

'We all laugh in the same language'

The Bolton clown who performed in refugee camps

Dani Cole Nov 1

Dear members — The Mill's very first writer Dani Cole left to pursue the joys of a freelance existence a fortnight ago — fortunately, we have a piece from her written before her departure we've been saving for a rainy day. The topic isn't an easy or comfortable one, but we think the story of Eddie Haworth is worth sitting with. After a difficult childhood in Bolton, Haworth went on to become a clown in the refugee camps of Thailand. Out of a very sad beginning to his life, he was able to craft a life full of laughter.

One of the reasons Joshi set up The Mill was to shine a spotlight on the lives of those who don't generally receive a huge amount of media attention. We hope this counts as one of them.

Fair warning: This article contains an account of child sexual abuse.

By Dani Cole

Eddie Haworth knew he was a spectacle: a big man daubed in face paint, floppy hat with a giant red nose, peddling atop a three-metre-high unicycle. The faces that looked back at him were marked by exhaustion, fear and hunger.

His performance was inside Mae La refugee camp, the largest in Thailand, which held around 40,000 people who had fled across the Thai-Myanmar border. And here he was, showcasing the art of buffoonery. What good could a clown from Bolton do here? As it turned out, quite a lot. **"We all laugh in the same language,"** he says.

That was 2006. He'd come to Thailand in 2000, at the invitation of the British Embassy to perform at a charity event in Bangkok. He was grappling with the breakdown of a relationship and had a few expat friends there. He'd stay there for the next couple of decades, establishing a charity, the [Gift of Happiness Foundation](#), performing for children and adults at international schools and five-star hotels in exchange for donations to support his charity.

Being a professional circus clown is an unusual career path. Eddie never wanted to be one. But being a circus performer in a refugee camp? That was something different. He spent decades roaming around Europe, Scandinavia, the Middle East and even New York as a street entertainer and one-man stage performer, carrying a small concertina and singing the blues. A stranger once told him, "His little squeeze-box was a perfect instrument for a

clown". Then soon after that comment was made, Eddie started to dream of becoming a professional "Character Mime Clown" in the style of Mr Bean and Charley Chaplain.



Eddie in 2022, photographed by Dani Cole for The Mill.

"I didn't find much to laugh about when I was a damaged child in Bolton."

It's hard not to wonder if it was important for him to make others laugh because his own childhood was so devoid of any kind of innocent fun when at the age of six years, his innocence and childhood were ripped away from him after the first of many sexual assaults.

Quote Eddie: ***"My youth was agonisingly lonely, in maturity I was tortured and disruptive, yet middle-age empowered me". "In my 70th year, I refuse to die before sharing the knowledge I have struggled so hard to learn"!***

In adulthood, he survived a catastrophic motorcycle accident which left him disabled for more than five years. His wife took their two children away to live with a new bread winner leaving Eddie struggling to hold down any romantic relationships due to the abuse that resulted in him becoming incapable of understanding what a mutual loving relationship should be.

After one relationship breakdown when eddie was in his early 40s he became suicidal and found himself being talked down from the banks of the river Mersey at 3 am. The good Samaritan suggested that he considered the effect of what his suicide would have upon his teenage son. That's when Eddie climbed down and wept by the roadside until dawn.

He had already started to make a name for himself in the world of big red noses and greasepaint. So, when he pulled on his oversized shoes, he became Clown Eckie. "That's when I become the child that was lost," he says.

Eddie, 69, was born in a caravan in Davy Hulme, Manchester. His mother's first husband had been violent and beat one of Eddie's half-sisters so severely as a small child that she became deaf. Jennie, his mother, was granted a divorce and soon met Eddie's father, Albert. For a time, their family of five lived together in the caravan before they were able to move to a small, terraced mill house in Farnworth. His parents worked 12-hour shifts to provide for the family, and Eddie was often left on his own, a "latchkey kid" responsible for ferrying his younger sister to and from nursery.

The first incident of abuse happened when he was six; his abuser lived across the street and was confined to his bed. People from the neighbourhood would help feed and wash him. One day, it was Eddie's turn. He was forced to perform oral sex in exchange for the man's WWII medals.

Two years later, Eddie's family moved to Morris Green in Bolton; he was abused again by several men. "If an adult spoke to you in those days, you didn't [dare] argue," he says. The abuse wasn't always sexual, and often the men would bond with their victims. "They make you feel like a man," he says. He speaks of Frank, one of the men whose names he can never forget. Frank was a scoutmaster and still lived at home with his mother. The scout hut was behind Eddie's house, which is where some of the abuse happened. Other times it took place in Frank's home. Sometimes he was told to bring a friend.



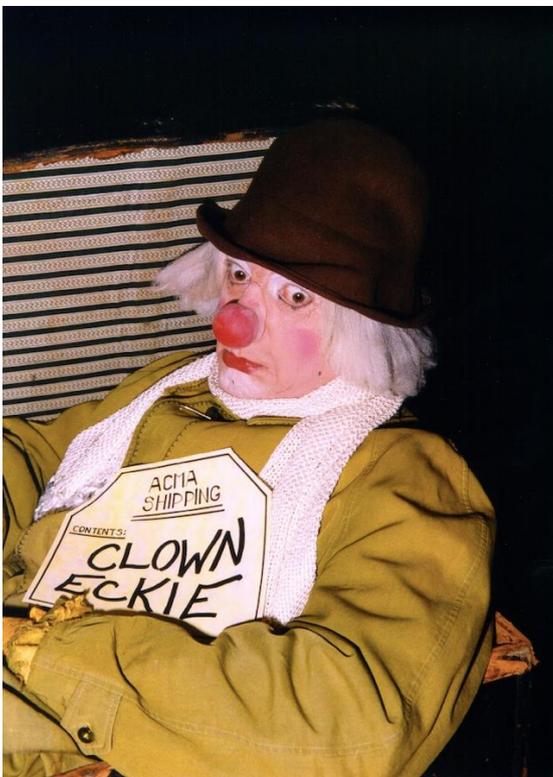
Eddie performing to a crowd. Thanks to Eddie for the photo.

His mother would be downstairs when the abuse happened. Sometimes she knew what was happening, but she was hostile towards the boys. "She hated us," Eddie recalls. "'You dirty little buggers', she'd say. 'What are you doing with my son? He's a good boy.'" Frank was in his 30s. Eddie was eight.

"You never talked about it," he says. "Deep down inside, you knew you can't tell anybody. They would make you swear in front of them and say things you couldn't dream of saying to anyone else." In exchange for sexual favours, Frank would give Eddie money and cigarettes.

He was labelled as "painfully lazy" by his teachers at school, but he would later learn he was dyslexic; he first ran away from home when he was 11. "I drove my mother almost suicidal with my behaviour," he says. At 15 he ran away for the second time, and lived in Morecambe, becoming a prolific car thief. He would joyride in rental cars and was finally caught by police during a drugs raid at a house party and shipped off to prison for three months.

At 45, he finally came to terms with what had happened to him as a child after seeking therapy. He often struggled with relationships; he proposed to his first wife on their first date — she was 21 and he was 20. She was the eldest of 13 children and was responsible for caring for her siblings. Marriage was the only way she could escape her family.



Thanks to Eddie for the photo.

Looking back, he realises that much of what he experienced was the result of the abuse he had suffered. "I was chasing love - I always wanted to be in love with someone, and I wanted someone to be in love with me," he said. "I was desperately in need of it for many, many years and could never achieve it."

His third wife, Charly, was from Lapland, and together they became a duo - she juggled with fire and Eddie would veer precariously on his high unicycle or perform as a

strongman. There was no defining moment that Eddie realised he wanted to become a clown - he had years of experience travelling around Europe as a street performer, and later he was honoured to be trained under Ken Dodd, Norman Wisdom and Ron Moody, amongst other well know Thespians. He knew how to entertain people, so becoming a clown seemed like a natural transition.

He honed his skills as a slapstick comedian (he calls Clown Ekie a 'character mime') and used his body to make children, parents and teachers laugh. He would fall from his unicycle or collapse onto the floor after sitting on a chair. In Bootle, in the 1990s, Eddie and Charlie performed at a school where the children were uncontrollable in the classroom; they were rough, lippy, and hostile.

But as soon as Charly tossed the flaming batons into the air, they were mesmerised. That was the joy of being a clown: seeing the faces of children who had experienced hardship soften into wonder. After all, the language of laughter is universal. He used to have dark days - shortly after he and Charlie separated. He is working on overcoming his past by writing his autobiography and promoting a TV documentary that was filmed for the Australian TV company ABC.



Eddie's Charity... If We See Someone Without a Smile, We Give Them One of Ours!

Eddie says, "I no longer have any days when I'm severely depressed." - "I am blissfully happy and have been ever since I started giving away free smiles."

The Film, [That Fat Bloke from Bolton](https://www.that-fat-bloke-from-bolton-uk.org/)