

# Jo Barton

Doctor

Born 1986.

Autobiographical life story.

Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk)



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# 1. Childhood

I started drinking alcohol at 12 years old with friends. I liked the feeling of being drunk. I was quite a shy kid and alcohol brought me out of myself. When I was younger, my mum wasn't well – she was in and out of the hospital with mental health issues a lot, sometimes ending with her being sectioned. My older sister and I spent a lot of time looking after ourselves. Around the age of 13, during one of my mum's periods of being sectioned, I started to drink on my own – rather than just with friends. I also started to drink more.

I started going to nightclubs and skipping school as I was hungover a lot. Even at that early age, I was starting to wake up feeling anxious and wanting to drink to make that feeling go away. I didn't realise I was starting to have a problem with alcohol – I was too young to even know what an alcoholic was. Looking back, I think I was depressed and didn't know it. Alcohol was hiding my depression and (I thought) it seemed to make me feel better. I had also started to smoke weed daily.

I thought everything was fine, that I wasn't depressed and that it was all good. But it wasn't.

My drinking and drug-taking got worse when I was about 14 or 15 years old. I was drinking daily and also sleeping around with older men in their 20s. I didn't realise I was being taken advantage of at the time because I was drunk and 14. I just wanted attention and someone to care about me. I would sleep with anybody, even if I didn't really want to. Because I was drinking and missing lessons, I fell so far behind with my course work that it felt pointless going to school, so I left halfway through year 10. My entire life revolved around getting alcohol and getting drunk.

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At 16, I started to regret how I'd been behaving and spending a lot of time alone isolated in my bedroom. I was so ashamed and embarrassed by my drinking and behaviour that I didn't really want to see anyone. I was so unhappy and suicidal. I thought, "This is going to be my life forever and I don't want it anymore". For some reason, I felt that if I moved away things could possibly change for me. So my plan was to change my location. I'd give it six months and if nothing changed, then I would kill myself.

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## 2. Getting a Job

I moved to a new area and got a job as a waitress in a restaurant but got fired after three weeks. I had no qualifications and found it really difficult to get another job. Then I saw a carer job advertised and thought maybe I could do that: I'd liked looking after my mum when she was poorly. It was also the only job I could find that didn't require any qualifications or experience and you could even earn an NVQ through the job. It was my first proper role and within a few months I was made senior carer. After a while, I decided I wanted a new challenge and applied for a job as a health care assistant in a hospital. I cried my eyes out when I got it. I was so proud and excited to get a job with the NHS.

After three years, I got onto an 'Access to Nursing' course. It meant I was working 60 hours a week as well as going to college part-time in the evenings. Getting back into education really helped me cut down on drugs as it gave me something else to focus on apart from it. I did so well on the course that people started saying, "Have you ever thought about going into medicine?" I'd never even considered it – people like me don't become doctors. But, when I completed the course with the highest mark out of everyone in my class, I started thinking, "I wonder if I could do it?"

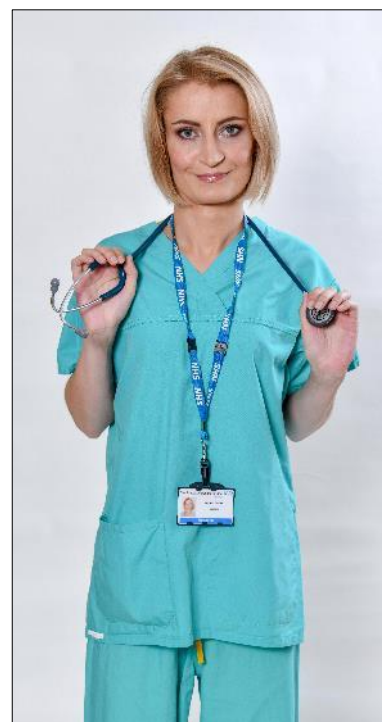
I'd spent a lot of time working in elderly care with people dying and a lot of them would have regrets. I didn't want to end up on my death bed wondering, "What if?" Life is short. You only get one, so I decided to live it. I did some research on medicine and how you get into it. There were only four 'Access to Nursing' courses in the country at the time so I didn't think I would get accepted. I remember thinking, "I'll just apply and see what happens".

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### 3. Becoming a Doctor

Much to my surprise, I got accepted! If I was still taking drugs, I would never have believed in myself and probably wouldn't have even applied for the course. The study was really intense, but I passed, then got a place on the full medical degree course and I graduated as a doctor in 2015.

Whenever I would talk about my past to any of the nurses they would say "You need to tell people your story, it's really inspirational." I never really thought of it as anything special – it was just my life. One of the nurses suggested I talk to the local paper. I was a little scared about telling my story because of the stigma around addiction but I think hearing stories from people who have changed their life is important because when I was younger I didn't believe there was a way out. It's so important to know that, although it's hard, there is a way out and your life can completely change.



I contacted the local newspaper, thinking "If it inspires a couple of people in Harlow, then it'll be worth it". I thought maybe it would end up as a small article in the back of the paper. It actually ended up as a huge spread across page 3. The Daily Mail and the Sun both got in touch and also asked to interview me. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. I now get lots of messages from people on social media asking for advice, support or simply just saying that after reading my story they are going to chase their own dream. I've also been asked to share my story in quite a few schools.

My end goal is to start my own charity supporting young people that want to get back into education. My original ambition was to just do any job, get money to do drugs and live in a bedsit. It's so different from how my life is today. With my job, I can travel the world and work anywhere. The world is my oyster and I have so many opportunities that I wouldn't have had the way I was living before.

I would never have got back into education and become a doctor if I was still drinking or taking drugs – there's absolutely no way I would have been able to do any of this. You have to chase your dreams. You don't have to be a doctor. If you want to be a hairdresser or something else then go and do that. It might not be easy and you might have to make some sacrifices, but you can do it if you really want.

I'm still sweeping up the debris of my past choices and behaviour but I love my life and I love my job. I'm not worrying about money and I'm able to be there and help and support my mum. I never thought I would have a life like this. I'm living a life I look forward to. I have no idea what the future holds, but that's exciting.