

# Michael Fraser

Michael, 36, is a self-made millionaire with his own company manufacturing door frames and partitions. He lived in children's homes for most of his childhood from the age of five, and has never learned to read and write properly. He began committing petty crimes from the age of 10, then got involved in burglary and car theft. He was remanded into custody, narrowly avoided a prison sentence by getting a job, and managed to turn his life around. He is now on the board of The Apex Trust, a charity which helps ex-offenders, and employs former prisoners in his own factories.

I drive a Ferrari worth £130,000 and I ride around in a chauffeur-driven Bentley. People resent me and hate me for it. They'll shout 'You black bastard! Nigger!' This happens often, *very* often. They're thinking, 'He's black, he's got to be a drug dealer'.

I don't mind. I can get over it. I *am* a black bastard! My parents never were married, so it's true!

I go into prisons now and talk to people who are due for release or who have only got a year left to serve. The first thing I say to them is this: 'I can't read and write, I can hardly spell, I've got no idea of maths or anything like that but I'm successful because I've fought to be successful. I've done what *I* wanted to do. The reason why I think I'm successful is because as a child I channelled all my efforts into going against everything that was right. And then I changed what I was fighting for, for something I believed in'.

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When we were put in care I found I could get away with a hell of a lot more, because no-one would beat me like my dad used to. As far as I was concerned, there was nobody in authority there who could do anything to hurt me.

I think being disruptive was just a cry for my father's attention. I think I craved attention and the only way I could get it was by being bad. I think I had a relationship with my father where I felt that every time I copied anything he did, he sort of praised me for it, whether it was good or bad. As a youngster I think I was probably like my father. That was important to me. I felt I was a mirror image of him when he was younger. My father got killed in a car crash when I was about 16. I didn't find out for a year, and I had no relationship with my mother till years later, when I was in my twenties.

It's quite strange because I've always been into this family thing. There was an Irish family I was friendly with, who lived near the children's home. I so much wanted to be in a family atmosphere though it never happened. But they were really good to me, this family. I *love* family life. I would *love* to have been brought up by a family. My two sisters were—they were fostered, and my older brother was adopted. I always wanted that.

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Education was never part of what my parents were about. At school I had learning difficulties, and if it was noticeable, as far as I was concerned it was a weakness—so I wouldn't show it. Rather than trying to learn, I'd cause trouble in the class, because I knew I'd get thrown out, and then I wouldn't have a problem trying to explain.

I felt different from other children at school because everybody seemed normal and I was the one who would be in trouble. As far as I was concerned the others were all very good, whereas I would always argue or disagree with what was happening. Whether it was right or wrong I'd still fight for what I believed in. And I stood out because of that.

Physically I was quite strong and as I went on through school I used to be more or less the cock of the walk. I felt I'd got to get out there and be somebody and fight for what I wanted. I was very disruptive, causing a lot of trouble. I used to attack teachers and generally be disruptive in the class. I was a bully too. I used to take money off people: I used to go and say to other kids, 'Give me your dinner money!' and if they didn't I'd knock them over and take it. The Indian lads used to hide their dinner money in their turbans, and I used to make them jump up and down so I could hear where the money was rattling, and I'd take it off them. And I can still remember to this day what I was like with members of staff in the children's home.

I didn't feel happy going on to secondary school. I couldn't manage to keep friendships from school because I was in children's homes and I really didn't have any social contact with anybody else. To me going to secondary school just meant I was getting older and realising school wasn't for me. I didn't want school, I didn't enjoy it, it wasn't part of what I wanted to do. So I became even more disruptive. I got worse as I went into secondary school. I actually got a kick out of saying no to people and going against what they believed was right—the teachers, anybody in authority.

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I was probably about ten years old when I first broke the law, pinching petty cash from the children's home. I was actually influenced by another kid in there. Even though I was bad, I wasn't *really* bad. At that age I still used to play with little matchbox cars, which I loved. But this kid told me I was childish playing with cars. He became my best friend. He taught me to smoke, later he taught me to have sex with girls, he opened my eyes to a lot of things I didn't know about. And he became very influential even though he was younger, because the things he was doing I found exciting.

When I was about 12, I was actually arrested. At this stage I used to be allowed to go home for the weekends to stay with my dad, and my dad had left his car up the road. My brother was allowed home as well, and me and my brother went and fetched this car and smashed it up, and the police arrested us and locked us up.

I thought my dad would kill me for it. But surprisingly he laughed about it. He seemed to think it was funny that I should do it. The police asked my name and I said 'Charlie Drake' as a joke. My father laughed because he couldn't believe that anyone that young could have that sort of cocky attitude. I'm not proud of it now but at the time I thought it was good.

So my father laughed about me smashing up his car and I felt good. But still, when they put me in that police cell, even at that young age I thought, is this it? Is this what my life's going to be? As a child probably you can go one way or another, and I sort of realised even then that I didn't want to end up going to prison.

So I decided to do something with my life. Even as a kid I was always a 'car person': if I saw a large car I used to go up to the bloke who owned it and say 'I like your car', and offer to watch it for him. I used to sit outside a gambling place and guard cars for people. One guy had a Daimler and I said to him 'I like your car, it's a lovely car', and he used to pay me to watch his car because he was scared I'd damage it otherwise. But I used to love to sit there guarding his car.

I left school at 16. I didn't have any qualifications, I just came out and that was it. There was very much the feeling that I had to get out and get on with it. I still had a care order on me so I was actually still living in children's homes. But at the age of 16 you got moved on to what used to be called a 'working boys' hostel', which is geared up to try and prepare you for life outside. You have your own room and you go out to work to pay rent and get on with your life.

I started work as a trainee bench hand in a very small factory, and to this day I don't know what a trainee bench hand is! I ended up cleaning machinery, doing odd jobs around the factory. There was a foreman and about eight employees.

Everybody was scared of the foreman and so for a while I played along. He told me to clean the machines and eventually I began to ask him when he was going to let me do this trainee bench hand work. He kept saying I could start in a couple of months but it never happened.

One day—I picked the day, I picked the time—I waited till he was in front of everybody and he told me to clean a machine. And I said, 'Clean it yourself!'. I did it on purpose—I wanted to belittle him. I was upset because he hadn't done what he was supposed to do. He hadn't started me on training to be a benchman.

So I walked out of that job and I left the working boys' hostel and went to live with some friends. These friends were into burglaries and thieving and eventually I used to go out with them. I'd keep watch while they broke into houses and pinched cars, and I found it exciting. I'd found it difficult struggling for money—and they could pinch all this fantastic stuff. But we were always scared to death that the police were going to get us.

One day we went to sell some stuff in a jewellery shop, and while we were in there I lifted a ring, gave it to this girl, got caught and got done for it.

I was remanded into a youth custody place for assessment by social workers. That place had a great influence on me because it taught me more than I ever knew about crime before. The people you lived with, you were all the same, in the same situation. You're in an atmosphere with everybody else—why should you be any different? We were all in there for the same sort of reasons, and we were all similar people anyway. The influence is there for you to be just like everybody else. You see offending as part of your way of life.

The social workers told me I'd be going to prison for receiving stolen goods. I decided I was going to have to get a job because I thought it might keep me out of prison. I thought 'If I have a job, then I can at least tell the judge I'm working'. I didn't think they would lock me up if I was working—I thought I'd get a fine or probation or something like that.

So I ran away from the assessment centre and set about trying to get a job. I went for this interview and the guy interviewing me was from up North and he'd never had any dealings with black people like me. I can still remember him saying 'Yeah, we'll let you know'. I walked out and then I went back half an hour later and I said, 'You said you'd let me know!' He said 'Yeah, I'll contact you. Don't come back'.

But I kept going back. I was going back every hour, on the hour! He must have thought I was a nutcase. And eventually he said, 'You've got the job, because of your persistence'.

So I went to work as a labourer and a forklift truck driver. I think I must have seen a nice side to that guy when I kept going back to him, because he became like a father figure for me.

I really enjoyed the job. I wasn't doing anything special—I was just in a warehouse atmosphere, working loading and off-loading things. I got on well with the guy's wife, who was the secretary, and we had a great time there.

When the court case came up I found it really did help that I had a job. I got a fine and I was put on probation instead of going to prison.

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Once I got out of trouble I'd planned to pack the job in, but I found I enjoyed what I was doing. I also enjoyed the sense of being able to have money and not look over my shoulder because I'd got it by wrongdoing. I felt, I've got the money because I'm working. It's hard to explain but I think I also enjoyed the fact I was doing something that was 'normal'. Whenever I'd been in trouble there was always a doubt in my mind. I was always thinking, 'If I'm in trouble, if I've done something wrong, something's going to happen to me. I'm eventually going to be caught up in it'.

The people I was hanging around with at the time we were doing the burglaries went on to do armed robberies and bank jobs with shotguns and everything. They're still doing it now. I see them occasionally when they come out of prison. When I meet them they say, 'Oh God, Mike, look at your Ferrari, look at your Bentley'. I try and say to them, 'You could do it as well'. I say the same thing to people when I go into the prisons. I say 'You can do it if you want to do it'.

The foreman at that job eventually became a very good friend of mine and we're still friends. But when I first got there I caused him as much trouble as I could and he said he'd have to resign from the company or they'd have to get rid of me.

Instead the guy who ran the company said he'd put me in a small workshop, working at a machine on my own. And even though it was monotonous and boring, I loved it. I loved working that machine, which

was used to cut locks out in door frames. I had control over that machine: it was a fantastic thing to work and I loved it.

I did that job for about two years. I used to daydream, set myself targets. To do 100 frames in a week was fantastic, but I was setting myself targets to do 100 frames in a day! And I used to do it—I actually did do it! My boss thought it was brilliant that I was setting these targets for myself. I was making him a fortune and we had a good relationship. I had my own keys to get into the unit. He trusted me totally, and I used to work seven days a week.

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At about this time I got married. My wife was a nurse and she had her own car. I was impressed that a professional like her could think anything of somebody like me. I was working seven days a week and it was good—it was really good. Then suddenly the firm's work started drying up.

So I set up my own business making these door frames and I went into big debt—by this time we had two children and we'd bought our first house. But I'd actually given up on the marriage because to me the goal was making money—and that's all I did do. I worked on my own every day, every night. I used to wake up in the night and think, 'I'll go to work, I can do some more frames'. I would promise people I'd deliver their order in a week, then instead I'd do it in two days. And of course they were over the moon.

It was great to be praised. It was great because people were actually saying 'You're brilliant, you've done it, well done!' This is something I think comes from my childhood when I never got any praise at all.

I knew nothing about accounts, I just worked, and I worked my butt off. We'd moved from our first small house into a four-bedroomed detached house—then we moved from there to an even bigger house. It was worth quarter of a million back in 1989. My wife had her own life and I was working unbelievable hours, making a hell of a lot of money.

Then I decided I'd missed out on playing around. So that's what I started doing. My wife knew, and we split up. I gave her everything, everything I had—except for the business. I said to her 'You can have everything else, but please don't go for the business'.

I fell in love with somebody who I think only loved me because I was wealthy, and we got married. Then about three years ago she had an affair which destroyed me, and this second marriage split up too.

I actually gave up on work and I went through a stage when I was drinking a lot. I never did drugs—I like to feel I'm in control, and you become dependent on drugs. I don't like the idea of becoming dependent on anybody or anything at all. I hate the fact that I smoke, because it

means I'm dependent on cigarettes. But drugs have never been a part of my life. I was absolutely scared of them. Absolutely. My drinking was just a stage, and I knew I'd end up killing myself if I carried on.

All this time my business was expanding. It had reached a stage where the turnover was £6 million a year and it was growing. By that time I was employing 40 or 50 people. Luckily one of the guys who worked for me could see what I was going through with my marriage. He runs the company for me now, as managing director, and he's very successful. I listened to him and I slowed down.

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Today I'm more enthusiastic about people than about my business. I work for the Apex Trust, which is about employment for ex-offenders, and now I'm on the Board. I enjoy that sort of lifestyle now. I do still go into work and I admit I love all the trappings I get from it. But I'm not that enthusiastic about actually doing it any more. I get enthusiastic about Apex and things like that. We're doing a big project now where we're getting government ministers to come and learn about prisons and I'm involved in that in a big way. I sponsored it and I'm really into it big time. I believe they brought me in because I can provide a link between Apex and the community and the ex-offenders.

I started doing my charity work in prisons. It pays to go into prisons. It does work. When prisoners see someone like me who came from nothing being successful it inspires them. And if I can inspire one person, fantastic. Every time I go into a prison, if just one person is inspired—fantastic. The more they know about people who come from nothing and create something, the more people will get out there and do things themselves.

I love success coming from nothing—I get a kick out of that. But I think we are a very resentful society in the UK: we don't like people being successful too long. We don't like to see them up there—we'd rather them drop.

Nobody believed in me. I wanted to prove to myself and to everybody else that I was capable of doing something—though I didn't know what. At that stage I didn't know I was going to be, or how successful I was going to be. I didn't have a clue. I just wanted to do something that was positive. I wasn't motivated by money—I was motivated by the fact that I'd achieved something. Luckily I was in a market that needed something and I found the niche in that market. And I was motivated by that.

I employ quite a number of ex-prisoners in my own company. I'd say that 95 per cent of the ex-offenders who come and work for me will get on and be successful in not returning to a life of crime. Five per cent will probably go back to crime. I've got people working for me now who've

been in prison for all sorts of reasons: car crimes, battering, assault, burglaries. You name it, they've done it—everything. That's no problem to me, as long as they're going to come in and channel all their efforts into doing something with their lives. That's fantastic.

I am not a do-gooder—that's the last thing I ever want to be. If somebody wants to get on in my company, they'll get on. If they don't, they can go. I have no problem with it. I'm there to say 'If you want to do something I'll guide you and help you. If you don't want to do it—get out'. End of story.

Sometimes when I go into prisons, the prisoners tell me I'm lucky, but I say, 'No, I worked for it'. You'll often have 12 blokes round you and there's always somebody in the group who'll have a little dig at you and say, 'Well yeah, it's OK for you, you've got there'. And I say, 'You can get there too. But if you don't want to do it, don't do it. Carry on doing your crimes'.

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I've kept in touch with my brothers and sisters though we were brought up apart. My two sisters are dead now. They died in 1986 and 1987. Both of my sisters had been in and out of prison all their lives. One became a prostitute. She used to work in Birmingham and I'd race around trying to catch her and stop her doing it. But she ended up killing herself with a drug overdose. My other sister died just 12 months later from stomach cancer, caused by her being kicked in the stomach in prison.

I'm still in contact with my brothers. My oldest brother went into prison as well—we've got similar personalities but I think I'm a lot stronger than him. He's been out of trouble for about ten years now.

Back in 1984, when I was 22, I made contact with my mother. I put an advert in a Halifax paper because I knew that's where she came from. I hadn't seen her since I was five. And she replied to this advert.

I got so excited when I went to see her. It was a strange feeling, thinking 'This is my mum'. The first thing she wanted to know was where my dad was. When I said he was dead, she was relieved because she was totally scared to death of him. But as quickly as I could, I tried to get over to her my memories of him, because I had loved him. She said he was a bad man, he used to beat her up, and I said, 'I know he did, but why did he beat you up?' And she said, 'Because he couldn't express himself in any other way'. I was beginning to form a relationship with her, but I couldn't call her Mum. I don't know why—I just couldn't. And in the end things just didn't work out between us.

It's affected the way I look at things now. If I have a relationship, or if I meet somebody and I get close to them, I always wonder what's going to happen. I believe I build up the feeling inside me that if

something is going well, something bad's going to happen. I don't like pain, I mean pain inside. I hate pain inside. I don't want to be hurt and I probably build up a barrier to stop that happening.

I think other problems of my childhood are still with me now. I haven't got the patience to learn anything. My writing's terrible and I can't spell to save my life. And I'm terrible at maths or anything like that. If I want something done these days I can just phone up my secretary. I don't have a problem writing a cheque, though if there's an alternative then I'll use it. But I'm not ashamed of all this any more.

People have always said to me 'You went through a rough time—losing parents, losing sisters and all that'. But I only went through what a lot of people go through. If you feel sorry for me, you make it worse for me. Life really can be hard—but you've got to be able to pull yourself out of that. Success isn't the big house, the big cars. Success is getting on with life, being happy in what you do, just getting on with it. That's what success is.

I don't know what will happen in the future. I really don't know. I've still got the bad parts of me where I'm frightened of commitment. But I just take things as they go along. I'm happy enough, I just get on with it, life goes on.

Today I'm proud of my success: I'm more successful than I could ever have wished for. But I'm still searching I think, searching for that ultimate—something. And I haven't found it. I've created what I want but I'm still hungry. Part of me is over the moon. I love the cars—Bentley, Ferrari, chauffeur—this is lovely, it's brilliant. But I'd give it all up tomorrow if that could make me really happy.