

FREE

LifeLine

PRESENT

TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT DRUGS



A talk given by Mark Reginald Gilman
at the First International Safer Dancing Conference,
Manchester, March 16th 1995

I have worked for the **Lifeline Project** for ten years. Before that I worked for a drugs project in Bradford, West Yorkshire. I know that it must be hard to imagine but before that, in the 1970's, this fat, sad old man could be found twirling around **Wigan Casino** to the strains of **Dobie Gray** or wallowing in the mud at one of the Free Festivals to the sound of **Hawkwind**. I have always been a man of eclectic interests.

Over the years I flirted with almost every youth culture. I flitted from one group to another depending on who seemed to be having the most fun. To my eternal shame, I can even remember wearing patouli oil and pretending to like heavy metal. I did have an excuse. In fact I had two excuses: **Barbiturates and Scrumpy Cider**. It was a very low point in my life.



The author as a young man

I was always interested and involved with British youth cultures. I was sometimes a player and sometimes more of a spectator. The one common theme that has run through all these years has been the **'Holy Trinity' of music, nightclubs and drugs**.

Academic qualifications aside, the real authority by which I speak is that I have spent the last twenty years surrounded by drugs. These twenty-odd years have taught me that drugs are not new. We are, and always have been, a drug taking society. The practice of taking drugs is as old as humanity itself.

People have always taken drugs. They always have and they always will.

The current youth culture that involves taking drugs like Ecstasy, whilst dancing all night to house music is just the latest chapter in a very long history of taking drugs and staying up all night dancing and listening to music. Taking good drugs with good friends and dancing to good music in good clubs is good fun. That is why most people take dance drugs - because it is damn good fun. Not because they were dropped on their heads when they were three years old and not because they come from "dysfunctional families" (whatever that means). People take drugs recreationally because they like it and they stop when they get fed up with it.

One highly successful young professional woman told us

"Of course you can have a good night out without drugs but you can guarantee you'll have a brilliant night out with good drugs!"

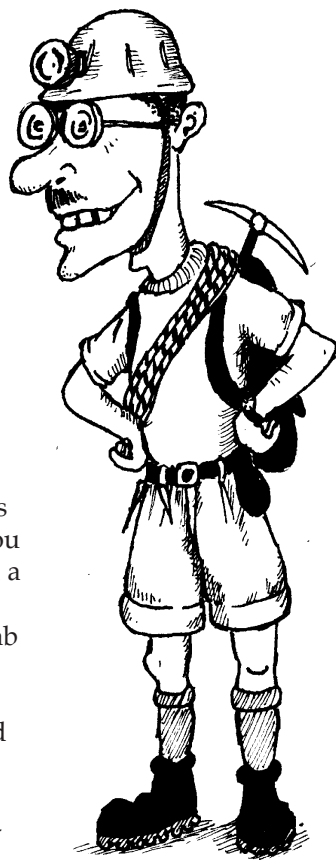
Of course, there are risks involved and there have been tragedies. No doubt there will be more. But taking a drug like Ecstasy in a nightclub is no more risky than climbing mountains or going down potholes. Interestingly, I find the attraction of both these stupid and irresponsible activities impossible to understand. But I do not want to stop other people doing it. It's none of my business.

It was a particularly bright young drug user who pointed out to me the irony of being put on probation for being caught in possession of LSD and finding himself on one of those adventure weekends which they have for energetic young criminals. He said "I'll tell you what, they're all mad them youth workers and probation officers. They go on about drugs being dangerous and all that, and then the next thing you know, they've got you dangling off the edge of a cliff on a piece of string or they're forcing you down some dodgy pothole...Now that's what I call dangerous...give me a tab of acid and a computer game any day!". It is interesting isn't it, that despite several well publicised mountain climbing tragedies, nobody is suggesting that we should close down, or fence off Ben Nevis? No one is suggesting that we close down the Army and Navy Stores because they sell mountaineering equipment and, therefore, encourage people to indulge in unacceptably dangerous activities.

Hypocrisy... Hypocrisy ... Hypocrisy ...

everywhere you look. For those trying to understand contemporary drug use I say this:
"Abandon all logic ye who enter here" Or, if you prefer:
"You can lead a horse to water but a pencil must be lead."

Let's get real. Despite the risks, the appeal of recreational drugs is too strong. Drugs are here to stay and there is nothing that anyone can do about it .



**"Don't do that,
it's dangerous and
we don't like it. Do
this instead. It's
much more
dangerous but we**

In parts of South East Asia people are executed for taking drugs but it still does not stop them from doing it. In the UK people go into maximum security prisons as healthy criminals and come out as sickly drug addicts. If you can't stop people taking drugs in maximum security prisons and the death penalty is no deterrent, then what can be done?

First of all, we can stop pretending and admit that drugs are here to stay. We can stop insulting young people's intelligence by trying to pass off **anti-drugs propaganda** as drugs 'Education':

"DRUGS... THE EFFECTS CAN LAST FOREVER!"

If only! It'd be a damn sight cheaper!

You know what I'd like to see? I'd like to see really big posters showing dead, frozen pensioners lying underneath blankets in squalid bed-sits and underneath the posters would read:-

"POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT ... THE EFFECTS CAN LAST FOREVER!"

I can't see it though, can you? Because that would be a bit too near the bone, just a bit too real. No. Lets stick with lying and exaggerating about the dangers of drugs. And while we are at it, let's pretend that it's those horrible black people who are responsible for corrupting innocent white youth. Yeah, why not? Let's throw in a big

chunk of racism into the anti-drug propaganda pot and give it a good stir. If we're going to tell lies, we may as well tell some whoppers.

Oh, and don't forget the one about the evil pusher outside the school gates giving away free drugs until the kids are hooked and then Dear, oh dear ... is there any other social issue that allows people to talk such rubbish and get so many people to believe them?

And what about the **Hypocrisy?**
Lets have a quick look at that....

We live in a society which actively promotes the highly addictive drug tobacco. This is a drug which kills a hundred thousand people every year. But it's a good earner. Then, let's think about those sophisticated television adverts which urge us to drink more alcohol. You don't like the taste of alcohol?... Don't worry, now you can get blasted away by drinking bubble gum flavoured, high octane, 'Mad Dog 20/20'.



So, alcohol kills a few thousand people every year and a few thousand more get maimed by dangerous drunks. So what? Alcohol is **OUR** drug. **WE** like it and we don't like to hear it being knocked. So get off our case, alright?

When you're relaxing over a few beers this evening, think how you would respond if your mum or dad walked into the bar, grabbed your drink off you and started screaming at you to stop. "Why are you doing this to me? Where did we go wrong?" "Mum, dad, I'm just having a few beers. There's no harm in that".

Yet, that's what happens to young people when their parents find out that they are smoking a bit of weed. Parents are fed a staple diet of sensationalist, anti-drug propaganda.



In schools we find two of the latest and most sophisticated attempts at anti-drugs education that have both been proven to be very costly failures. The Drug Abuse Resistance Education or "**DARE**" programme was shown to be practically useless in an article in *The American Journal of Public Health* (September 1994, Vol.84 No.9).

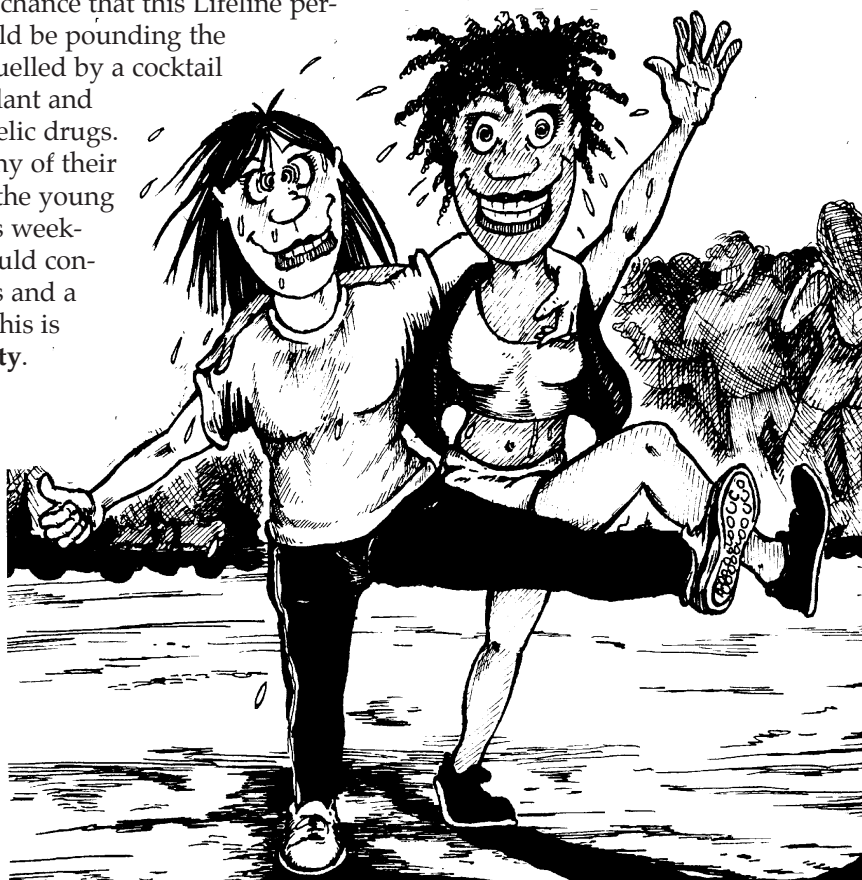
The Life Education Centres were believed to give young people "a deep respect for the complexity and beauty of the human body which would make it unthinkable to abuse drugs". In fact, a recent article in the academic journal "Addiction" (1995,, 90, 205-215) found that young people who had been through Life Education Centres were **more likely** to use drugs than those who had not.

Let's face it... Drugs are here to stay.

Let's get used to the idea and work towards reducing the harms that can result from drug use. If we know we cannot prevent people from using drugs let's put our energies and efforts into identifying and preventing drug related harms.

At a time when so many drugs are being used by so many people, this is the only logical and morally defensible position. To carry on wasting scarce public resources chasing a fool's dream that drugs education can prevent drug use is a scandal. And we at Lifeline know all about scandal. In daring to tell the truth about drugs, we have scandalised all manner of people of all colours, creeds, political persuasions and sexual preferences. In fact, we have been exemplary in our equal opportunities policy. Over the years we have upset everybody. (If there is any person or group out there who feels that we have missed them out, please tell me and I'll see what we can do for you).

The Lifeline Project was born in 1971, but was very much a child of the late 1960's. **Rowdy Yates**, in his history of drugs, music and popular culture in Manchester, described the early Lifeline Project as one of "*the field hospitals of the counter culture revolution*". If Lifeline were a person she/he would be 24 years old. As such, there is an odds on chance that Mister and Mizz Lifeline would be found strutting their stuff on the dance floors of any one of Manchester's wide variety of straight and gay dance music nightclubs. Furthermore, there is an odds on chance that this Lifeline person would be pounding the boards fuelled by a cocktail of stimulant and psychedelic drugs. Like many of their friends, the young Lifeline's week-ends would contain 3 E's and a weed. This is **the reality**.



Despite the sustained attempts of the anti-drugs warriors to peddle anti-drugs propaganda in the name of drug education, more and more young people are **just saying Yes to drugs**. Most of them are saying YES to **Cannabis, LSD, Amphetamine Sulphate and Ecstasy** in their millions. A much, much smaller number are saying yes to Heroin and Crack-Cocaine and they are finding themselves stuck into lifestyles of addiction. Sadly, these people are most often found in those parts of our cities which are also stricken by chronic unemployment and multiple deprivation. For these people, the important question is not why or how they got into Heroin addiction but why and how they can get out of it.

The great **William Burroughs** once said that Heroin "*wins by default*". Heroin addiction wins because there is nothing better to do with your time. For many young people in our impoverished towns and cities there is nothing to do. There are no jobs, there is no chance for further or higher education. There is no future. In this post-industrial age where greed and selfishness are paraded as virtues millions of young people have been thrown on the scrap heap. They are surplus to requirements. As the Clash so rightly pointed out:

"There ain't no need for 'em ... so why not go straight to hell, girls and boys?"

There is no doubt that Heroin addiction can be a living hell. But, is it much worse than taking poverty neat?

However, this edict is concerned with completely different kinds of drug use. The drug use that takes place in dance music clubs is not about **addiction**. It is about **recreation**. It is a **leisure activity**. We must never get confused or fail to recognise the fundamental difference between **recreational drug use** and **drug addiction**. Similarly, we must never fail to remember that epidemics of addiction to drugs like Heroin have coincided with epidemics of unemployment and poverty of opportunity.

The scale of contemporary recreational drug use is massive. Young people who go to nightclubs and take drugs as part of their leisure activities outnumber drug addicts by at least ten to one. In the face of the scale of recreational drug use we at Lifeline have been forced to ask ourselves one simple but critical and fundamental question:

**"What do you say
AFTER just say no?"**

The answer to this question is that you start by accepting the reality that almost **50% - one half** of the sixteen year olds in the urban North West - are experimenting with illegal drugs. Having accepted this reality, we recognise that we have a **moral responsibility** to do everything possible to reduce the harms that can result from the use of drugs like Ecstasy in nightclub settings.

This has not been easy to introduce or been without its critics. In establishing the **Safer Dancing Campaign** we are recognising and acknowledging that the use of illegal drugs is a central feature of the night-time leisure economy of cities such as Manchester.

In establishing the Safer Dancing Campaign as an ongoing feature of Manchester nightlife we are also recognising and acknowledging that the use of illegal drugs in clubs is here to stay and is impossible to stop. After all, if you cannot stop drugs being widely available in prisons (and it is clear that you cannot) what chance has anybody got of stopping someone swallowing a small pill before they even approach the queue to get into a nightclub?



**Keeping drugs out of nightclubs is impossible
and that is a fact, it is the truth.**

This brings me to my central point and to Lifeline's mission, that is:

"TO TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT DRUGS"

More and more young people are realising that much of what pretends to be drugs education is, in fact, anti-drugs propaganda. In the "War on Drugs" more and more exaggerations, distortions and downright lies are propagated in the name of drugs education. Young people are bombarded with lies such as:

"Cannabis leads to Heroin"

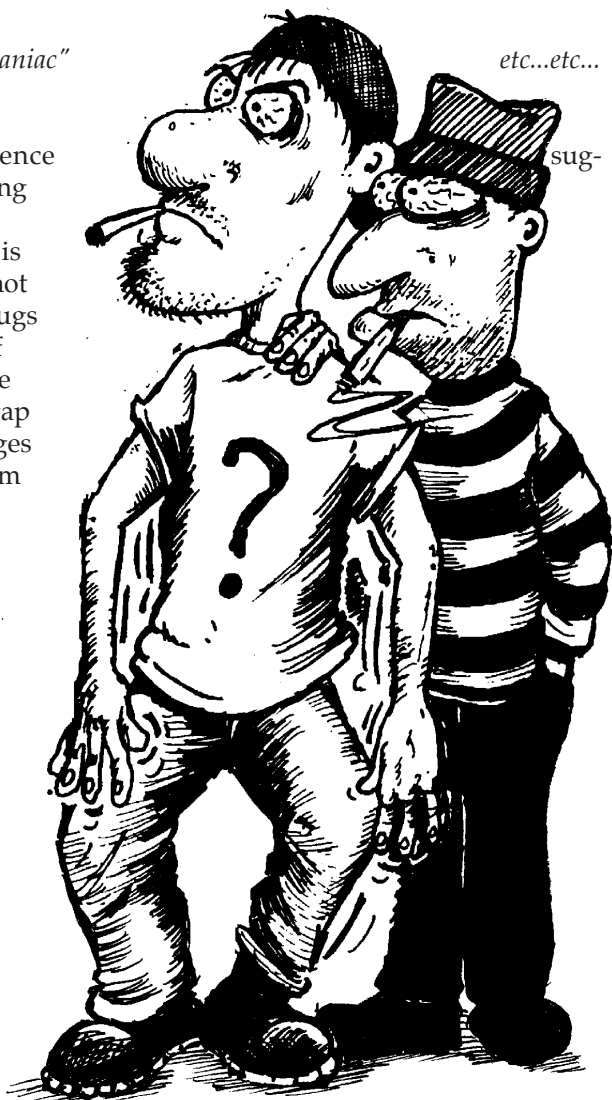
"LSD makes you want to fly"

"Ecstasy makes you a sex maniac"

etc....

All the available evidence suggests that more and more young people are realising that the Emperor of the War on Drugs is naked and young people are not afraid to tell him. The anti-drugs propagandists have cried wolf far too many times. They have created a massive credibility gap between those sending messages about drugs and those at whom the messages are aimed.

At Lifeline we have spent the last eight years trying to win back some credibility, to win back the right to be heard by young people. From the publication of the first issue of **"Smack in the Eye"** in 1987 through to the latest adventures of **Peanut Pete**, we are engaged in a constant struggle to win back the trust of young drug users simply by **telling the truth about drugs.**



It sounds very simple, **telling the truth about drugs**, but it is not. Such is the power of the **War on Drugs propaganda machine** that simply telling the truth about drugs becomes, in and of itself, a subversive act.

Andrew Tyler, in his book *"Street Drugs"* states that. *"Smoking Cannabis is just as likely to lead to a pinstriped job in the city as to subterranean junkiedom"*. This is a classic example of a subversive truth.

Many adults, parents in particular, accept it as given that a torn Rizla packet is a sure sign of impending degradation and a squalid death. One of the saddest sights we see at Lifeline are the parents of a young man or woman who are torturing themselves because they have found out that their son or daughter is smoking Cannabis.

Most adults are systematically misinformed about drugs by the media. However, there are some notable exceptions to this rule. **The Independent** newspaper deserves praise for its sensible coverage of drug issues but special praise must go to magazines such as **MIXMAG, THE FACE, I.D..** Magazines such as these, have steadfastly tried to tell the truth about drugs.

Any fool can get a round of applause by repeating the anti-drugs rhetoric. It is much more difficult to take the issue of drugs seriously and look at what can realistically be achieved in the protection of young people and the prevention of drug related harm.

The time for those involved in harm reduction to be defensive is over. The risks involved in taking dance drugs can be identified and reduced.

Welcome to

"The moral high ground".

*This speech was given by Mark Gilman at Lifeline's
1st International Safer Dancing Conference,
16th March 1995.*

*Lifeline's Safer Dancing Team consists of young
volunteers who visit night clubs and raves giving
help, information and advice to club promoters, door
staff, club managers and, of course, club goers them-
selves.*



*As part of this initiative, the Safer Dancing Team distribute many thou-
sands of the Safer Dancing Post Card Sets and Posters free of charge.*

*If you would like to help Lifeline in promoting the truth about drugs and
reducing the risks involved in taking dance drugs you can make a dona-
tion by filling in the form below.
(Each £10.00 donated buys 300 Safer Dancing Post Cards or ten Posters).*

*In return, everyone who donates will be credited in future print runs of
this booklet if they so wish.
Many thanks.*

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