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Press Release

Urgent call for volunteer hosts to offer ‘spaces of sanctuary’ for destitute refugees at home.

What is it like to open your home to a destitute asylum seeker? Volunteer hosts Miko and Dorothee have been welcoming refugee guests in to their home since January 2020, describing the experience as ‘amazing’ and ‘such a privilege’. The The Jesuit Refugee Service UK (JRS UK)’s ‘At Home’ hosting scheme matches destitute asylum seekers with volunteer hosts, who offer a spare room for 3-months.

This summer, JRS UK is facing a shortage of volunteer hosts, as many hosting placements come to an end. At the same time, many more refugee friends will be at risk of street homelessness once again, as local authority accommodation introduced during COVID-19 draws to a close.

Miko & Dorothee have hosted several refugee guests in their spare room over the past 18-months, including a woman who they hosted for her final trimester of pregnancy. When she gave birth months later, Miko spoke of the joy of visiting her in hospital, and seeing how her usually apprehensive and quiet demeanor, shifted to familiarity and excitement at seeing her former hosts.

Miko explains: **“It was just such a privilege to have somebody around. You know most people in life you meet you meet for a short amount of time...But if somebody is actually there, then there’s the possibility to have proper conversation and really learn.”**

Hannah Markay, JRS UK’s Accommodation Officer, coordinates the ‘At Home’ scheme and works closely with volunteers like Miko & Dorothee. She said: **“We often hear that our refugee friends are forced to seek respite by sleeping on night buses to escape the streets of London, rely on friends who might host them for a night or two, or risk the exploitation and abuse sometimes associated with an offer of temporary shelter. The security of a home to return to in the midst of this debilitating uncertainty allows JRS’s refugee friends to live with dignity - not constantly in a state of worry about where to sleep or find food and soap. These seemingly basic concerns can be all-consuming and prevent our refugee friends from thinking strategically about important decisions ahead. “**

Reflecting on their experience and the support they have been able to provide to destitute asylum seekers, volunteer host Miko said: **“One of the things that we learned very quickly was that the guests who come in have been through some really, really tough experiences. they’ve developed incredible resilience, and massive self-reliance. These are guys who can really**

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look after themselves and who can come through some tough spots. But even so I think they're in a pretty terrifying situation.”

Seeking asylum is a complex, drawn-out process during in which refugee friends are banned from working and earning a living, lose the right to rent housing, and face multiple barriers to accessing healthcare. They live in a cycle of uncertainty and endless waiting that wastes time, and lives. Their physical and mental wellbeing suffers dramatically as they wait for an answer, living in the constant fear of street homelessness

Suddenly, by being hosted by volunteers like Miko & Dorothee, refugee guests find they are able to progress their lives and engage with their immigration cases. Some even find their new found confidence allows them to participate in meaningful community volunteering work. Often separated from family and friends by thousands of miles, the majority of the refugees JRS UK serves have lost their most basic support networks. By being hosted, many refugee friends regain some sense of community and welcome in the human family.

One refugee friend hosted through the *At Home* scheme said:

“Hosting to me, [it was like] I was escaping. I didn't really expect too much. I just wanted a place where I would escape and then other things will just fall in place later on. What surprised me most was the way I was welcomed. [...]So when you give someone a place, that space is like a sanctuary, it's like a place of peace where they have shelter, you know, at least they're not sleeping rough and then that's the beginning for them to start thinking clearly”

The JRS UK 'At Home' scheme is designed to prepare hosts and guests in advance of the hosting placement, with support continuing throughout the placement. Hosts remain in constant contact with the JRS Accommodation Officer, and are encouraged to share their experience and feedback.

Could you open your home to a refugee friend in need?

If you have a spare room and live in the greater London area find out more and get in touch:

<https://www.jrsuk.net/at-home-hosting-scheme/>

- Ends -

Notes to Editor

1. **The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)** is an international Catholic organisation, at work in over 50 countries around the world with a shared mission to accompany, serve and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. In the UK, our work currently focuses on those who find themselves destitute as a consequence of government policies and those detained for the administration of immigration procedures.
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