

The Manna Society Newsletter

Spring 2022

Working with homeless people & those in need



Tell Them by Edwina Gateley

Breaking through the powers of darkness
bursting from the stifling tomb
he slipped into the graveyard garden
to smell the blossomed air.

Tell them, Mary, Jesus said,
that I have journeyed far
into the darkest deeps I've been
in nights without a star.

Tell them Mary, Jesus said,
that fear will flee my light
that though the ground will tremble
and despair will stalk the earth
I hold them firmly by the hand
through terror to new birth.

Tell them, Mary, Jesus said,
the globe and all that's made
is clasped to God's great bosom
they must not be afraid
for though they fall and die, he said,
and the black earth wrap them tight
they will know the warmth
of God's healing hands
in the early morning light.

Tell them, Mary, Jesus said,
smelling the blossomed air,
tell my people to rise with me
to heal the Earth's despair.

**Happy
Easter**

Photo by Jud from Pexels



A personal reflection of a Manna Society worker

By

**Bandi Mbubi
Manna Centre Director**



The Manna Society is celebrating its 40th Anniversary this year. To fit the occasion, I wanted to write something profound, but I experienced a writer's block. Speaking to Billy Innes about it, he advised me to tell it simply as it is: "Just share your personal experience of working here. How has it been for you working here? The various changes you've seen whilst working here... That's all people want to know!" Billy has served homeless people with the Manna Society for the past 27 years as a Senior Project Worker. A record only beaten by Paddy Boyle, our former Director, and now our Administrator, with his over 35 years of service. And of course, Nannette Ffrench herself as our Founder from the very beginning. People tend to stay for long once they join our team of volunteers, paid employees and trustees.

I haven't followed Billy's advice completely. Instead, I've focused on how I came to work with the Manna, how I first felt about it, my state of mind at the time, and a few early lessons from my initial encounters with Nannette.

My first encounter with the Manna Society goes back to January 2001 when I responded to a job advert for a Campaigns Officer post. It's at the job interview that I first met Nannette. I still remember it as if it was yesterday. During the interview, she hardly spoke, but I could tell she listened carefully to every word I said, smiling, nodding at times, or looking at me pensively. Her charming and encouraging demeanor kept me going and eased my nerves.

Beside Nannette on the panel, Joan Brown, a former trustee, and Gerry McCann, the Administrator at the time, questioned me thoroughly. But when in the end Nannette finally spoke, it was as if she'd already made up her mind that the job was going to be offered to me. Her choice of words made me think so anyway because she used words like, "when you start working with the Manna...", not "if". A few hours after the interview, Gerry phoned to inform me that they'd decided to offer me the job; I eagerly accepted it. Eventually, I'd also take on the responsibility of working with service-users as a welfare and housing advice worker, then becoming Director 10 years ago.

At the time of my job interview, I was still finding my place in society, not knowing what life had in store for me. I'd been in the UK for almost 10 years after fleeing the Democratic Republic of Congo because of political turmoil there. Speaking English was still relatively new to me, so I felt uneasy about how I came across when I spoke. To this very day, on a bad day, my teenaged sons still laugh at my mispronunciation and confusion of words like bitch and beach, live and leave. Growing up in the DRC, I never thought I'd one day become a refugee in a foreign land with no one to call family. During my childhood and youth, we'd known enough stability and peace to dream of a better tomorrow. Alas!

For many of us who have gone through the kind of political turmoil and war Ukraine is going through now, we know first-hand the devastation war brings to people's lives. The disruption to everyday living; the loss of livelihoods; the poverty; the feeling of having to survive all the time. And even when you manage to find refuge in a foreign country, like thousands of Ukrainians are currently doing, life may never be the same again. Images of people and families caught up in the war caused by the recent Russian Invasion have brought to the general consciousness across the Western World the horrors of war and the suffering that goes along with it in a way we haven't seen in recent times. For those who have managed to escape the war, having to rebuild their lives abroad may prove daunting, fraught with all sorts of difficulties; initial acceptance may easily turn to xenophobia, language and cultural barriers may hinder social integration, which may keep them out of meaningful employment for a long time.

As a Campaigns Officer, I gave talks about the work of the Manna, and homelessness in general, mostly to churches, church groups, and schools who formed the bulk of our support. I doubted my ability to be up to the task, but I was eager to learn. "I support you to the hilt!", Nannette would often reassure me. I loved listening to her talk about her experience of setting up the Manna Centre, the vision she had for the place, and why we needed to treat people with respect, dignity, love and acceptance, regardless of who people were. It redefined for me what Christianity is all about in more practical ways. Christianity in practice, among human beings, boils down to being each other's keeper. It's our response to God's call, as Nannette quoting Psalm 95 would put it, "O that today you would listen to my voice, harden not your heart".

A great storyteller, she'd often encourage me to use stories in my own speaking engagements. "If you've got an idea, put it in a story". It helped that I got to know Nannette better during this period of my life as it helped me develop my own voice and confidence. I didn't always heed her advice, but with time and experience, I've come to value it more.

Over the years, I've witnessed how the Manna has in various ways affected not only the lives of service-users who come to us for assistance, but also the lives of workers themselves, employees and volunteers alike, as well as trustees. This article has been my attempt to share a glimpse of how the Manna has affected me personally. If you'd like to share in written form your story of how the Manna has affected you, please let us know!

We intend to organise at least one event where we'd invite everyone to mark our 40th Anniversary. We'll circulate relevant information once our plans are finalised.





“Homeless, not hopeless”
By
Margaret Shapland
Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



This quote above comes from a 2016 article. We have long known that this is a fact and in this article we are bringing to your attention some of the recent issues that have arisen as the pandemic starts to lift and focus shifts to problems that have effectively been amplified due to the pandemic.

“I am afraid – he is making death threats to me and threats to my family back home”

This quote comes from one of our clients fleeing domestic violence and made homeless because of it. More of her story later on. As International Women’s Day moves closer – the 8th of March this year, let’s reflect at the where we stand with respect to violence against women.

The most recent statistics tell us that the number of households made homeless through domestic violence has increased by one-third since the start of the pandemic. Cases of persons made homeless through domestic violence account for 1 in 5 of cases presenting as homeless to local authorities. A study (Breaking down the Barriers) carried out by the Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage, chaired by Baroness Armstrong, found that domestic violence was one of the primary causes of women’s homelessness.

Let’s go back to our client – let’s call her Heloisa. She is Brazilian by birth. Her story was that she married a Spanish citizen in 2019 who brought her to the UK. Once here, she was virtually confined to a rented flat ostensibly as her husband’s employee, working as a receptionist for her husband’s business. She received no real salary, just minimal pocket money. For a while, Heliosa was content to live under such constraints and to put up with the taunts and emotional violence perpetrated by her husband – the fact that she had very little English further isolated her.

As a Brazilian citizen, her status relied upon the fact that she was married to an EU citizen. When she flew back home early in 2021 for some surgery due to an endemic health issue. Whilst out of the country, her husband contacted her and told her, he was separating from her as he had entered into a new relationship. She flew back whilst she was still recuperating and as soon as her doctor would release her. Following a period of quarantine, she went back to the flat she had shared with her husband to find that she could not gain access, the flat has been emptied, he had emptied her bank account and effectively left her destitute. Baroness Armstrong’s report stated the difficulties that BAMER (Black, Asian, Minority and Refugee) women face – and echoed much of what we had heard from Heloisa.

To quote, *“Women described to peer researchers, for example, how their abusers used their position against them: criticising them for not speaking English, not letting them know their rights and telling them they would not be understood”* – Breaking down the Barriers.

For a while, she was supported by some friends but was unable to work as she had no national insurance number, no funds and was homeless. Whilst Heloisa was coping with this, her husband was threatening violence to her family back in Brazil – as it turned out he had criminal contacts there who would have no problems in visiting violence on her elderly mother and father.

Heloisa found out about our service through the Brazilian embassy. She came to see us in August last year and we were able to place her in a shelter immediately. Following that to maintain her status, she needed to look

for work and to access our benefit system – we helped her with some initial subsistence funds so she could travel to find work and attend necessary appointments for her health issues, she needed to be registered with a GP, which we managed to find for her. For a period, she was supported through Universal Credit.

Further she needed help from a specialist domestic violence service who could advise her of her rights and provide a further support network to protect her. She was very industrious in finding work and has settled into a fixed term contract with an employer. We have now linked her to a Portuguese speaking women's right service with specialist legal assistance so she can make informed decisions about resolving her status in the UK and how she deals in a legal sense with her husband. Finding a BAMER service was critical to ensuring that Heloisa fully understood and could communicate openly with a specialist worker. Again, I quote from the report *"When women were able to find a specialist BAMER service they described it as transformative, allowing them to speak in their own language and be supported by women who understood what they had been through. BAMER women described the difference it made talking to professionals that understood domestic and sexual violence and were specialists in BAMER women's experiences"* – Breaking down the Barriers

As a person she has grown in self-esteem, is stabilised, and looking forward to building a secure life for herself in the UK. She is happy and hopeful.

The plight of young homeless people in the pandemic

Centrepont recently published a report entitled "A Year like No Other" summarising the experience of young people and homelessness. Between April and June 2020, homelessness among those aged 26 and under increased by 80%. In the capital, they accounted for 1 in 10 of all those rough sleeping – which was a historical high. There were several factors which contributed to this. As a group, young people were particularly badly hit by the impact on employment during the pandemic – unemployment rose to 14.3% of all economically active individual aged 16-24 as many of the sectors such as the hospitality sector where young people were historically made up a significant number were affected. In London during one period in 2020, 25.2% of young people were unemployed.

5,995 new homes for the cheapest social rent were provided in England in 2020/21 compared with 40,000 a decade ago.

One of the most significant schemes put in place by the Government over this period was the "Kickstart" scheme, which financially rewarded employers for taking young people into employment. To date, however, it has delivered less than half the jobs it was thought it could deliver (250,000) whilst the number of young people on Universal Credit has grown from 450,000 to close to 840,000 as at December 2021.

Centrepont reported that their helpline saw a substantial increase in calls from young people who were job seeking, those who had recently been in the care system – possibly due to the restriction the pandemic placed upon social workers and newly homeless young people – 78% who called had been homeless for between 0-3 months compared to 67% in 2019-2020.

Relationship breakdown has long been a cause of youth homelessness but this was amplified by the pandemic which put even greater pressure on family relationships creating an even greater emotional toll on what were already fractured relationships.

Looking at the case of two of the young people that approached us during the pandemic, both had fallen on hard times due to the pandemic. One had parents who had moved away and was left to fend for himself and rely on the support of friends in a very overcrowded home. Eventually the parents of his friend told him that he

could not stay there anymore. The other had complex relationship problems with his family due to their cultural background. We were lucky to find both of them a placement in a hostel that worked primarily with residents who needed to get back into work. The regime in the hostel is very driven by that objective with residents committed to undertaking job-seeking activities for the equivalent of a working week based on the principle that finding work is a job in itself.

What of the future?

No sooner than the pandemic eases, then another factor takes its place – that factor being the likely impact of cost of living increases. Let's look at the impact on one particular sector. We are all aware of the huge shortage of staff in the care sector. Recent reports in The Independent reported that the Care Workers Charity handed out three times as much as the year before to prevent homelessness among care staff. The Care Workers Charity stated that it can take as little as two weeks off work to fall into debt. It is a sector that the Government has targeted at younger people. If you want to attract young people to consider a role in the care sector, you have to provide a salary that they can realistically live on.

CRISIS has predicted that the number of homeless persons will increase by a third by 2024. Again much has to do about the availability of truly affordable homes – just 5,995 new homes for the cheapest social rent were provided in England in 2020/21 compared with 40,000 a decade ago.

The fight goes on for services such as ourselves to help those who need a home to find one.

Who used our services on Sunday 23rd January 2022?

	Numbers using centre	%
Male	112	97
Female	3	3
Rented Accommodation	45	39
Sleeping Rough	35	30
Friends	14	12
Hostel	9	8
Temp Accommodation	9	8
Other	3	3
Ethnic Origin	Numbers	%
UK	46	40
Eastern European	27	23
Western European	14	12
African	12	10
South American	11	10
Asian	4	3
Jamaican	1	1

Photo by Hejaar from Pexels



Challenges and Opportunities: A round up

By

Eleanor Smith

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



It is nearly Spring, and the day centre is now open to all again, in a re-instatement of what my colleague referred to as our 'open borders' policy – the only restriction we now have on attending the centre is a cap on numbers, to prevent the centre being too crowded. It is a pleasure to see many old faces returning to the centre to get some respite, eat and socialise. We have been able to find out what has been happening with people we have not seen for a long time. I was particularly glad to see our client Ethan* again, a young man who a few years ago was coming to the centre with extremely poor mental health, rough sleeping, often filthy and poorly dressed. After many interventions by a number of different agencies working together, he is now doing much better, is housed, and comes every day looking brighter and happier, clean and well fed. I had not seen him, until recently, since before the pandemic, so it is good to know that his progress has been sustained. It has also been good to see our client Clara, an older Irish woman with a mischievous sense of humour, who has not been able to come to the centre since before the pandemic. Living alone, I know she has really missed being able to see people every day. We had to very carefully weigh up the risks involved before fully re-opening the centre and are encouraging everyone to keep testing and maintaining social distancing. The risk to people from Covid had to be balanced against the risk to rough sleepers from not being able to access food, warmth, company and help.

Speaking of open borders, and of gatekeeping, on Wednesday last week, I attended a talk on the upcoming Nationality and Borders Bill on people seeking sanctuary. Speakers from the organisations Bail for Immigration Detainees, Maternity Action and Migrants Organise spoke about what the bill meant, and the implications it would have for people seeking sanctuary. The speakers highlighted the shocking implications for forced migrants, who would be criminalised for not making their asylum application before they arrive in the UK. As anyone can imagine, making complex legal applications whilst fleeing for your life is not always practicable, or accessible to every person in this situation. The next day, President Putin made the shocking decision to invade the Ukraine, making safe routes to sanctuary even more pressingly urgent for hundreds of thousands more people. I am imagining more problems with the stringent, punitive and unrealistic UK asylum legislation will be highlighted in the coming months, as Ukrainian people struggle to reach safety and keep their families out of harm's way, and their harrowing stories reach us.

I have also been thinking a lot about the cost of living crisis, and what it will mean for our clients. The removal of the £20 uplift hit a lot of people we work with hard, as this extra money had been put towards making up the cost of high rents which were not completely covered by housing benefit. Rising food and energy prices are causing financial strain even for people who have previously enjoyed comfort and stability in their lives, let alone people already struggling, with just enough money from their Universal Credit to pay for the essentials. I was heartened to see chef and anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe launching an alternative consumer price index to raise awareness of the nature of food poverty. This, they say, is to reflect the larger price hikes of basics food ranges, or the disappearance of these ranges altogether, making food much more expensive for people that rely on budget ranges than is reflected in the consumer price index. One solution to the problem of food poverty is large scale communal purchasing, cooking and eating, through community kitchens, meal clubs, food co-ops, and of course, organisations like the Manna Centre, where we know that large scale nutritious meals can be produced relatively cheaply, with the help of our generous supporters. These kinds of enterprises also empower communities and help to reduce social isolation.

Already I can see that people are organising themselves to provide aid to people fleeing war in Ukraine and are demanding that the government provide sanctuary. At a time of what seems like constant crisis, it can be difficult to keep the suffering and needs of so many people in mind. But through modest collective efforts by ordinary people, something powerfully hopeful can be created. The Manna Centre – which is 40 years old this year! – is a living testament to this.

Fancy raising money for us by running 10k through central London this summer?

The ASICS London 10K Run takes place on Sunday 10th July 2022.

Starting at Piccadilly & finishing on Whitehall

Passing St James Palace, Trafalgar Square,

St Paul's Cathedral, Big Ben,

Westminster Abbey & Parliament Square.

If you feel up to the challenge and can raise a minimum of £200 we would be delighted to hear from you.

Please contact Paddy at mail@mannasociety.org.uk

More information about the run itself can be found at
<https://run.limelightsports.club/event/asics-london-10k-2022/asics-london-10k>



Photo from Marcelo Renda from Pexels

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