

HIGH AFTER A CRIMINAL PAST

From a grim Divis Flats childhood to becoming one of the UK's most dangerous prisoners, meet the business tycoon feted around the world as a public speaker and mentor

EXCLUSIVE
BY JAMIE McDOWELL



IF Stephen Gillen's life story was pitched to Hollywood as an original screenplay, it would be dismissed as too far-fetched.

Having spent his childhood in Northern Ireland, he was soon to be regarded as one of Britain's most dangerous men and spent many years as a category 'A' prisoner, locked up with the country's most high-risk inmates.

Now an internationally successful entrepreneur, writer, producer, filmmaker and award-winning public speaker, Stephen took time out this week to speak of his new book, *The Monkey Puzzle Tree*, which charts the fall and rise of a man once written-off by society, and how he turned his life around from being a convicted bank robber to having a jet-setting career.

"I was born in 1971 in England and taken to Belfast as a baby, I would have been about 12 months old, but I stayed there until I was nine," he said.

"My parents were originally from Northern Ireland and we lived near Divis Flats for a while, which was crazy back then because of the political situation, but we then moved near Greencastle, which was better.

"It was very hard in those days in Northern Ireland, and so my mum left me to go back to England to work and to try and find a life, so I was left back in Northern Ireland as a child with my aunts and uncles who brought me up. My aunt Madge then died - who was like my surrogate mother - and that's why I left Northern Ireland. They were the best of people, salt of the earth people."

Stephen described how a fractured upbringing led to problems as he tried to fit into London life.

"When I first came to London, I had a funny accent and was in a place which was alien to me, a place I didn't know and a different culture. That was very hard for me. I stuck out, so my thing was always to try to do more.

"I was also a very anxious child coming over here because it was such a shock to me. I didn't settle in very well because I was grieving for my aunt who had died and my answer to that was to rebel, which I really go into in-depth in the book.

"So it kind of went from there. In many ways I was stuck with some pretty serious grief and abandonment issues.

"My mother had left me back in Northern Ireland for nine years at a crucial time in my development. She was trying to forge a better life for us but it was still very hard not having her around in the important years.

"In saying that I've always been very protective of my mother. She is a good woman who tried her best, but when you get older and look back you have to look at the reality of stuff, because



HONOURS: Stephen gets a peace award from General Secretary of the United Peace Federation Robin Marsh and, left, speaking at the UN on International Peace Day



that was so hard for me, and that's also what drove me forward and got me into trouble.

"I was very confused and very anxious. I didn't have proper instruction when I tried to settle in England and in London I had no good role models. I wasn't

shown the right way to do things. "I couldn't understand my new environment and felt a fish out of water when I wanted to be brought closer, so my reaction was to get into more trouble, to do more and to be more. Then all of a sudden I was in petty crime, I was put in homes and I had to fend for myself."

Stephen's life of crime continued until his first major conviction for armed robbery. It was a prison experience which he didn't adapt well to, and from there, while he didn't realise until later in life, the seeds of change were beginning to sprout in his mind.

"I'm always guided by the truth, now. Back then I was a high-security prisoner. I was arrested for an armed robbery, there were two shots fired at police. They said I fired the shots, which was deemed as an accident because I was wrestling with a police officer.

"When I got that big sentence, I was a category 'A' prisoner, the highest there is. However, the truth is I took incarceration as a high-security prisoner very badly. I was quite desperate as a person then. Again, my response to that was to rebel.

"I was deemed as one of Britain's most dangerous prisoners. I was actually released as a cat 'A' as well, which is very rare. I did 11 years and nine months altogether. I was put away with a lot of people from the old days, there were a lot of IRA guys there like Paul 'Dingus' Magee - all of these famous cases."

When Stephen came out again he found it hard to adapt to normal society. He was jailed again for possession of a gun, this time for five years - the last time he would see the inside of a cell.

"People talk about having an epiphany, but the truth for me was that I'd wanted out of that life for many years. I was forged into something that I

never really wanted to be, but I played that role to the best of my ability. Even during the worst of times, there was something deep inside me that was saying 'you are not this person'."

Upon his release, Stephen and his family, who were known as experienced ground workers, managed to secure work with the local authority. "My family set up our own company and we begged and borrowed and we worked every hour that God sent, and that company is still around. It was very hard work - digging and working on the roads."

Working his way from labourer to supervisor, he ended up running an Isle of Wight contract with his family and then built his own separate company, all within 18 months. It was during this time Stephen got checked into rehab and kicked drugs. Now nine years clean, he doesn't so much as take a drink or cigarette.

PERSEVERED

"Then one day I met someone who was great at IT and had worked in the film industry. We both had good ideas and we both started up an IT media company. It was then I learned documentary making and wrote documentaries on some of the world's most powerful business empires.

"Everyone said we were mad; we would never do it. That was also hard work, with people telling me it was never going to work, but I persevered with my goals and went on to complete a degree in business at the London School of Business. I didn't really need that, but it's just something I wanted to do in my life, and I loved it!"

Stephen then learned public speaking, becoming a motivational speaker, buttressed by his remarkable story of battling against adversity to make

a huge success of his life, as well as founding Shooting Stars Events with Daphne Diluce, a company providing bespoke training coupled with profile and brand development systems for those in the film and music industry.

More recently Stephen has been filming *Two Extremes*, also produced by Daphne Diluce, which follows a series of events hosted by himself and an ex-top cop as they embark on a national tour sharing their experiences, the next of which is due to be held in parliament and is already drawing much traction from leaders and media influencers all over the world.

"Then there is the film on my life story, which, with the screenplay nearly finished, is based on my autobiography, and it's already receiving much acclaim," he said. "It's a very emotive and inspirational story that will also touch on my humanitarian, philanthropic journey as well as the work I'm doing with ex-police commander Kul Mahay, which is obviously a very interesting collaboration. It's a unique story."

"Kul and I get on very well. It's the weirdest thing. There are loads of things out there on criminals who've done this and done that, and loads of stuff about ex-policemen who've done this and that. However, there's nothing about people like us who were at such a high level, who had gone from the bottom to the top, but then went on an internal journey of discovery and then went on to do so much work together.

"We were two men who couldn't have been further apart, but there was no judgment."

Now, with his new eBook set for release in a few weeks and a hard copy ready for publication, Stephen is in a great place.

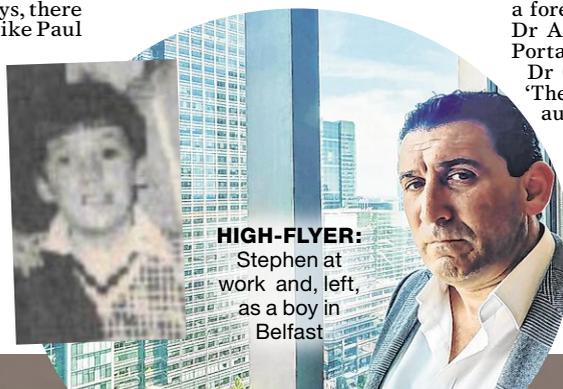
He spoke of his pride that his autobiography, *The Monkey Puzzle Tree*, has a foreword by celebrity psychologist Dr Arthur Cassidy, originally from Portadown.

Dr Cassidy describes the book as: "The most compelling mind absorbing autobiography I have ever known."

It seems the man who once had chains around his ankles now has the world at his feet.

The Monkey Puzzle Tree, published by Filament Publishing, is due for digital release in seven weeks and will be available in bookshops after lockdown.

jamie.mcdowell@sundayworld.com



HIGH-FLYER: Stephen at work and, left, as a boy in Belfast



FIGHT: Megan Rapinoe

Meg vow to battle inequality

BY BOB GIBSON

USA women's soccer co-captain Megan Rapinoe has vowed she will never give up the fight for equality after a federal judge threw out their claim for equal pay with their male counterparts.

The 34-year-old, who won the Golden Boot and the Golden Ball at the 2019 Women's World Cup, has been a leading voice in the fight against US Soccer, which suffered a big blow on Friday.

Judge Gary Klausner ruled the pay case did not warrant a trial, though the players' case for unfair treatment in travel, housing and medical support will go to trial in June.

Rapinoe, a two-time World Cup winner, tweeted: "We will never stop fighting for EQUALITY."

Team spokesperson Molly Levinson said the team were "shocked" and that they would appeal against the decision.

"We are shocked and disappointed with today's decision, but we will not give up our hard work for equal pay," she said on Twitter. "We will appeal and press on."

BOY, 11, VICTIM OF SHOOTING

AN 11-year-old boy has suffered possibly life-changing injuries after being shot in east London, police said.

Officers were called to an address in Kerry Drive, Upminster, on Friday evening and found two people with injuries - the boy and a man believed to be in his 40s.

Metropolitan Police say both were taken to hospital, with the boy's condition listed as not life-threatening but possibly life-changing.

The condition of the man has been assessed as not life-threatening.