

Life took a  
new direction  
when Danny  
met Alice.

# MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE



### **The Cenotaph, St Peter's Square**

A bus screeches to a halt, a taxi driver honks his horn but then smiles and waves. Danny literally stops traffic. Casually sauntering into the middle of a city-centre thoroughfare, he stands, doffing his signature flat cap to drivers as he ushers his followers across. Despite his short stature, you can spot Danny a mile off. He's certainly not invisible.

With a hoarse voice – from a poetry gig the night before – Danny announces the itinerary for his Invisible (Manchester) tour with the charisma and charm of a natural showman. Danny's tour is a privileged insight into his life and his transformation from ex-serviceman suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleeping rough and unable to find a way out, to poet, author and local celebrity, singing opera in Manchester Cathedral and taking tea with the Lord Mayor.

All this was completely unimaginable just five short years

ago, he says: "You couldn't get two words out of me. If someone told me I'd be performing my own poems at Manchester International Festival, I'd have said, give me a pint of what you're on!"

Life took a new direction when Danny met Alice.

### **An office block, Noma**

Alice Sparks is brimming with passion, pride and energy. "I just want to do everything," she giggles. It's precisely this energy that's got her so far so fast.

When Alice graduated with a history degree from the University in 2018, she wasn't pondering career paths or sending off job applications like her peers. She had already been Head of Invisible (Manchester) for over a year, balancing meetings and training days with exams and finishing her dissertation. As she says modestly, she "had a lot on".

Invisible (Manchester) is the second outpost of Invisible Cities, which launched in

Edinburgh in 2016, and has recently expanded to cover York and Glasgow. It aims to bring those who have experienced homelessness into the spotlight, to make them visible by giving them a platform to tell their story on their turf, training them to lead walking tours of the city in their own words. It builds skills and creates confidence in the tour guides, and changes attitudes towards homelessness among those on the tour.

All the proceeds go straight back into supporting homeless people across the city and beyond. As Alice says: "The more I think about it, it's a genius idea! It benefits everyone. Walking in someone's shoes, walking with them through their city, is a really intimate and transformative experience.

"And for the tour guides, to go from a position where your confidence is physically on the floor, to leading a group of people around the streets, telling them your story, is so incredibly empowering."

Getting Invisible (Manchester) up and running hasn't been easy though.

"As an outsider, it took a long time for people to trust me," Alice admits.

She nearly gave up after a year, having not found anyone willing to become a tour guide. She booked a one-way flight to America and conceded that if she hadn't found someone by then, Invisible (Manchester) just wasn't meant to be.

Two weeks before her flight, Alice met Danny.

They couldn't be more different. Danny is a working-class, ex-homeless, ex-serviceman Scouser just about to have his "21 times three" birthday, as he coyly puts it. His missing teeth, deep wrinkles and faded tattoos telling of a past life.

And Alice is a bright young graduate who, by her own admission, had a very privileged upbringing, living all over the world. She says: "I'm very lucky



Images by Emma Ledwith Photography

## THE BAG

Look at the person, not the bag,  
 Think of who they are and what they've had.  
 Look at the person, not the bag.  
 They once had hope, they once had dreams,  
 But lost it all and ended up on the street.  
 Looking forward, never back,  
 Look at the person, not the sack.  
 Just give them five minutes of your time  
 To listen to their story,  
 And I'll bet you, when you do,  
 You'll see the person, not the bag.

DANNY COLLINS

– things have been very simple for me.”

The unlikely pair obviously have a deep connection, and their respect of and fondness for one another is apparent as they greet each other with a warm hug. It's this connection that has been so pivotal to the success of their venture.

“She's my adopted daughter now. She's also my boss.” Danny laughs, with deep affection in his eyes.

“And your PA,” Alice adds, jokingly. “He's a busy man now.”

### A dingy tunnel, King Street

As Danny guides the tour group nonchalantly through three “very dingy tunnels” everyone laughs nervously as they tip-toe over ominous puddles and breathe lightly to avoid inhaling dubious smells. These tunnels are invisible to most of us but Danny slept here on many occasions – as do hundreds of people every year. It's lit and

quite sheltered. A good choice by all accounts, when you see things differently.

Finally, the group emerges from the darkness into the blinding marble facades of King Street – “the dearest street in town”, as Danny puts it.

Rather than one life-changing moment, Alice's drive comes from a deep feeling of unease about this juxtaposition of disparate worlds, and the dramatic mundanity of seeing homelessness every single day on her cycle to work.

“I don't understand why I wouldn't do anything about it,” she says pointedly, and it's obvious this is her vocation.

### The University of Manchester, Oxford Road

Alice recently won the University's prestigious Venture Further business start-up competition, which has given her the validation she needs to push on.

“I always have people telling me that I'm doing an amazing job, but no-one's willing to put money into it because it's a risk. Winning this award – having people invest and believe we can be a viable business – is amazing.”

Naturally, Danny attended the awards ceremony with Alice. “I cried,” she says. “He read a poem. That's what we do.”

Keen to scale up Invisible (Manchester) through an ongoing relationship with the University that has been so instrumental in her journey so far, Alice says: “There are endless opportunities, but now we need the manpower to make it happen. We're currently recruiting a team of student volunteers and we're working with the University on developing an internship to support our work.

“This is just the beginning. The more work I do, the more amazing people I meet, and the more inspired I get. It just makes me want to do more.”

### A bus stop, Stevenson Square

The tour comes to an end. With joyful applause and “free hugs”, Danny and his tour group celebrate his triumph over adversity, his PTSD and his homelessness, right in the heart of the Northern Quarter for all to see, and passersby stop and smile.

Before he strides off to another important meeting, Danny turns around and shakes his keys with an outpouring of pride, grinning through the gaps in his teeth.

“Keys!” he exclaims. “What every homeless person dreams of.”

For tour information, visit [www.invisible-cities.org](http://www.invisible-cities.org)

