Helping the homeless

Bianca Payne, a senior dental nurse, volunteered in the Dental Service area at Crisis Christmas for the first time in 2008 and put a smile on the faces of many. Here, she explains why it’s worth helping out this year.

When I first heard about the Dental Service at Crisis Christmas, I really wanted to give it a go, as it sounded so rewarding. I signed up in 2008 and was thrilled to be offered three days of volunteer work soon after.

Admittedly, I was a little daunted by the idea of coming face to face with these unfortunate people whom we see every day across London, and who seem largely ignored by our society. I had never worked with or been in contact with homeless people before. I was one of the many people who offers a pound here and there and the most I’d ever done for a rough sleeper was give them a cup of hot chocolate on a freezing night.

What to expect

I went to the induction meeting where a Crisis team explained how the week is run, what to expect and they also went into what it means to be homeless and the reasons why people are homeless.

When I turned up on that first chilly morning to volunteer, I was instantly affected by the warmth of the place – it was buzzing. There were people everywhere – holding steaming cups of tea and coffee, engrossed in wholesome conversations and having a good laugh. I couldn’t tell the difference between the guests and the volunteers. Although the building had been set up only a couple of days before, it seemed that this was an annual meeting place for good friends.

Our first patient was a young man from Lithuania who was extremely polite and grateful. I wished all my patients to be like him. Another patient was a young professional man who had come to London on a working holiday and lost his job and couldn’t find another. He soon became homeless. Another still, was a gipsy who had great travel stories to tell and made everybody laugh. He had even been to a suburb I used to live in. We went into what it means to be homeless and the reasons why people are homeless.

Surgeries on wheels

The dentistry work was carried out in fully-equipped vans not much smaller than some of the surgeries I’ve worked in around London. Furthermore, we had heating and a steady supply of chocolate to keep up our energy levels. We were parked next to the makeshift kennels, where guest dogs were having a little Crisis Christmas of their own. They were halled, fed and given a thorough work-out and barked their appreciation regularly. I went in to visit the dogs several times – they were so cute.

We all worked hard but had plenty of time to sit down and have a chat with the guests and other volunteers and share stories. It was a great opportunity to meet new people, and at the end of the three days, I wished that my day-to-day work was as much fun as this.

More information

To find out more about volunteering, email volunteering@crisis.org.uk, apply online at www.crisis.org.uk/volunteering or call 0207 426 3874.