



Achieving Asylum.....

That Golden Moment?

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Walking the same path but wearing different shoes....

Aster received the news that she had achieved asylum on the 21st May 2019, communicated to her via telephone by her solicitor. Aster had spent the last 3 years in the UK attempting to claim asylum having escaped torture and detention in Ethiopia and undertaking a very long and arduous journey to get to the UK. Her journey started in Jimma and then went via Addis Ababa to Metema (NW Ethiopia) to Sudan and eventually Libya where she was enslaved for 3 months. She became pregnant by a fellow traveller whilst in Libya and then continued her journey to Italy, France and finally the UK.

She claimed asylum on entry and was dispersed initially to Cardiff, and then Southampton where I (a volunteer from SWVG (Southampton and Winchesters Visitors Group) which befriends asylum seekers and refugees was asked to befriend her. She was four months pregnant, with no English language skills and heavily traumatised.

Aster, unlike most of our asylum seekers, did not have a professional background, had no family or friends in the UK, had never been to school and was illiterate in her own language Oromo. She grew up on a coffee farm and spent her early life living with her family harvesting coffee.

Initially, she was under the legal care of a very overworked London solicitor who was dealing with many people seeking asylum and not able to spend much time on individual cases. Consequently, a referral to the charity Freedom From Torture was not made and Aster did not obtain the only legitimate evidence of torture that the Home Office accept. Her claim was rejected through lack of robust evidence.

Time passed which was punctuated by the birth of her son Abel and learning to speak English. During this time Aster lived in accommodation paid for by the Home Office and attended a multicultural centre on Friday mornings. I supported and helped her navigate the difficult path of being an asylum seeker in Southampton, while she introduced me to wonderful Ethiopian food and other cultural delights. A great partnership between us was established.

One of the actions I undertook on her behalf was to engage a local immigration solicitor and under her care Aster was referred to Freedom From Torture. This was exceptionally beneficial as not only did it provide the evidence of torture that Aster needed but also provided 6 hours of much valued post torture counselling.

A very cold day in November 2016 saw Aster, her 2 year old son and me travelling for 8 hours by train to the Home Office unit in Liverpool for a 5 minute meeting where Aster submitted this new evidence which constituted a fresh claim. Travelling to Liverpool to submit a fresh claim has been the rule for a few years now. It is unfair, unnecessary, expensive and cruel for those living a distance away. Asylum seekers are destitute and without charitable support would not be able to make the journey. So they would end up on the streets and be outside the legal system.

We then had to wait an entire year for the result - that she had failed yet again!

This time, the reasoning was different. The Home Office accepted the weight of the torture evidence but claimed that as she was not politically active in the UK she was unlikely to be seen as a threat in Ethiopia and her life would not be in danger if she returned.

She appealed against this decision in December 2018 through the courts with the wonderful result in May 2019 that her appeal was upheld.

Her dream had come true, her nightmares were over, Aster and Abel could stay in the UK for 5 years. But in reality, her nightmares were only going to take a different turn.

The first step was another journey to Lunar House in Croydon where she had to get a biometric card for both her and her son. Since Aster could not read or write when she arrived in the UK, her name had gone through many spelling versions. We were informed that the name on her card would be spelt the same way as was originally registered by the Home Office, and there was nothing we could do to alter this. This was going to prove yet another hurdle in the weeks to come.

The biometric cards arrived on the 20th August 2019. Aster now had 28 days to pack up her life, leave her home and enter society as a regular English person. Except she still could not read English, had no money, no bank account and now no home.

Fortunately, she still had the support of SWVG and me. The 28 days went by in a whirlwind. Aster's name with the various spellings meant she had no proof of her identity which was needed before she could open a bank account or apply for Universal Credit.

Whilst attempting to solve this problem we also faced the huge hurdle of Aster finding a home. She registered with Southampton Council as homeless and following a "relief assessment" and provision of a Personalised Plan, it was accepted that she was homeless and the Council had a duty towards her and her child to help. She was asked to look for accommodation for herself, but without a guarantor to support her rent payment, this was unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, we were successful with the help of her solicitor in providing proof of identity, so a bank account was opened and the claim process was started for Universal Credit. Interviews with the Job centre to validate her Universal Credit claim proved very helpful and she managed to get an advance on her monthly allowance within just a couple of days.

The day arrived in September when she had to leave her home and old life behind and quite literally make a new beginning. The day dawned bright and sunny but without an address to go to. Three SWVG volunteers helped her pack up her life whilst I kept making anxious calls to the Homeless Department at the Council. At 4pm, we were advised that she was to spend the night at a B&B but leave at noon the following day. Her cases, furniture, clothes, toys were being moved to a friend's house.

The next day dawned but still no permanent address. The morning echoed the previous day with many calls to the Council. At 11.45, she was advised by the Council that she would remain in the B&B until Monday.

Monday arrived and the Council advised Aster that she would be moving into emergency accommodation for a period of 3 - 4 weeks. This turned out to be another B&B, but one that had more space and communal cooking facilities. During this time Aster made the long journey across the city twice a day so her 3¹/₂ year old son could remain at his Pre -School.

Not having been to school herself, Aster recognised the importance of education and the stability that this would give to Abel's life.

Then on a cold day in October, Aster was advised that a temporary home had been allocated to her and her son. This, she was told would be her home until April - May 2020. She was given the key to her own home.

Her new still temporary home is an old, poorly decorated, poorly insulated 2 bedroomed maisonette on the 3rd floor of a block of flats that is assigned for demolition. But it is a home of her own. Her son settled into a new Pre-School and she has registered at the local GP.

The downside is that it is a long way from her friends and a cheap supermarket. It is however close to a Sure Start centre where she meets with a volunteer who helps her access her Universal Credit account, read her post and any number of other little things that Aster requires to live her life like a regular English person.

The first few weeks were again frenetic. She had to set up Direct Debits, start a savings plan for her application for a further "leave to remain status" in 5 years, and set about making the maisonette into a home. She is learning to read, but her level of attainment does not equip her to read council tax letters or water bills.

One of the first tasks was to learn about budgeting. Aster did not have money in Ethiopia and as with all asylum seekers in the UK was only awarded just over £5 a day. Suddenly she had about £700 a month including child benefit. Although I was greatly relieved when she said to me "money in left hand and out right hand" I still set about teaching her simple budgeting skills.

Another challenge for her was living alongside English people. The Home Office housing was all shared with others seeking asylum so this was the first time she had other English people around her. Although the Mums at the school all seem nice, her neighbours do not speak to her and she is far from her friends, and is lonely. There is also no garden allocated to her maisonette and she misses the smells and colours of home.

She is often sad but the future looks positive and will get better. She lives life through her son and her dearest wish is that he will be safe, happy and British.

All names changed.