

## **A volunteer's account of her chat with two ASSIST hosts**

As I sat in Steph and Jeremy's cosy living room, they shared with me the story of how they became involved with ASSIST. They already had a background of longstanding social activism and involvement in their community, but what prompted them to volunteer as hosts was a political crisis abroad. Hearing horrible stories on the news made them wonder what practical action they could take. "It's easy to give some money every month, and then forget all about it" said Steph. "We decided we wanted to make a big contribution, even if only to one person."

Steph and Jeremy were vaguely aware of ASSIST as a local organisation that helps destitute asylum seekers so they made contact.

The ASSIST team told them more about the dire situation of people who, usually because of fear of persecution or violence in their own country, come to the UK to seek asylum and who have their application refused by the Home Office. This is what happens to around half of the people who seek asylum in the UK. As a result, they aren't allowed to work, and they have no right to accommodation, benefits, or healthcare. ASSIST's clients have said that providing a warm, safe and stable place to stay is the most important thing ASSIST can do to make a difference.

The ASSIST team made time to discuss openly with Steph and Jeremy what hosting asylum seekers entails. They talked about what is expected of both the hosts and the guests, answered all Steph and Jeremy's queries, and allayed their fears and misgivings.

ASSIST was keen to fit in with Steph and Jeremy's availability and preferences. Both have full-time jobs that frequently take them away from home. They were aware their lifestyle would not realistically allow enough time to have a commitment to cook daily or to be there full time to provide support to their guest. They therefore requested a guest with a high degree of independence.

Most new hosts start their hosting experience by offering weekend accommodation once every month or so. Unusually, Steph and Jeremy asked the team about the possibility of hosting someone for 6 months (the maximum amount of time allowed in ASSIST). They thought it was more realistic in their life circumstances to provide a place where someone could go in and out as they pleased, rather than to have someone for a weekend and feel that they had to be there for them throughout.

Initially, Steph asked for a female guest. "I felt like it might be awkward as a Western woman to have a man from a different culture staying in the house, particularly if I was alone and my partner was away for an extended period of time." Following a few very positive experiences of hosting females, Steph and Jeremy decided to host a male guest. Steph said that it was not awkward at all. The ASSIST accommodation team find that this is a common concern among hosts but their experience is that it turns out to be unfounded.

Steph mentioned that some of their friends said that they didn't think they'd feel comfortable having a stranger in their house or leaving all their possessions about the house while the guest was there. "In our experience those fears are completely misplaced" said Steph. "Asylum seekers have so much to lose in terms of a comfortable safe space that they can live in, that they would never even consider doing anything that would jeopardise that. I never felt any concern in that regard, and never had anything go missing. The opposite was true. Getting them to accept money to buy groceries for all three of us was quite hard. After getting to know them, we felt comfortable enough to leave them in the house when we went on holiday for two weeks (with the added bonus they could feed the cat!). Those fears are natural and perhaps common, but in our experience completely unfounded."

I asked Steph and Jeremy what factors helped ensure their experience of hosting was successful and positive for both them and each of their guests.

They said that the open conversations with experienced hosts about the process of hosting was pivotal for their later success as hosts, as was finding the 'right fit' between guest and hosts. In a two way-process, Steph and Jeremy provided a criminal record check, went through interviews and showed the space they had to host someone. The asylum seeker, on the other hand, was previously hosted by more experienced hosts, risk assessed and offered ongoing support from ASSIST during their stay. "While demand outstrips supply, ASSIST is good at being considered when they place people and making sure they find the right match for both the hosts and the guest" explained Jeremy.

Steph and Jeremy said it was important that they were able to meet in advance the person they might be hosting, and that both the guest and the host had the right to request a change following that meeting. Once a guest had commenced their stay, ASSIST always checked-in shortly afterwards to speak to both guest and hosts separately, and another formal opportunity to withdraw was provided. "I'm confident that if at any point I had felt uncomfortable with the guest, then ASSIST would've found another place for them to live. They want everyone to feel comfortable."

"One of the most important things in our experience as hosts, is that we never felt alone. We always had a 'go to' person within ASSIST who was available at the end of a phone." Jeremy reflected that in the end they had not really needed to use many of the available resources (such as more experienced hosts to chat to, training opportunities and emotional support), but knowing those resources were there if needed was reassuring. They felt the guidance and support was key in making the three experiences they have had as hosts a complete success. Had there been difficulties, Jeremy felt confident that formal guidelines, policies and procedures would have meant that they would have been supported, and everyone's safety and wellbeing would have been ensured. With ASSIST's support in the background, Steph and Jeremy felt able to work out the intricacies of hosting an asylum seeker, and the relationship between guest and hosts developed naturally .

I asked what was it like having someone that you don't know in your house...

"Surprisingly easy." said Steph. "It's like having a lodger, or a friend. In many ways it was easier than having a family friend. You're not expected to cook or clean for this person, they're just fully independent. So long as we had our own bedroom and they had their own space, it never really felt like we were on top of each other. In all cases, there was no need even to ask them to do household chores. Knowing we weren't being reimbursed, they were quite keen to do their bit.

"The best part was that we gradually became quite close friends and part of each other's lives. We watched movies together, we went out together, we shared our interests and we laughed together. With one guest who didn't speak much English, we shared funny videos and used an ASSIST team member to help us have more detailed discussions. On that occasion it was surprising to discover how much we can communicate even without language. In every case, food was something the guest was really keen to share with us, and we were very grateful to receive it. We just naturally ended up getting on with people, and forming those relationships is what mattered for us."

I asked what had been the hardest thing about becoming a host...

"There were probably two main difficulties. First, was when the final decision didn't go in their favour and they were not granted asylum (i.e. leave to remain in the UK). It's really hard to manage that, when they've become close friends, but that's the reality of the system and the hostile environment at the moment. It's depressing to see someone with so much potential and possibility, and such a strong legitimate case, prevented from flourishing. It's an entirely inhuman system for very human miseries. However, when it goes the other way, and a great friend calls me up saying they've got leave to remain, it's just a complete joy. We've had both of those experiences. Second, it was difficult saying goodbye at the end of those six months, especially if they've not been granted leave to remain. There's often still a lot going on in their lives, but ASSIST is good at not shutting the door on those cases, and looking for other avenues. ASSIST insists on the policy of a maximum stay of 6 months and then you have a break, and then you can have someone else, again for a maximum of 6 months. Even when we asked ASSIST to extend this due to circumstances and the bond created, it was good to have enforced respite. We're not saints and it is nice to have our space back. That's not to imply the guests were in any way demanding, but I think it's natural after a while to just want your space back. You know, to have a bath with the door open. They want to stay, we want them to stay...prioritizing our needs over theirs feels horrible, but having the ASSIST framework is really helpful. It was also good that people were then moving on to other suitable accommodation, or, as in all of our cases, they were going to an even better alternative: an ASSIST house."

I asked Steph and Jeremy what had been the main thing that hosting had given them...

"The people that we've met through the process, the relationships we've developed. It's been really eye opening. You hear of these struggles all the time, but to meet someone who is really

at the front end of that struggle, and to put a face to them, makes you realize just how privileged you are. It's good to be able to use some of that privilege to help somebody else out, in a way that is from our perspective a really minor inconvenience, if an inconvenience at all. In return, we've got real lasting friendships out of it."

I asked for any other comments they'd like to share with potential hosts...

"It's far less of a commitment than you think it would be, in terms of demands on you, and you'll get more out of it than you think. It's definitely worth trying. We've enjoyed it in all three cases. It's really rewarding to make that tangible difference in one person's life, and at pretty minimal cost to us. It's been a pleasure."

Finally, I asked them if they would host again. "Yes, definitely!"

**A big thank you to Steph and Jeremy and all our ASSIST hosts. You make a huge difference.**