

## A BEFRIENDER'S STORY ...

"I'm a volunteer with Shelter Families Project which is in Blantyre, South Lanarkshire. Shelter Families Project is an organisation which deals with families who either have been homeless or are in danger of being homeless or are in temporary accommodation and its families have all got children under 16.

I first got involved in volunteering when I was looking for a job, while I was at college doing a degree. I couldn't find anything that fitted in with my hours and I'm a mother as well. I saw an advert in the job section for volunteers and I thought, 'well, that might be the answer because I need a bit of job experience'.

At first, when I telephoned up and replied to the advert, I did feel a bit nervous. I didn't know what they were looking for, or if I had the capabilities. And at the end of the day, I thought, well what is there to lose? It's volunteering, if it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out, there's no harm done.

When I started volunteering, rather than going straight into befriending, I tended to do other 'group' volunteering roles. So I did things like go out with another group decorating, or I made up sandwiches for the children's picnic—you know, things like that. Getting involved with other volunteers before you have the confidence to go out yourself, but that's very much your own decision. Whenever you feel ready to start going out and befriending, that's when you do it, and if you don't, you don't have to.

The befriending side is what I'm interested in. Normally, it's with one of the mums. Quite often they've had to move into a new area, they don't have friends and family local to them. They maybe need to build up

their own self confidence—things like going out for a coffee and a chat, doing some shopping.

The project has an allotment space, which we're really fortunate to have. It's a nice quiet place. If my friend has something to offload, it's often easier here rather than when we're sitting in a café where there are lots of people about. At the allotment, you can take time out for a chat, look over the lovely scenery. On a nice summer's day, it's just something different. A place to go that's away from the accommodation their living in—just being out in the fresh air can be great.

The main reason I volunteered was to try and get some work experience and to find out if this was the kind of work I would be happy doing. I have been very happy with it. It's put me on the track to my future career because now I know exactly what I want to do. It's been unexpected because the clients are not what I expected. When I thought of the homeless, especially when I thought of mothers, a lot of them are single mums having a really tough time and I tended to think of victims that are just suffering through life. They're not like that at all. You get as much back from them as you give them. These are just normal women who have been given a rough deal in life, but you give them a chance. They're great. They're not victims at all."

Sharon McCormack  
(Interview first appeared on the BBC website)

*The Shelter Families Project offers practical help and support for families moving from temporary to permanent accommodation. This can range from negotiating with the local council on the family's behalf to helping furnish and decorate the new home. We can also provide support to help families regain their self-confidence and look at the reasons for past tenancy breakdowns, helping identify the steps that need to be taken to maintain a new tenancy, and so preventing recurrence of homelessness. There is no set time limit for support, as this often depends on the length of time the family has to wait in temporary accommodation. Support workers continue to be involved once a family has secured a new tenancy, and can remain involved for several months. The aim throughout the work is to help the family resettle in their new community and*

*equip them with the skills and confidence necessary to maintain a tenancy. For example, the project may offer advice on budgeting skills or employment opportunities. Workers focus on helping families build links in their new community and refer them to local agencies for ongoing support. The project also works with Shelter Housing Aid Centres to ensure that the family gets all the help and advice it needs. A key part of this service is the contribution made by trained volunteers, who can assist families by helping decorate a new tenancy, access services in a new area and build confidence by befriending families who are in transition. For more information on the project, contact: **Families Project - South Lanarkshire**, 66A Victoria Street, Blantyre G72 0BS, Tel: 01698 307 112, Fax: 01698 720 210.*