DPO-933-E
May 2026

Way2Work: Playing a bad hand (A)

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While the rest of the staff had left the office hours ago to head home, Derek "Deky" Byrne, co-founder and director of Way2Work (W2W),[1] remained absorbed in the case file of Sean, one of the young people the non-governmental organization (NGO) was trying to train for eventual entry into the job market. Unfortunately, due to repeated outbursts of anger, Sean had recently lost his fourth internship arranged through W2W. Byrne understood the boy's pain. He had lived through it himself: the absence of a stable family, detention centers, drugs, violence... Byrne could not help but be moved. In the card game of life, Sean had been dealt a hand as poor as the hand Byrne himself once had.

Yet Byrne also could not ignore the dozens of candidates currently awaiting their first opportunity. Despite the tireless efforts of those working at W2W, the organization's resources were limited and had to be allocated both wisely and justly. As he went about the daily routine of turning off lights and locking doors before heading home to his family, Byrne wondered whether giving Sean a fifth chance was worth sacrificing the support others might receive. He was still undecided when he left, aware that he could postpone the decision no longer and that whatever path he chose would carry a cost.

Byrne: a more than complicated life

In the local authority home that Byrne had shared with his family in north Dublin, there was never a shortage of empty bottles or alcohol-hoarsened voices. Poverty smelled of sour laundry and beer spilled on linoleum floors. Byrne lived with his three sisters and two brothers. The eldest boy died from an overdose. The other brother, Keith, became briefly famous in 1985

[1] "Creating Opportunities for All Young People," Way2Work, accessed May 25, 2026, https://www.way2work.ie/.

This case was prepared by Professors Carlos Rodríguez-Lluesma and José Ramón Pin Arboledas. May 2026.
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Last edited: 28/5/26

when, at just 10 years old, he managed to travel from Dublin to London by train and ferry, finally boarding an Air India flight to New York. When their mother received a call about the incident from the police, she initially thought her son had been found on York Street, not far from home.[2]

A bare, lonely lightbulb lit the narrow living room through which passed people who mostly never returned. One night, Byrne came home to find a group of criminals explaining to his parents their plan to rob a bank the next day. One of them pointed at 11-year-old Byrne and stated that they would use him to carry the money and weapons out of the bank without raising suspicion.

Hours later, still before dawn, Byrne was on his way to Boyle, clutching someone else's duffel bag to his chest and trying to appear calm. He entered the Bank of Ireland branch behind a couple of the robbers. After the heist, they handed him the gun and the money, and he simply walked out. The police, blind to the child in his school uniform, paid him no attention. The same afternoon, after the robbers were arrested, the police found Byrne hiding in a nearby hotel. They took him to a harshly lit interrogation room and kept him there until he told them every detail he knew. It was his first interrogation, albeit not his first arrest—that had happened almost two years earlier.

Nor was the bank robbery the first time Byrne had been used as a source of income for the family. At the urging of his alcoholic and mentally unstable parents, Byrne sold cigarettes stolen from the airport. The method involved slipping through a poorly guarded door, vanishing among the rows of baggage, filling a suitcase with duty-free cartons, and walking out with the air of a dawdling child hurrying to catch up with his parents. He did so weekly—sometimes twice or three times a week—and sold the goods in back alleys where buyer and seller hurried to wrap up the deal. As he recalled, "My parents taught me to steal whatever I could, as fast as possible, to support their addictions. It seemed normal to me. When you're little, you think your parents are perfect—you don't question them."

But the scales soon fell from Byrne's eyes. Eventually, not only did he stop seeing his parents as perfect, he also had to take on their roles for his siblings. Each morning, he would wake his three little sisters, get them dressed in their uniform, and walk them to school while mentally calculating how much money would be enough to satisfy his parents' cravings.

Unfortunately, heroin crossed Byrne's path. At first, he used it to dull his stress and pain, but later, he began to sell it. He dealt with the cold efficiency of a seasoned professional: avoiding drama, choosing discreet clients, and reinvesting his profits. For a while, that caution allowed him to thrive where many friends failed. Perhaps his ambition helped too: "I didn't want to be just any gangster—I wanted to be the best," he stated, with a mix of apprehension and wry humor.

[2] After telling his mother that he was going out to play nearby with a friend, Keith and the other boy collected coins from a public fountain and set off on an astonishing journey. First, they took a commuter train from Dublin to the port of Dún Laoghaire, where they snuck onto a ferry bound for Holyhead in Wales. At that point, their vague thirst for adventure crystallized into a decision to visit the United States to meet Mr. T, a character from the popular television series *The A-Team*. To accomplish this, they took a train and a subway ride to Heathrow Airport. Once there, they used all their cunning to get through passport control and board an Air India flight, stating that their parents were just behind or ahead of them or claiming that they were orphans from Belfast who were expecting to be met by airline staff assigned to unaccompanied minors. They made it outside New York airport, where a police officer saw through their tall tales, although it took an hour of friendly conversation before they finally told him the real story. The boys were returned to Ireland amid a blaze of media attention.

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However, things began to unravel when his body started to demand increasing amounts of the drug. He began taking greater risks, becoming entangled in debt and turf wars. He recalled two terrifying moments from his time as a heroin addict:

> In 2004, a couple of guys attacked me with samurai swords. I was in the hospital a long time, and I still carry the scars. My life was total misery—pure misery. I lived in constant fear. I was in fight-or-flight mode for probably 15 years... I was always on edge, always looking over my shoulder, because either the police or some hitman was after me. I was damned my whole life.

Eight years later, in 2012, when he was 31 years of age, someone tried to assassinate him in a gang hit. The gunman pressed the barrel to Byrne's temple and pulled the trigger, but the gun jammed. After a brief struggle, Byrne knocked the gunman down and ran as fast as his legs could carry him. "At that moment," he recalled, "with my heart pounding and pain in my side, I said to myself: 'That's it—I can't live like this anymore.'"

That night he found a phone and called an addiction counselor. Acting on the counselor's advice, he entered a rehabilitation program that included 10 months of residential treatment and five months of outdoor work. After the standard assessments, the treatment team labeled him "feral." Over the years, Byrne had been evaluated by many clinical, forensic, and therapeutic psychologists.

> None of them asked: "What's going on? Why are you living this way?" They just read off a list, ticked boxes, and sent me on my way. I'd been diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder and every criminal-related disorder you can think of. But no one ever asked me why I was living the life I was living.

He spent 16 months in the program. "I went in on April 23, 2014, thinking I had all the answers and that the problem was everyone else, not me. That mindset was absurd... The program was the hardest thing I've ever done. Harder than prison, harder than solitary confinement."

During his time at the treatment facility, he faced punishment after punishment. Most residents moved from Phase One to Phase Two after four weeks and earned a day off. Byrne spent seven months in Phase One, with no days off. Yet, against all the odds, things began to change.

> A counselor friend helped me see that those punishments felt comfortable to me, because the suffering, being predictable, gave me the illusion of control. A psychologist taught me that trust means surrendering control—and after so many betrayals, that was unbearable. Every time I tried to trust, I felt the risk of being let down. So, I'd hit my self-destruct button. At least that way I knew what was coming and didn't have to depend on anyone.

That realization—namely, that painful control protected him from the uncertainty of others' help—was a profound breakthrough. Byrne finally understood why he could not fully trust anyone and how punishment had become a predictable refuge for him. "I'd always wanted to make something of my life. To avoid a life of pure misery. I finished the program, I changed, and I came out determined to make an impact."

After completing the program, Byrne joined Tiglin, an Irish charity dedicated to restoring lives affected by homelessness, addiction, and social exclusion. He had been volunteering with the charity for a year and a half, distributing food and blankets to drug users and the homeless, when he met Andrew Low, a senior executive in the insurance sector who, by his own admission, did not

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