

My experiences of befriending....

I have known Patrice for less than twelve months, but it feels longer. After Jeremy from Restore introduced us, we became friends straightaway. He is well educated, affable and was a man of substance in his native country. Arriving in the UK in 2004, he was forced to leave his wife and children in his homeland. He has not seen them since. I have never asked Patrice about the route he took to get here and it would be impolite. He would not wish to give away secrets that could hurt others.

Apart from talking to Patrice and some preliminary training from Restore, I knew nothing about asylum seekers. What was surprising, was to learn that they get no money and of course, they cannot work. Patrice gets very bored with nothing to do most days. He applied for asylum, failed to get it and is now subject to an appeals procedure which never moves. You almost feel that there is a battle going on. We as society will make people so poor and bored, and therefore miserable, in the hope that they will leave.

Patrice came from a violent place. His brother had already been killed. Apart from the obvious dangers of returning, Patrice has been very worried about his family. Once he cried as he told me that the landlord where his family was been living, had made sexual advances to his wife and there was nothing he could do. Things have now improved. The family have moved out and an uncle is now paying for his children to be educated. They had not been attending school because of a lack of funds.

I see Patrice once a fortnight. He usually comes round for Sunday lunch. He is equally friendly towards my wife and other family members that he has met. We have a good laugh.

The whole point of befriending is to help someone in less fortunate circumstances than yourself, but without being patronising. If we could go back into our family histories, we would all find instances where our ancestors were strangers in a foreign place. They welcomed the friendship given out by the locals. It has been a privilege that I have been able to make a small contribution and it is humbling to realise how little others possess.

Steve Jones