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 – building steamy 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 Melbourne.

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 bathed, fed and given a thorough work-over 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 5876.