

Steps to Hope founder to sleep rough for five weeks in five cities

As the cold, dark nights edge closer, 37-year-old Richie Roncero will be joining rough sleepers for five weeks.

He will sleep out in some of the UK's biggest cities for five weeks in five different locations, to raise awareness and funds for the charity he founded in Edinburgh, Steps To Hope.

Starting in Glasgow on 30 October 2021 Roncero will spend a week in the west of Scotland, before arriving in the streets of London, Liverpool, Aberdeen and finally completing his five-week challenge in Dundee.



Richard Roncero leads charity Steps to Hope, who were classed as an essential service by the Government to feed the vulnerable people with their fully kitted van to provide hot meals amid the Covid-19 pandemic which has affected the whole of Scotland. Credit: Euan Cherry

Roncero recalls his addiction taking over his life at an early age.

He said: "I had a dysfunctional upbringing.

"My parents were alcoholics, and there was a lot of alcoholism within my family. From as far back as I can remember, there was a lot of fear and anxiety within my life.

"I got kicked out of school at fifteen. Somebody handed me

cocaine and from that moment, I found my solution to life, I immediately felt easing comfort. My fear, anxiety and worry evaporated within a second and that spiralled into a life of misery.

“Very quickly my alcohol and cocaine use got a hold of me and took me to a lot of dark places. Prison, suicide attempts, broken relationships with my family and my children, homelessness, rehabs, the lot.”

Richie was just another person who submitted to addiction, and despite trying to stop for a number of years and visiting a number of professionals, it wasn't until he met somebody he could relate to, that things started to progress.

He explained: “The last ten years of my active addiction, I was actively trying to stop using. I tried councillors, GP'S, Psychologists and therapists, but I just couldn't stop.

“When I went into rehab for the second time, nobody ever told me that I needed people with lived experience, who were now clean and sober.

“I went on a sort of recovery process. I met a guy who was 13 years clean and sober at the time. He worked with me one-to-one and gave me the tools on not just how to stop, but how to stay off it.”

As is often the case with recovering addicts, this completely changed Richie as a person.

He continued: “Getting into recovery is all about changing as a person, once he started taking me through the process I learnt a lot more about myself. It was drilled into me very early on that I needed to change the person I was, to stay clean and sober.

“I went on that journey to change because I had become very dishonest, self-centred, selfish, controlling, manipulative

all these defects of character that I'd built up over the years, were now being addressed and I had to change them to stay in recovery."

Broken relationships with his family were just another consequence of Richie's actions, but when his recovery was developing he began to re-establish his relationship with his daughter, Courtney.

He said: "At the time, my daughter had washed her hands of me, but she'd seen that I was trying to change. One Christmas I asked her if she wanted to come out on Christmas Day and hand out hats to the homeless and she jumped in with both feet.

"From that point onwards, we continued to go out and hand out warm clothing to the homeless and then I decided I wanted to register the charity.

"My daughter came up with the name, 'Steps To Hope' and ended up moving in with me full-time. She's lived with me now for the past six years."

It's testament to Richie that he is so open about his past. He recalls the suicidal thoughts he endured on a regular basis, but now wants to deliver the hope he received from someone, who was once just like him, to those on the streets.

He said: "I had written myself off a long time ago, the thought of death really excited me.

"It wasn't a morbid thought, I was suicidal. I tried to take my life, and every day I woke up was another day I regretted being alive.

"I felt I'd let everybody down, I didn't like myself, so I had no hope that I could live and be a different way, so seeing people that had once been exactly like me, to now being clean and sober, totally delivered hope to me and I wanted to take that hope to the streets, to people who wanted to change, but

couldn't find the way out."

Government figures [released this year](#) revealed that for the seventh year in a row, Scotland recorded record high levels of drug deaths.

Richie believes that despite having great organisations available, often the people on the front-line aren't relatable enough for people to open up to, and the focus needs to be turned to lived experiences to tackle the problem.

"Addiction is a very taboo subject, there's a lot of stigmas about it. We judge ourselves on shameful things we've done in the past. So, when I step into an office with a professional and ask for help, I can't be fully honest because I'm scared of judgement.

"When I met someone who described things they'd done in the past, I thought 'I've done that' so that gave me the platform to open up and for the first time in my life, I could be completely honest, about who I was and what I'd done and only then could I recover from addiction.

"From my own experiences, lived experience is the only way forward. I've met a lot of people who work in the addiction field and the homeless sector, and they're very unrelatable.

"There's amazing organisations out there, but there's people on the front line, who just don't get it and it's very hard to make someone follow you if they feel separate and disengaged from you."

Alongside Courtney, Richie began doing handouts at Christmas, whilst continuing his own personal recovery, before setting up a soup kitchen to in the long run try and guide people off the streets and towards the recovery community.

"In 2014 my daughter and I done our first handout. The following Christmas, we did 10 little bags with scarves and

things like that in them, then the following year we did 40 Santa sacks and that was when I decided I wanted to register the charity,” Roncero explained.

He added:” About seven months after getting charitable status, we launched the soup kitchen, ‘Monday’s Munchies’. The ideas for this meant anyone suffering with addiction or homelessness could come along and have a three-course meal.

“If they just wanted food that was fine, but if they wanted to talk about issues or support, I was on hand to guide them towards the recovery community.

“It was slow to begin with, but then word spread, and we were hitting 50 or 60 people every Monday, so we launched another one on Sunday and that was regularly hitting over 100 people.”

Despite the soup kitchens attracting high numbers of people, Richie believed the experience would be too daunting for some, so instead decided to try take the food to them.

He said: “We campaigned for a catering van, raised £45,000, purchased the catering van, and whilst it was being modified Covid hit. Three days before the first lockdown the van arrived ready to use.”

The arrival of the pandemic resulted in all of the soup kitchens having to close, so Richie and Steps To Hope, set about filling those gaps and increased their workload to help feed the homeless.

“Overnight, all the other organisations that were doing the food on different days had to close, but because we had our kitchen on wheels now, we were able to increase our services from two days a week to seven.

“We filled in every single gap in Edinburgh, feeding thousands of people. One company actually went bust during lockdown and they asked us if we’d be willing to take their project on

under the umbrella of Steps to Hope.

“Just now, Steps To Hope is out five days a week serving free hot food to around 500 people every week.”

Whilst all that is great, Richie admits the recovery programme they offer is “The heart of Steps To Hope”.

Richie explained that other rehabilitation centres require people to be on a 30ml level of methadone, for example, before they can be referred for rehab. Steps To Hope are helping people nowhere near that level of Methadone, so are “a million miles away from being offered rehabilitation” as a result of this.

Roncero explained: “At the end of lockdown, we acquired our first leased property, a two-bedroom flat.

“The idea was to house people who were on more than 30ml of methadone, get them stable and down to 30ml, then refer them to the rehab. The problem was, the rehab was shut for a long time, so we had housed people, got them down to 30ml, but then we had nowhere to refer them to.”

Instead of waiting for the rehabilitation centres to reopen, the volunteers at Steps To Hope decided to come up with their own recovery programme.

“It’s a daily schedule of activities, that teaches people about addiction, recovery, yoga, meditation, fitness, cooking classes, there’s a wide variation on this weekly schedule.

“People just wanted to join it. We acquired our second two-bedroom flat, but we still needed more space, so we managed to get a nine-bedroom guest house. Today we have 13 people fully engaged in the Steps To Hope recovery programme.

“These guys have been on prescription medication for 20-30 years and they’re now achieving total sobriety, through the Steps To Hope recovery programme.”

Like any charity, fundraising is crucial, and Richie now is preparing to sleep rough for five weeks in five cities to raise awareness and funds for Steps To Hope.

He admitted: "We constantly have to fundraise.

"It costs a lot of money to keep our projects going. We follow people's journeys on our Facebook and through that we gain supporters, people set up monthly direct debits and donate to us regularly.

"We need to bring in more awareness and fundraise, so we can sustain Steps To Hope. Last year I did a sleep rough for seven nights in Newcastle. We generated £10,000, we brought in new supporters and new followers to our Facebook page and to our charity.

"This year I'm doing a huge challenge. I'm sleeping rough for five weeks in five different cities to hopefully raise as much money as possible and bring in as many new supporters as possible.

"I start off on 30 October, I'm going to Glasgow with [Scottish singer-songwriter Callum Beattie. He's doing the first 24 hours with me. After the first week in Glasgow, I'll jump on a train to London, then Liverpool, then Aberdeen and finally to Dundee.

"This time of year, it's going to be tough, but being on the streets in cities I don't know anything about, I'm not researching anything about food services that are available, I'm just turning up at the train station with no money and no mobile phone.

"I'll have a rucksack and a sleeping bag, and I'll be ready to go."

To donate to Steps To Hope and follow Richie's five weeks-five cities challenge, [Click here](#).



Richard Roncero leads charity Steps to Hope, who were classed as an essential service by the Government to feed the vulnerable people with their fully kitted van to provide hot meals amid the Covid-19 pandemic which has affected the whole of Scotland. Credit: Euan Cherry