



**Issue 53 April 2013**

Welcome to the April edition of the WERS newsletter!

**WERS celebrates triple funding success!**



WERS is delighted to announce 3 new grants from Big Lottery, Northern Rock Foundation and Shears Foundation.

- Big Lottery has awarded WERS a 4 year grant totalling £263,173
- Northern Rock Foundation has made a further grant to WERS: £113,622 over 3 years
- Shears Foundation has given WERS a further £30,000 grant over 3 years

WERS thanks these funders for their most generous support of its vital work with asylum seekers and refugees.

**Thank you to Angels of the North!**

The local charity Angels of the North recently donated boxes of brand new thermal gloves and hats to the clothing store. These were much appreciated by the clients during this very cold Spring!



Carol Willis, one of our Volunteer Co-ordinators, is retiring in May after 11 years at WERS. Here she talks with Lindsay about the WERS volunteer programme and reflects on the many changes that have taken place during her time both at WERS and in the West End of Newcastle.

*L. Carol, when you joined WERS back in 2001, the volunteer programme was in its infancy and very different from today.*

C. It certainly was. That was pre-database and it was small enough to be managed with a card index system! Before I took on the role, WERS did not have a volunteer co-ordinator and each member of staff looked after a small group of volunteers as an additional aspect of their job. The Befriending Scheme as such did not exist but a few volunteers were in fact befriending as part of WERS' overall support for clients. A few volunteers also helped in the clothing store. Our client group was quite different then with many Croatians, Czech Roma and Kosovans as well as asylum seekers from the African continent.

*L. It's changed a fair bit since then!*

C. Yes, it has grown so much. WERS now has some 60 volunteers and clients from 37 different countries. There is a wide range of volunteer roles: befriending, clothing store, Time to Talk, job mentoring, teaching English, admin, gardening and library. Over the years all the policies have been written and implemented and the Befriending Scheme has been accredited by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation for the last 5 years.

*L. Do you think that the needs of clients have changed very much since 2001?*

C. The basic need for friendship and support hasn't changed at all and still people are in that same place of insecurity. I think asylum seekers and refugees probably have an even harder time now.

*L. Has the volunteer co-ordinator role become more challenging?*

C. Yes, it has. The co-ordinator's job has changed a lot. All the 60 volunteers need to be properly supported and there are 8 different volunteer roles to manage. We have developed a really good training programme which is rolled out every 4 months and volunteers tell us how much they appreciate being thoroughly prepared for their work at WERS. The Lone Working training is particularly appreciated and it is surprising sometimes to learn that people working in paid jobs, where you would assume that Lone Working training would have been given as part of the induction, have never done it before.

*L. What have the most rewarding aspects of the job been?*

C. Having the opportunity to meet so many asylum seekers and refugees from all over the world. Admiring their strength through such difficult times and their not giving up when most of us would have gone under. Meeting volunteers who are so generous with their time and who have done so much for the clients. Some deep friendships have been established – befrienders have become almost like an extension to the family. It's a two-way thing, too, with both sides benefitting from the match.

*L. And the least rewarding or the most frustrating?*

C. The worst thing is seeing families and individuals struggling and in distress. Seeing how they are treated by the system. Always feeling that UKBA could do a much better job.

*L. You've worked in the west end for almost 30 years – 11 years at WERS and before that as a classroom assistant and then as a family support worker at Riverside. How do you think the West End has changed over those years?*

C. People generally are more tolerant now. The early days of dispersal were tough for asylum seekers. There were very few black people living in areas like Benwell and Elswick. The work that WERS does – Ali giving talks, the team sending out positive messages about asylum – all that helps a great deal in changing negative attitudes. We've always adopted an approach that isn't in people's faces - not preaching, just telling it how it is – and that's been very effective.

*L. What will you miss most about WERS?*

C. Being part of the team. Not seeing the people I've got to know so well. I would like to take the opportunity to wish everyone at WERS all the very best for the future. It has been a privilege to work here.

*L. We will all miss you very much and will make sure we keep in touch. Have a very happy retirement!*

Lindsay Cross

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