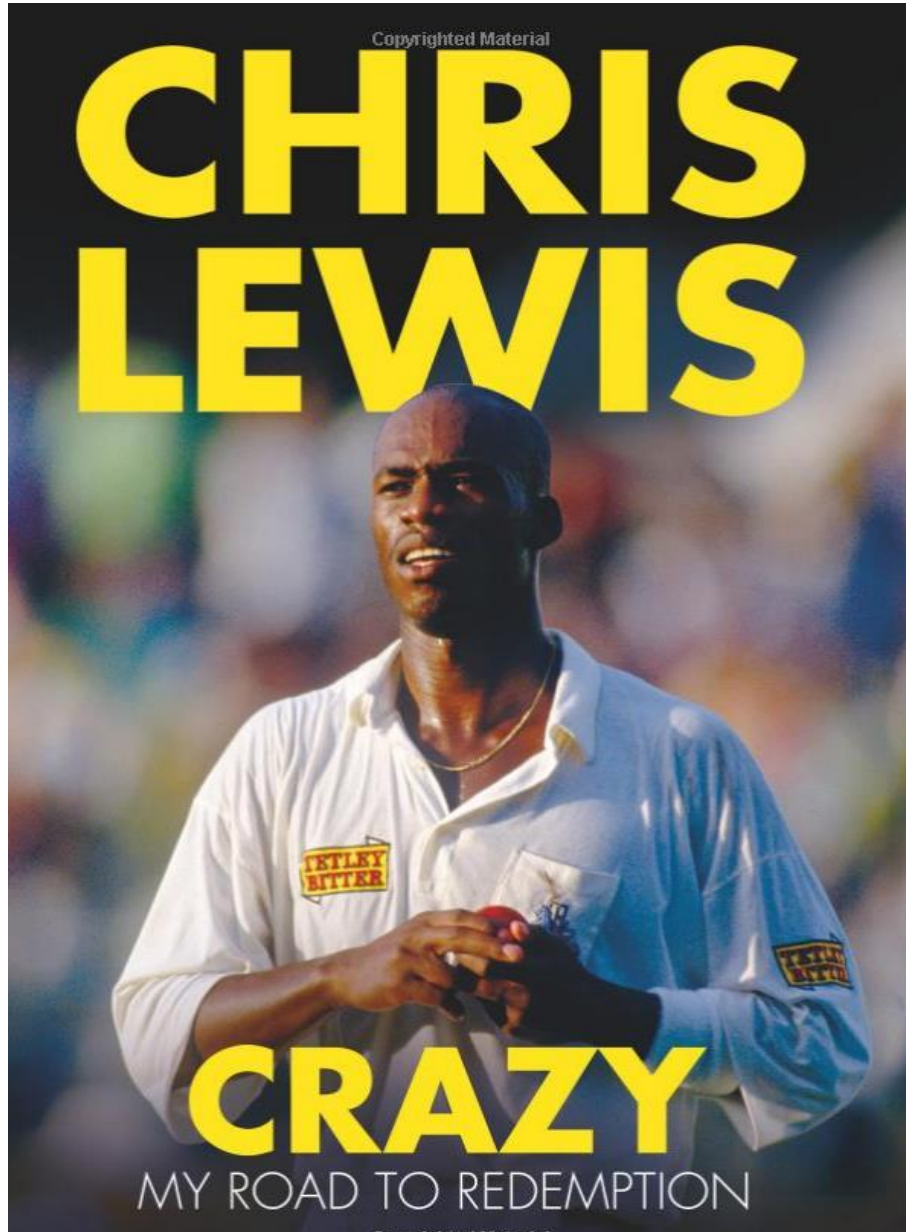


A perspective into part of IHAG's work from a former volunteer - Chris Lewis: Crazy My Road to Redemption: Autobiography  
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CRAZY: MY ROAD TO REDEMPTION

With the other members of the family, it's a relief to look into their faces and see them smile, a genuine smile that I haven't seen in years. It's amazing. Time runs so slowly on the inside, while my four days at home go by so quickly. But at least it will only be twenty-eight days before I can come home again.

Back in jail, things are different now. There is less there for me. There never was much there in the first place, but I suppose I had to find a focus, a coping mechanism, a way of getting through. Now, though, I've had a taste of life outside again, life at home, being back in jail now seems so pointless. All I can think of is my next home visit, another month away. The twenty-eight days between home visits move at a snail's pace. Before, weeks, even months would pass by quickly. Now I am looking at the calendar every day. What is becoming clear is that there is a slightly different challenge in Category D. While I was in closed conditions, there was no hope of ever going home, no hope of a day out, so I never gave it much thought (or if I did, it was maybe a distant thought for the future). It quickly becomes apparent that what I considered the worst part of my sentence, mentally, isn't over yet. Now, it is a case of having to manage myself and manage the outside world – which for the last four and a half years, I have kept at bay. Yet I yearn to be outside again permanently.

I get a new job. I'm an insider again, which means that I meet new inmates coming to the jail. I explain to them how the jail works and help them in their first few days in their new environment. I do this for six months, which takes me to the end of the year. I am then able to start doing some community work, which for me involves working for a charity. I start my first day at Ipswich Housing Action Group (IHAG). I'm going to be a chef; that's good for me, I know my way around a kitchen. IHAG

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## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

deals with people of all types who have fallen on hard times: the homeless, people with alcohol and drug issues, and those with financial problems – a whole host of people in need of help. We point them in the right direction for benefits or treatment, and we also provide food parcels and warm clothing, helping where we can. The ladies here give out advice, they do the work, the charity work. And it's understood that people who are hungry don't make good listeners, so I do the cooking and help as a handyman. I cook breakfast and I cook lunch. I'm here five days a week. It's an unreal experience. I meet all types of people, all of whom have found themselves here, in need of help, for a whole host of reasons. A general judgement doesn't fit all. These are people with alcohol problems. Drug problems and a lot of their family relationships and friendships have broken down. It's a last resort centre. In the midst of all of this, there are people who have just fallen on hard times. It's curious to see that, whatever state people arrive here in, they did have a life before – as oil rig workers, lawyers, all sorts of professions. Yet, they have all still ended up here.

It is an emotional place to work. Some days, things seem to run smoothly but on other days, the ambulance is called two or three times. One of our clients may have taken an overdose. On more than one occasion, I arrive to find one of the clients has taken an overdose and is propped up against the door. Sometimes I'm unsure whether they are even still alive. We call the ambulance and hope for the best. On other days, I come to work to hear that Peter, John or Sarah had taken an overdose and died overnight. But, hang on, I think, it was only a matter of hours ago that I was serving them lunch. It is a challenging environment, but one I seemed to thrive in.

## CRAZY: MY ROAD TO REDEMPTION

The ladies who work at IHAG are the real heroes of this part of my story, dealing with everything that is thrown at them. They know how to handle the clients, as they are called. They are kind, caring, and seem to understand what is needed ultimately; self-empowerment. It's a real learning experience for me.

I spend a year working with IHAG. The people I meet here are so gracious. They all know my situation. They all know what I've done and they all know where I've come from. Yet, they treat me wonderfully. This is my first time back in the community and it's nice to feel like a human being again. It would have been so easy for them to be judgemental and to be an extension of the jail, but it was nice to be around normal people – meaning people who are not prisoners or work for the prison system. I have interacted well with officers for the years I have been a prisoner, but they are always your bosses. Here, though, I am part of a team. Yes, I'm cooking in a kitchen, but I am part of the team and can take courses that are available to the staff. I am encouraged to take part in it all.

Eventually, my time is up, there are six months left on my sentence. There's one more thing I need to do, I want to learn to be a plasterer. There is a course back in the jail that lasts for five months, so I leave IHAG – with some regret. After all, this means that I will be back in jail seven days a week, day and night. But, plastering is the last thing to tick off my list. I've been wanting to do it for some time now, and this is my last chance. Leaving IHAG is emotional, if I am honest. I've enjoyed my time working here and the people I have been with are genuinely nice. We have lunch, kisses and hugs. We will meet again, I tell them. They all seem to be pleased about that. They are tremendous people doing tremendous work.