

My experiences of befriending....

I have been a volunteer with Restore for 18 months and I have found the experience to be rewarding and enjoyable but also a challenge. Befriending an asylum seeker has started to open my eyes to the plight of so many who seek refuge in this country. Having myself lived in both France and Italy for over a year I have known to a small extent the everyday experience of an asylum seeker here in Birmingham: confusion, loneliness, misunderstanding and even racism. Although I had studied French and Italian at university and sometimes found difficulties in communication, it seems that many asylum seekers have very little English when they arrive and struggle with the language for some time. One evening at church I was asked to speak to some French-speaking African asylum seekers. I found them to be so warm-hearted and encouraging to me that I decided to find out if I could help on a more regular basis with asylum seekers. I was so grateful to the many people who had looked after me when I was abroad that I thought helping refugees/asylum seekers was a small token of my appreciation to all those who had befriended me.

I try to meet up with my befriender at least every 2 weeks. Often we'll go for a coffee and just chat or we'll go for a walk in the countryside, away from the hustle and bustle of the city centre. As an artist in his own country, he has really enjoyed going to exhibitions. He views paintings with great deliberation and care, a passion that I do not share. I have helped him to enrol on English and Art courses, some of which have been a success, but he has not always continued to attend these. I have also encouraged him to meet other asylum seekers through Restore, but again he has not always taken full advantage of these opportunities. During the short time that I have been a befriender, I have also experienced the delights of translating from English to French a range of dental and medical jargon, legal terminology and occasionally Home Office incoherence. Although it can be frustrating, I have seen the progress that he has made through his improved English, becoming more open and as a Catholic, he is very happy to talk about his faith. For me I have gained so much as well. I have enjoyed his companionship, met so many interesting people that have been involved through Restore and found out so much about his country and my seen my own through his eyes and perceptions.

Volunteering with Restore is certainly not for everyone; however for those who have an interest in internationals and would like to make a difference, however small it may appear to be, it can be very fulfilling. It is always a risk to move out of one's comfort zone, but I believe that it is certainly a risk worth taking and in a very small part is a response to Christ's call on our lives. 'I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me..... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'.

Ian Edgington