



Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group

Brenda's story

After 12 years Brenda escaped. She had been trafficked from Africa and kept as a domestic slave – denied freedom, money, outside contact and status. Brenda could neither read nor write and when she escaped, the outside world was a bewildering and forbidding place. Initially she was helped by some local people and then by the Medaille Trust who brought her to safety in Southampton. They

referred her to SWVG and we allocated her a trained visitor for befriending and support. The visitor helped Brenda to understand the city and adjust to the demands of her new life. She accompanied Brenda to medical appointments, helped with reading and writing and above all was a friend who listened and cared.

After some months Brenda was granted Leave to Remain and is permitted to live and work in the UK. However her state NASS support ceased

and she entered a difficult transition phase. Applying for mainstream benefits and searching for jobs was a long, complicated task. At the Jobcentre there was little or no consideration for language problems and, without the help and advocacy of her visitor, Brenda would have floundered. While waiting for her benefits she could easily have become destitute - but fortunately, through our ASSIST scheme, SWVG was able temporarily to rent a small room for her and provide some money for food.



At last, a year after being taken on by SWVG, Brenda took her first big step forward to fulfil her aim of becoming financially independent. She started a part-time job as a school cleaner. Realising she had become a valued working woman, Brenda began to blossom. Her employers were pleased

with her work and offered her more. This September she was finally able to sign off from the Jobcentre. Increasingly confident, Brenda participated in an SWVG drama project and this has led to performing at the House of Commons, a radio interview and a feature in the local press. Brenda's progress has been described by her visitor as 'unimaginable'. Her life has been transformed by her own determination, by her ever-increasing band of friends and, crucially, by the support from SWVG.

This year 55 clients like Brenda have had regular volunteer visitors. This vital core work involves visitor training, monitoring and support, backed by fair financial help for clients and ready access to advice. Our work depends on regular fund raising and we greatly appreciate the generosity of all those who donate and make it all possible.

Basic needs

Friendship and support

Every client we take on is paired with a visitor, a volunteer who offers friendship and emotional and practical support. This may include helping them to find a GP or solicitor. Many asylum seekers have received scanty legal help and many initial decisions are poor and eventually get reversed. Our visitors help their clients to access good solicitors and get impartial information about possible options.

Destitution

When an asylum seeker submits a claim for asylum they are granted NASS support, a room (sometimes shared)

and subsistence of less than £40 a week for food and other necessities. If the claim is unsuccessful all support stops and he/she becomes totally destitute with no means of providing for the basic necessities of life. Asylum seekers are forbidden to work.

How we help

Many of our clients are in this position when they are first referred to us, while they gather evidence for a fresh claim. Our ASSIST scheme was set up to meet this pressing need. We can pay up to £75 a week for a small room and £30 a week for subsistence. The scheme is carefully managed to ensure that only those with no other means of support are given ASSIST. It

is provided for a limited period to enable clients to get reliable legal advice, to gather necessary evidence and to submit a Fresh Claim (quite often successful).



Support at the end of the road

For some of our clients NASS support is withdrawn when all avenues for Leave to Remain become exhausted. In such cases, as well as emotional support, we can provide a limited period of ASSIST support while they can consider and discuss possible voluntary return.

Working with others to provide basic needs

We work closely with other agencies, particularly at the Avenue Multicultural Centre. Here clients can receive snacks, bags of food and second-hand clothes.



Moving on

Progressing asylum claims

We do not offer legal advice but we do seek to help our clients in understanding the legal processes with which they are involved. This year we have continued to benefit from up to date legal advice and information provided by Jo Renshaw. Jo is an experienced immigration lawyer, head of immigration and a partner at Turpin and Miller LLP. She has undertaken assessments and provided advice on some of our most complex cases. Jo has also led two seminars for our volunteers, providing us with information about the current situation, as

access to legal help becomes ever more restricted in scope and even harder to obtain.

Accessing education and training

This year four of our clients have demonstrated huge commitment and energy and accessed higher education to prepare them for work when they obtain leave to remain. Three are on University degree courses, and another is doing a two year plumbing course. We have helped all of these young people to gain some charitable funding. However, courses have become very expensive, and gaining funds from charities is difficult. For some clients continuing their course is precarious due to lack of funding.

Participating in voluntary work

Until they gain leave to remain asylum seekers are not allowed to work. However most have ambitions to work when they get ILR. Carrying out voluntary work allows them to build up experience and restore their self-esteem and confidence. A number of our clients currently work for local charities, whilst others help in the kitchen at the Avenue Multicultural Centre at Avenue St Andrews Church.

Accessing benefits/support when granted Leave to Remain

This is hugely difficult for everyone. There is frequently a very long time lag before benefits are paid and we have found ourselves forced to support people while they

remain destitute, waiting for payments. Some clients have been required to attend the Jobcentre during their work hours, despite the office knowing precisely what hours they are required to be at work. In such cases we have been in contact with the Jobcentre to challenge unjustified demands. We continue to work closely with CLEAR staff, who have very considerable experience of entitlement and obtaining JSA and Housing Benefit, to resolve these situations.

Starting a new life

We are delighted that many ex clients with leave to remain become independent. Some work in caring, cleaning or the contact lens factory. One is a Southampton taxi driver and one works with disturbed children. Several ex clients are now doing degree courses.



Better lives

Beyond the basics

We make sure that our clients are provided with the basics such as a roof over their head and food. But they are often lonely, depressed or frustrated by what seems the endless waiting to hear the result of their asylum claim. They are not allowed to work and have no money for personal spending on hobbies or activities. Boredom can be debilitating and add to the cycle of depression.



Getting active

We have organised group activities such as a 'Sport and Fun' day on Southampton Common, where participants enjoyed taking part in traditional English activities such as sack races, egg and spoon races, skipping and football and afterwards had a big picnic. On Friday mornings at the Multicultural Centre we provide badminton equipment for those who seek a little physical activity in a game that is easy to learn.

Getting together

At the end of the summer holiday we organised a barbecue at the Royal Victoria Country Park. Over twenty adults and children accompanied by some visitors travelled by train or bus from

Southampton to Netley. One of the women had organised samosas and halal chicken, which she had marinated in delicious spices. The men enjoyed being in charge of the cooking on the day. In the extensive grounds there was plenty of time and space for ball games, skipping or just chatting with friends. We also explored the playgrounds and collected shells on the beach.

Creating a play

Perhaps the highlight of activities this year has been a drama performance developed by a group of clients under the guidance of Wendy Arrowsmith. The women created an unscripted play based on their individual experiences as asylum seekers, something they later described as 'therapeutic'.

The play was performed on several occasions in Southampton and finally in the House of Commons – a most memorable occasion for all those involved.

Individual activities

Importantly, we also support clients individually, where a particular activity contributes to improve the quality of life. We have helped clients to attend a gym, whilst others have been able to purchase materials for art and craft or other creative projects. Such activities can have a very positive effect on a client's physical and mental wellbeing. Children, too, benefit from individual support and we have helped some to participate in extra-curricular activities, such as after school clubs.



Reaching out

Speaking out

This year several members have given talks to a variety of audiences including schools and church groups. These talks help to raise awareness of the plight of asylum seekers in the UK. They also arouse interest in our work and sometimes lead to recruitment of new volunteers.

Encouraging our clients to reach out

A group of our clients, together with a drama-trained SWVG member, devised a drama called 'Behind the Smile'. This reveals the traumas and challenges of life as an asylum seeker or

refugee in the UK. The piece was first seen at the Avenue Multicultural Centre in Refugee Week. It was then performed at the Houses of Parliament before an audience of more than 90 as part of a City of Sanctuary event at Westminster. MPs from existing and would-be cities of sanctuary were invited to attend the event.

Working with the wider community

SWVG actively supports the City of Sanctuary group in Southampton and three of our members are on its steering group. The City of Sanctuary movement aims to improve the lives of asylum seekers in the city. For example, by working with the local media they hope to publicise positive

stories about sanctuary seekers and so raise local consciousness of their contribution to the city. Campaigning nationally for a more enlightened asylum policy is another aspect of their work.

Collaborating with local organisations

We do not work in isolation; members work closely with CLEAR, the British Red Cross, local solicitors and local MPs. We also maintain important links with many other local organisations including Southampton City College, Homeless Health, the Community Mental Health Team and Southampton City Council Communities & Social Care. Volunteers provide an SWVG advice desk every Friday at the



Avenue Multicultural Centre (AMC) in the buildings of Avenue St Andrew's United Reformed Church. AMC provides activities such as English classes, IT, art work, sewing and knitting, music, first aid and health and hygiene courses. A light lunch is available at no charge for asylum seekers.



Participating in the national debate

We have developed strong links with national organisations working in the asylum field, including Refugee Action, Refugee Council, Detention Action and Detention Forum.

Making it happen

Funding our work

So much work goes on in the background to allow SWVG to function. Each year we need to raise about £80,000 – £90,000 to finance our ASSIST scheme and cover running costs. Many people are involved in raising this sum.

There are three strands to our fundraising – **grants, donations and events**.

We are very grateful to the grant giving trusts that support us so generously.

A number of organisations, including several churches and some individuals also support us

with generous donations. Some make regular monthly or annual donations.

How you can help

- ✓ Join us!
- ✓ Attend an event
- ✓ Run an event of your own
- ✓ If you order goods online, join www.easyfundraising.org.uk with SWVG as your chosen charity. Companies you buy goods from may make small contributions to your charity for each purchase.
- ✓ Make a one-off or regular donation either on-line at www.justgiving.com/swvg or by emailing our treasurer: treasurer@swvg-refugees.org.uk



We have run a number of fund-raising events throughout the year, including:

- Vanessa Redgrave's two visits to Winchester. The first was for a staged conversation with Jenny Cuffe and the second to perform with actor and singer Jennifer Wiltsie and guitarist Mike Outram. Each time she met several of our clients.
- Actor John Griffiths combined reminiscences of a Swansea childhood with readings from the prose and poems of Dylan Thomas, interspersed with songs, at Winchester College.

- Several choirs have given the proceeds of a concert to SWVG. In March 2014 Southern Voices put together a special programme entitled 'A Royal Progress: four centuries of music for monarchs'.



- Our patron John Pilkington gave an inspired talk with photos about his 5-month journey through the Balkans.

- Our annual fundraising members' dinner was held at the Bangkok Brasserie in Winchester.
- Our seventh sponsored walk of 25 miles from Salisbury to Winchester took place in September.

- Members and clients stood 'tin rattling' outside a Sainsbury's store in Southampton twice during the year.
- A group made and sold cakes in the University of Southampton.
- Members and supporters have organised their own fundraising, including sponsored events such as a half marathon run and a family mountain climb, an annual book quiz, collections in lieu of Christmas presents, a quiz night, choir concerts and a sale of ceramic bottles.

Supporting our visitors

As well as needing to raise money, SWVG provides its visitors with good training and support. An initial training

programme for new visitors is held annually. Training on specific issues is delivered through our general meetings and through ad hoc sessions. Jo Renshaw, our legal advisor, provides occasional training sessions to update members on the ever changing legal environment. Individual members are encouraged to attend national and local conferences.

Each visitor has a backup, an experienced visitor who will work alongside the visitor providing help and advice; they will also know the client. Every visitor attends a monthly support group consisting of up to half a dozen other visitors, where they can discuss issues that have arisen through their work with their clients.

In numbers

We have regularly visited **55** clients
(with **29** children) for all or part of
the year and about **17** more have
stayed in occasional contact

We have provided ASSIST support for
34 of our clients (with **14** children)
for all or part of the year

We have taken on **24** new clients
(**15** male and **9** female)

17 clients have been on state-funded
NASS support in Southampton for all or
part of the year

7 clients have moved to state-funded
NASS support away from Southampton

7 clients have been granted leave to remain

1 client took voluntary return

1 client was reunited with her child

Our clients come from **15** different countries

Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Iran and Pakistan are the countries of origin for the **largest number** of clients

46 trained visitors have befriended and supported clients



Thank you...

Thank you to our **patrons** Miriam Margolyes OBE, John Pilkington and Shirley Firth who provide us with unstinting support. We were deeply saddened by the recent death of our patron the Rt Revd Michael Scott-Joynt who was a true friend to SWVG, both when Bishop of Winchester and after his retirement. He was tireless in his support both of individual asylum seekers and in the group's work; he raised asylum issues in the House of Lords on several occasions.

Thank you to the **trusts** who have made us grants this year; without their support we would not be able to provide support for destitute asylum seekers.

The Bromley Trust
The Henry Smith Charity
The French Huguenot Church
of London Trust
The Tolkien Trust
St Faiths Mission Room Charity
Souter Charitable Trust
The Observer Charitable Trust
Knight Charitable Trust
Sheba Charitable Trust
St Clare and St Francis Trust
IBM UK Trust
Lush Charity Pot
The A B Charitable Trust
The Lankelly Chase Foundation
The Hilden Charitable Fund
The 29th May 1961 Charitable
Trust
The Beatrice Laing Trust
Austin & Hope Pilkington Trust
J Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Trust
The Allen Lane Foundation

Thanks too to the following
organisations who generously
donated to SWVG:
Lymington Quakers
The Listeners
Wulfris Trust
Al-Mizhan Charitable Trust
Bangkok Brasserie
Winchester Quakers
Winchester College
St Lawrence Church
Helena Kennedy Foundation
Greening Fulflood
Prisoners of Conscience
St Mary's Church, Southampton
St Mary's PCC, Kings Worthy
Southampton Quakers
Winchester URC coffee bar
Twyford Singers
Southern Voices
Concord Choir
Grail Community
St Matthews Church
P&G Wells Bookshop

Thank you too to all those individuals who have given donations and attended our events, taken part in sponsored events or sponsored others on our behalf.

A particular thank you to Vanessa Redgrave, Jennifer Wiltsie, Mike Outram, John Pilkington and John Griffiths who gave their time, without any charge, to SWVG and provided such memorable performances that attracted large audiences and raised considerable funds.

We give a huge thank you to Winchester College for the free use of halls for several of our events, as well as for collections that have been made after student concerts.

Their support and welcome is highly valued. Thanks too to St Swithun's school who generously hosted Vanessa Redgrave's first event for SWVG at no charge. Thanks to the Theatre Royal, Winchester who helped market and sell tickets for the same event. Miff Kayum, proprietor of three prestigious Winchester restaurants is a loyal friend. He hosts our annual Members' dinner and makes a substantial donation as well as providing refreshments for our performers. We thank Wells Bookshop for their support.

We are extremely grateful for the professional advice that is given to SWVG by Jo Renshaw of Turpin and Miller LLP and by Stefan Lipa. Thanks too to Peter Casson

who examined our accounts and to David Hyde who designed this review.

Of course, SWVG owes a huge thank you to all its members who are hugely generous with their time and bring to the group wide-ranging expertise and enormous commitment.

SWVG would not exist without their clients; thank you to them for their courage, good-humour and tenacity in the light of all the difficulties that they face.



Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group

Patrons

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