



Community Social Care

Homelessness: Ernest's story

V/O

Homelessness. Four people tell you about different experiences of homelessness. They were contacted with the help of Cyrenians Cymru. In Swansea, the Cyrenians run a small hostel for homeless people. One of the residents is Ernest, a young Kenyan.

Ernest: I was born to a family of eight kids, I'm the fourth one, I was born in Kenya, and we grew up in the city, went to school, had an education. When I was home I had an apprenticeship course with the local garage. My mum wanted me to continue my studies abroad, my dad wasn't sure, and then my mum convinced my dad to send me to Swansea Institute. My uncle had studied in the Institute and he recommended it, and he knew the Principal personally. I was excited about coming to Britain but back home everybody thought it's like the streets are paved with gold on that thing. At the airport in Kenya we said our farewells and I was on the plane, and I knew I was on my own. It was quite a cultural shock for me; I had never seen so many different people, white people, so many in my life. I would lock myself in my room most of the day. I'd just come straight from college, run into my room and lock myself up, wait for the next day. I met a few Kenyan friends but they were mostly in the university not in the student, they were in their last year. Then when they finished their courses they went home; some got married, stayed behind, and I was scared of making friends with people I didn't know. In college it was one off, I'd take out one year, come back, try again, drop out. I tried some counselling, it didn't help, and then the only thing that helped, would give me courage was I started drinking, put me in hospital for three days once, I tried overdose, but my landlady found me. My parents came to visit me, they just knocked on my door one day, they didn't tell me they were coming, and there they were, both of them. They are divorced, I knew they were divorced but they didn't want me to know that so I just played along. They met my lecturer and I went with them to London, then came back, started the college the next week. It didn't work out, I was still late with my assignments, at the end I just couldn't cope any more, I stopped going altogether. I got cleaning jobs, early morning cleaning jobs, and I was alright. I shared a house with students from the Institute. They didn't know I'd stopped going to college, I didn't tell them. Christmas last year they'd all gone home, and I came back from my morning job to find the landlord had emptied my room, all my belongings had locked them up, and I went to talk to him. He said I owed him money, which I did and I didn't have, so at the end of the day he told me I could have my stuff but I was to move out. I had some money so I moved out to the YMCA but then was told they didn't have any more funds to keep the hostels open, so on the 23rd December I moved out to the Grand Hotel. I just packed all my stuff in a taxi and moved there. I had about £200, that's all I had with me so it was £15 a night at the hotel. At the time I had money so I was alright, I felt I was alright. Christmas come and gone, I'd got another job, two jobs now, cleaning jobs both of them from half past six in the morning till twelve lunchtime. I was sacked from one job so I had one still going on but it wasn't enough money, so I went and applied for an allowance, which was the Job Seekers Allowance. They sent me 120 quid the first week, then they sent me a letter saying they'll have to stop my allowance; they'll have to have it. At the hotel I was staying, £60 a week it wasn't enough but because I'd stayed there from December to about March and I'd been paying my rent properly the landlord let me stay on after that month till I got myself sorted out. There was a temple just across the road where homeless people used to go have breakfast and sandwiches. I started going there and I was introduced to the soup round - there's a van that goes round. I met Marvin, the driver, and he told me about a place, Cyrenians, they took homeless people. So he suggested like he'd talk to the people at the hostel and see if they could take me. It was a while before I got a reply and every day whoever was on the soup round would bring me a book to read 'cos they told me I'm different from the other people who are there, they told me like if I'd stayed out there much longer I would have become something else, I don't know, maybe a drug addict or whatever. So I came to the hostel one Monday morning and they let me move in. They ran a project,

arts and craft project, where you can do painting, drawing, photography, woodwork, carpenter and lots more. I have joined the project but at the same time I have been unemployed for six months now, and since I have been signing for the six months, the Job Centre is trying to get me back to work. What I did, I decided to do a computer course at the university; hopefully in six weeks I shall have completed it, and probably then once I get a qualification I can get a proper job and get on with my life. At the moment I'm in a project whereby they're trying to get me my own place, own flat or a bed-sit, and they'll furnish it up for me, and I think it's time like I tried something, tried it out there myself 'cos the hostel staff give you support; if you don't like it out there, you're always welcome back. They don't trash you.

It's a bit like a family, we have a laugh, man, then we have our fights. Some weeks are bad for all of us, especially if it's the week when everybody's broke. It's a good thing though when everybody's broke 'cos we're all there, we can sit and watch telly, have a laugh. If we have problems we go to the staff, the staff are like our parents now, they sort it out for us. When I dropped out of college I was too embarrassed to go back home; I'd be the laughing stock of the family, my dad wouldn't like it, he might disown me or something. Last I heard he'd taken in a new wife and her son who apparently, I found out, was my dad's son, my brother. He stopped sending money to support me so I took it like he don't want to know anything about me. I've been here almost eight years now. Back home the language is Swahili. The funny thing is if I went back home I wouldn't know how to speak the language; I would hear it, but it would be very hard for me to speak. I would be like a foreigner in my own country. I would like to go back home one day, but I'd like to go with a qualification so that to show like, you know, I was there for something.