’s no point rushing anything.



Image: Laura Carruthers

How did the Charlie Watkins Foundation begin? There was a universal sense after Charlie died that it was something that can and should have been prevented. Charlie's case is quite high profile because he appeared on Take Me Out and touched the lives of so many different people, that his story really speaks to everyone. The foundation came about because Harry, Charlie's twin brother and the Foundation's founder, is incredibly motivated to essentially prevent that from happening again. Speaking to Harry something that we agreed on is that once something like this happens to you, it opens your eyes to just how prevalent an issue this is in universities across the UK. Harry and I were talking about different stories we've heard coming out of Bristol and Durham and all these other universities and you don't hear about it until something like this happens to you, and all of a sudden you're thrown into a world where it seems to be everywhere, and I think Harry recognised that he was in quite a unique position to be able to talk about not only what had happened to him but to try and make a difference and a change.

What work is the Foundation doing to support students like Charlie and to raise awareness? At the moment it's in its initial stages of fundraising, and it's not just fundraising for an ephemeral cause and not seeing what the money is going towards. They've set up this online support service, the 'Chat with Charlie' helpline, and it's essentially a forum manned by volunteers where students can message it at any point during the day to express anything they're thinking about. Hopefully it will encourage people to talk, because it eases you into that process, for mid to low level issues the volunteers can offer a level of support, and they're then there to be able to provide that next step in terms of you can consider talking to these people, this charity, these are all the different options available to you at this point in time, so it bridges the gap between being by yourself in silence and not knowing where to go, and receiving the help that you need. That's been set up in the last month or so, and it's up and running at the University of Essex, and now, with all the fundraising that's going on, we can roll that out to different universities across the country. Harry wants it to arrive in York, it feels right because Essex is Charlie's hometown, so the next step is where he went to university, and from there who knows?

Was the Sabb skydive campaign because you wanted to raise money or was it about trying to raise awareness and cause a conversation around these issues? It's both. Obviously, what happened to Charlie was quite intensely personal to myself and to a lot of others, and then I came into this role and you're given a year to try and make as big a difference as you can to students, and I was put into this weird position where what I say and what I do have quite a high profile and a high platform so I essentially stood back and said what do I want to achieve from this year. I firmly believe in leading by example, so me talking about Charlie and the impact it's had on me and the stuff that he was struggling with, it all contributes to that overall sense of it is okay to talk about these kind of things, and I want that to be the thing that people take away from this. I can talk about something that's personal to me, but

that's because I want people to feel like that is okay, and by acting that way you set the norm so I hope that if it's a story that's even touched people in the most subconscious of way, it hopefully does all contribute to that normalising of a culture where mental health is accepted as physical health is. So it's very much an awareness campaign and that was for me the key premise for it, along with the fact that the 'Chat with Charlie' service is hopefully going to arrive in York at some point and hopefully fill a void that I do see with people falling through the cracks here in terms of mental health support, which is where the fundraising element comes in because we do need to raise funds in order for that service to be set up here, so it forms quite a neat circle. But essentially, the main thing I wanted to achieve is more a normalising process of it is okay to talk about this kind of stuff, and it has a real tangible impact on people's lives on a day to day basis and it stays with you.

How much have you raised so far? I believe the current total stands at about £2 100, but we haven't yet completed, we've got a raffle at the Colours Ball and we haven't counted any of the donations that have come in by text, so at the moment it's just a combination of the money we've raised from the Just Giving page and the Movie Under the Stars night, so there's still quite a lot to come in so we're definitely going to exceed our target which is great. We've already broke even on the cost of the skydive by about half of that.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about Charlie or the work that the Foundation is doing? Just that this whole piece isn't about my friendship with Charlie, because in many sense it's just one of the friendships that were formed. I want other people to find something in that story that resonates with their own lives, their own friendships, and makes them think twice about their own situation, the situation of others around them, and maybe just gets them to just have that extra moment of thought about mental health, what it means to them and their friends, and if there's anything that they could be doing differently. If it just makes people think twice, that in itself is a success. So, although we are talking about Charlie and the Foundation, actually it speaks to a much broader audience, and the whole point of it is it's about everything that goes on around it, and to get people to think slightly differently and hopefully that in turn will contribute to a more longer lasting change.



Most Read Discussed

1. [What is the difference between tax evasion and tax avoidance?](#)
2. [Penalty for submitting work up to an hour late halved](#)
3. [Study reveals spending habits of students](#)
4. [Academic censorship at Reading University](#)
5. [Massive power cut hits homes and train station](#)
6. [YUSU to hold referendum on policy of supporting second EU referendum](#)

Write for Nouse News

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

[Join the Facebook group](#)

More in News

[Penalty for submitting work up to an hour late halved](#)

[Massive power cut hits homes and train station](#)

[YUSU to hold referendum on policy of supporting second EU referendum](#)

[A Viking Theatre for York](#)

[Annual Student Housing survey to close soon](#)

[Volunteering Week](#)

- [About Nouse](#)
- [Who's Nouse](#)
- [Website Credits](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Student Discounts](#)
- [Print Editions](#)
- [Mini-Sites](#)
- [Nouse on Twitter](#)
- [Nouse on Facebook](#)
- [Nouse on Google+](#)

