

50

**YEARS
OF
CRISIS AT CHRISTMAS:**

REFLECTIONS FROM
VOLUNTEERS

Crisis

Together
we will end
homelessness



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It changed my life
for the better

Introduction



It is fair to say that Crisis at Christmas has transformed over the years. From the first 'open Christmas' in 1971, with 20 volunteers providing food and support services out of a church in Westminster, to over 13,000 volunteers delivering services across Great Britain, the power of volunteering has always been at the core of Crisis at Christmas.

We have reached the milestone of 50 years of Crisis at Christmas, but we are aware that this is not a time for celebration. We do not want to keep it going. We want to end homelessness as soon as possible, and only then, can we celebrate. Until that moment, it remains important to acknowledge this milestone

in the context of the extraordinary gift our volunteers have given guests year after year.

There is no better way to do this than with the words of our volunteers. This book contains special memories and profound reflections shared by volunteers, collectively articulating the magic of Crisis at Christmas. It also tells the stories of some of our guests and their lives. While this book is by volunteers, for volunteers, it is also dedicated to all the guests you have cared for, laughed with, and ultimately supported out of homelessness.

Michael Phillips, Head of Volunteering



Thank you...I'm so grateful for this experience. *I don't know what I would have done without Crisis at Christmas* and all the great volunteers.

Crisis at Christmas guest, 2021



For me,
it's all about

community



You might have heard, or indeed used, the word 'family' to describe the people who volunteer at and attend Crisis at Christmas. With so many of you returning every year, lifelong friendships have been formed and we've even heard of a few volunteer marriages!

When guests return, they are often touched by a volunteer remembering their name and asking how they've been. And guests find companionship with one another during their stays, offering support and comfort during a challenging period in their lives.

We learned a lot about what the Crisis family means to you through the experiences and reflections you shared with us. It's a community that's inclusive, supportive, and respectful. People, especially guests, feel seen and heard. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, everyone is welcomed with open arms and treated as equals.

Thank you for cultivating such a wonderful community over the years. It's so important for our guests to experience that sense of belonging, and we hope it adds something special to your lives too.





For me it's all about community, more than any one specific memory. The guests and volunteers alike get a chance to be *be part of a community* at one of the most emotive times of year.



Kate Munn





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I first started volunteering with Crisis when I was 18 and still in the sixth form at school. I had no idea what to expect! I have spent my Christmases with Crisis ever since and cannot think of a more festive, more rewarding, more exciting way to spend Christmas. I call my shift team my *'Crisis family'* and it's pure magic what we can make happen in such a short space of time. Whenever I see a former guest come back as a volunteer it's worth more than any Christmas present could be, and I get to share all of that with our amazing volunteers.

Sally Macdougall


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I have found so much joy being part of the Crisis family, having volunteered with some familiar faces at the same day centre over the last 10 years.

Friends for life.

Katy Ramsey

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4



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Years ago, I had been talking to a guest for quite a while, when he realised with surprise that I had a volunteer badge. He said
“oh I thought you were a guest too.”
That felt like acceptance.

Christopher Cheek



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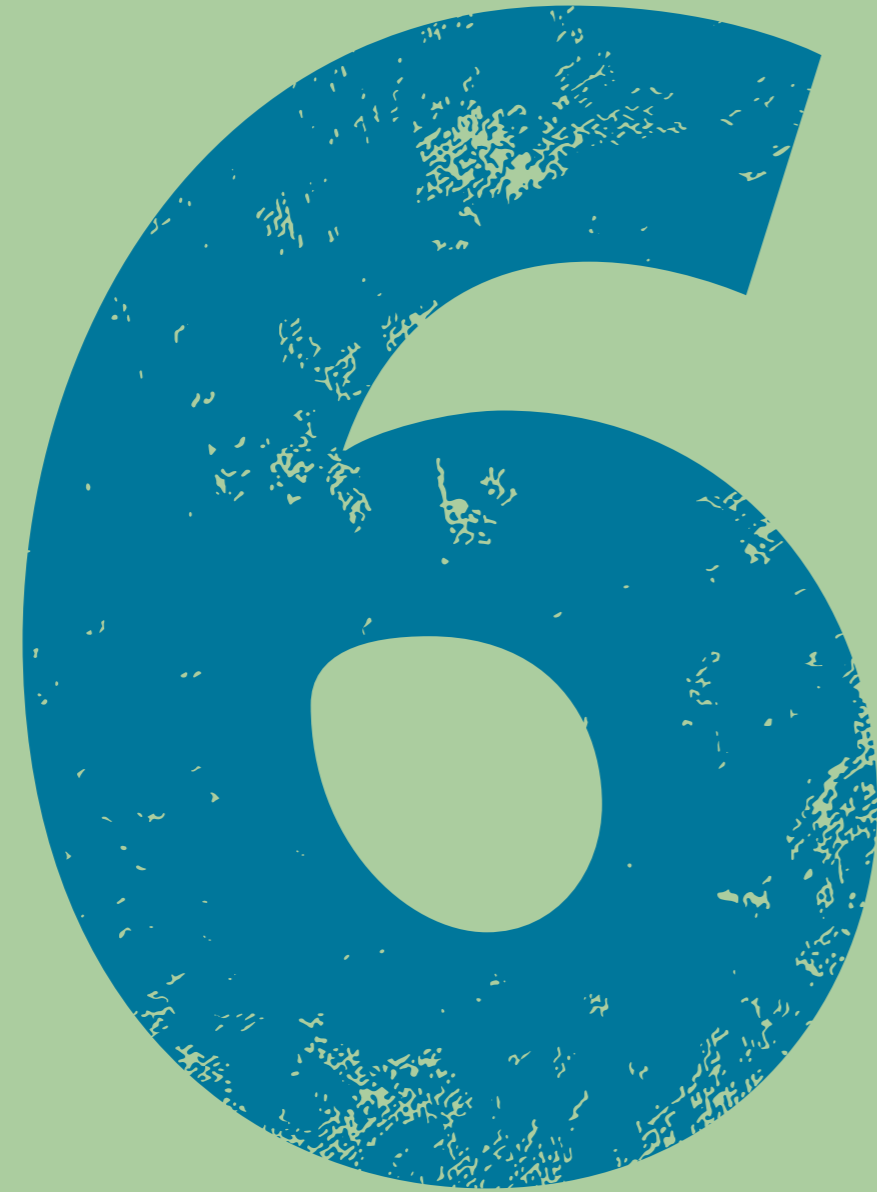
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2019 was the last time I volunteered. I like the atmosphere the other volunteers bring, that sense of community and no judgement from either the volunteers or the guests. The way you can get your backside kicked at chess again and again and finally how humbling it is that guests aren't looking for pity, but just want people to look them in the eye. It's a stark reminder that *I am very fortunate to be where I am.*

Adam Ledlie

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Loads of memories - but a stand-out one for me was when one of the guests brought me through a can of Irn Bru and said she thought I was looking tired on my shift. I was tired - and that Irn Bru hit the spot... thoughtful and beautiful kindness and compassion in action.

Evelyn





A guest being overcome because
I remembered his name **from the**
previous year. He didn't think
anyone cared enough about
him to remember his name.

Karen Hardy





After the death of my husband I volunteered with Crisis and it was so uplifting. The management team are caring, upbeat, sense of humour and *supportive of volunteers and guests.* Seeing a guest I had worked with come back from playing in a football match at Arsenal grounds and be full of confidence and self-worth was amazing.

Catherine McEvoy





Being with like-minded volunteers and led by super efficient and considerate team leaders
I felt this was what Christmas was about: doing what you could to help people in need and the experience in turn made us all feel enriched.

Kumiko Matsuoka



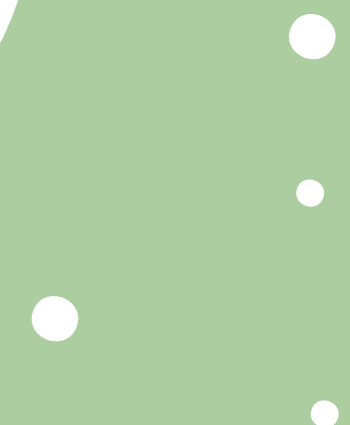


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*Bringing some humanity back
into the lives of our guests
**who more often than not remain
invisible to the general public.***

Christelle Bourgois





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During my first year volunteering (2017), I travelled to a Day Centre with some male clients to see the dentist. They did not know one another, however by the end of this experience they were singing on the minibus and had formed an incredible bond with one another, sharing their stories of teeth being removed or cleaned.

A couple even had a haircut as well!

I noticed that they looked out for one another in the days ahead, and we even formed a football team to play against the other centres! We came a very close second, however the following year with some of the same team members, they brought home the trophy to a massive celebration! They wore their medals proudly for the rest of their stay. This and many more experiences I have encountered has warmed my heart.

Vicki Hedley

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1?

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I have had so many moving and beautiful conversations with guests over the years it's hard to pinpoint one specifically. *I will volunteer with Crisis for the rest of my life.*
What these centres give over Christmas is so important.

Chloe Cahill

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13



13

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I started volunteering with Crisis when I was 17 years old, spending every Christmas at Crisis since *has helped shaped me into the woman I am today.* **Every Christmas I always ask to wrap and hand out the cutlery at Christmas dinner; nothing will beat the pure joy of handing every guest and volunteer their (impeccably wrapped) cutlery with a Christmas cracker and telling each person 'enjoy your meal, merry Christmas.'** I love to see everyone smile. Thank you Crisis for allowing me to get involved in my community and share the love.

Ellora Kowalczyk

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14

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I volunteered last year for Crisis at Christmas for the first time as a volunteer driver. One moment stands out as I was delivering to an address at the end of a cul-de-sac and there was no parking close at hand. So with several carrier bags of goods, I staggered to the address and the thanks and appreciation of the recipient when she opened the door and I explained the bags were for her made tears well up!

*Birmingham
Christmas volunteer*

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I can't imagine

Christmas without Crisis

Christmas has become synonymous with Crisis for the volunteers (and there are plenty of you!) who return year on year. And for those who volunteer occasionally or have recently joined the team, the festive period might have felt different for you whilst spending it with Crisis.

What's clear from many of you, is that volunteering has given your Christmases a whole new meaning. By giving back and supporting vulnerable people in your communities, you have been reminded of what's really important. You've described connecting with people with warmth and generosity as resulting in the sincerest Christmas feeling you've experienced.

Christmas isn't just a difficult time for people who rely on our services. Many of you described feeling disenchanted by and lonely at Christmas before signing up to become a volunteer. But once surrounded by likeminded people united by a common goal to end homelessness, and amongst guests who are so appreciative of your support, those feelings melted away.



15

A large, stylized number '15' is the central focus. The '1' is a solid black vertical bar with a white, textured top section. The '5' is a solid black shape with a white, textured top section. To the left of the '1' are four white stars of varying sizes and shapes. To the right of the '5' is a white heart shape. The background is a solid dark purple.

There are general memories of being terrified of volunteering for bingo (if you know, you know). Seeing guests turn to volunteers and friends. But mainly, honestly, knowing that Christmas for me is Crisis. That the family I have at Christmas is the family I have at Crisis - the volunteers, yes, but mainly the guests and the feeling I get every year that I, like them, can walk into that building by myself and probably have a chat with someone pretty new and pretty different, *who doesn't care who I am* but who just cares whether or not I like Marmite. And that's bloody Christmas for me.

Ellen Hunter





2019 was the best Christmas I've ever had, it was the first time I'd volunteered for Crisis and it will not be the last!! I remember there was a guest who didn't speak to anyone, he was very withdrawn and quiet. On my last day I tried one last time and we had a cup of tea and a conversation. I then saw him in public about 6 months later and he remembered me. *Such a lovely feeling!*

Laurielle Sheekey





Christmas used to be a difficult time for me. Volunteering at Crisis over the years has now made it the best time. My favourite moments are connecting with guests at lunch and dinner, when *guests can finally relax and sleep and gain access to services.*

Georgie Gwynne





Christmas wouldn't be the same without Crisis. I look forward to meeting the guests, many of which I recognise from previous years and the wonderful team leaders that I've been privileged to support.

Bob Stevens



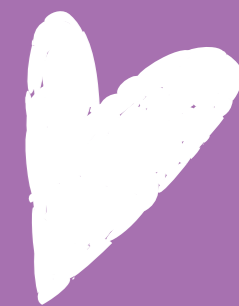
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I have volunteered at Crisis at Christmas for so many years that Christmas is not the same without it.

Joanna Matthews

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2020

I volunteered in Newcastle last year as a driver and from the minute I started I knew I'd want to always spend my Christmases doing volunteer work. I have never been huge on Christmas but doing the work with Crisis threw me right into the Christmas spirit with all the *warm generosity* and connecting with people!

Joe Fitz-Gerald

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It simply makes Christmas,
Christmas!

Natalie Turner





Can't imagine Christmas
without **Crisis volunteering!**

Jane Longshaw



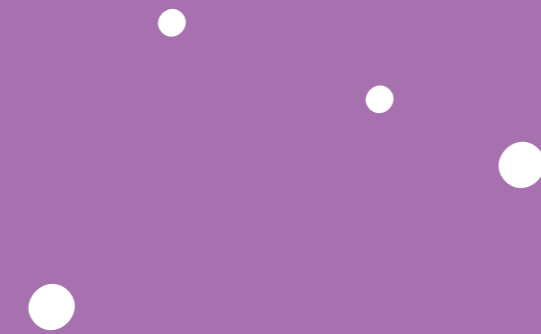
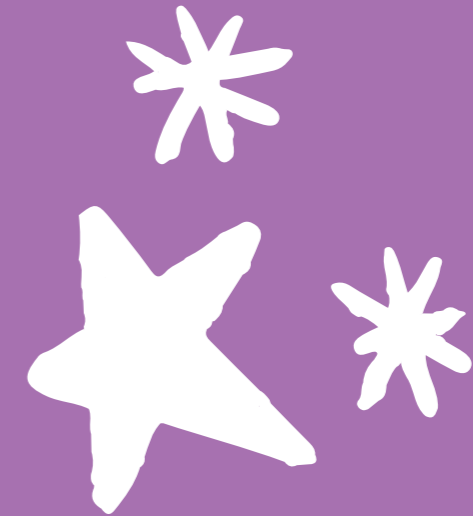
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The energy and buzz, it was the most sincere Christmas feeling I had felt in years.

Juliet McLaren

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24

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**My first time as a volunteer,
Christmas 2019. To put it simply, this
was *the best Christmas I've ever had.*
It was me who was the lucky one.**

Deborah Lewis

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25



Volunteering with Crisis has given my Christmas a better meaning. It has gone from a lonely day to one surrounded with *joy and hope.*

Melanie Pope





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Working for Crisis at Christmas reminds me of the Grinch story – “what if Christmas he thought doesn’t come from a store? What if Christmas perhaps means a little bit more?”

Nick Downs

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Crisis showed me

what I was capable of



We've witnessed and heard of countless instances of guests and volunteers uncovering and rediscovering skills and talents at our Christmas services. From a guest wowing the room with a powerful rendition of a popular song during karaoke, to a volunteer discovering a talent for manicuring, each skill brought to light shaped that individual.

We've heard stories of volunteers changing careers because of their experience with us at Christmas. They might have discovered a new skill or passion while carrying out their duties or realised what makes them feel truly motivated and rewarded.

Wandering around the communal areas during your shifts, we're sure many of you would have seen guests and volunteers engaged in intense games of skill, like chess. Or, you might have been playing yourself. These moments can break down barriers and facilitate new means of connection.

For many of our guests, recognition and validation of their talents gives them a much-needed confidence boost. It often helps to restore enough dignity and self-worth to take their first steps out of homelessness. We thank you sincerely, as volunteers, for providing that crucial encouragement and appreciation.



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I never knew I could be a manicurist! My first year of volunteering with Crisis showed me what I was capable of. The best thing was to offer hand massages and seeing the pleasure this gave to clients. A hand massage is very underrated and offers both *comfort and connection.*

Alison Rudd-Clarke





28



A guest had never had any formal art classes, but after a week of being trained by a lovely volunteer, produced the most beautiful lakeside landscape, boat and all.

He decided to let me keep it and I have it to this day :)

Syed Imam



29

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Each year I have volunteered has been an absolute joy but one of my favourite memories was the talent show in Camden Day Centre when all the guests were so happy to be there and a few got up and sang and I remember this one young guy went up and rapped. He was amazing and after he came off *he was beaming and was so happy to have done it.* It was so lovely to see him and other guests enjoying themselves.

Akinyi Odhiambo

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30

I believe it was 2019. I remember singing in the main atrium at Westminster centre and everyone was in great spirits. A group of guests returned to the centre while I was singing and they had just won the big football game and were carrying their trophy high in the air. We played We Are The Champions by Queen and the guests were beaming with pride. The place was filled with cheers and applause and when we went back to the Christmas songs, so many people joined in. Guests began to dance with the volunteers and people were rushing down from the other floors to join in the fun. I left feeling extremely Christmassy and *my cheeks hurt from smiling so much!* Volunteering with Crisis at Christmas has been a huge part of my Christmas celebrations for many years now and I hope to continue for as long as possible!

Lucy Clark

31

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I volunteered Christmas 2019. It was the most remarkable experience: I was in Croydon and on the last day I volunteered there was karaoke being played and an elderly gentleman stood up in the activities hall and sang “You’ll Never Walk Alone” by Gerry and the Pacemakers. It was sung with such gusto; it was one the most *powerful moments* of resilience, pride and hope I have ever seen or heard.

Ahmad Namazie

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32

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One of my favourite memories of Crisis is playing one of the most intense games of Jenga with a guest. We had a crowd watching forming as the game kept going on and on.

The atmosphere was Olympic-worthy!! Had it not been for Crisis, I would have never played one of the best Jenga games of my life!

Aamna Khokhar

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33

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Crisis at Christmas made me realise what I wanted to do so I changed my career and became a social worker.

Daniel Howard-Schiff

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**I knew I'd learn a lot,
but I hadn't predicted**

learning Latin!

Every now and then as volunteers, you might have encountered something surprising on shift. You may have spoken to a guest who's studying for the same degree as you or had a lively discussion about a shared niche interest.

Through these unexpected connections, you may have seen yourself in a guest and drawn parallels between your life and theirs. Plenty of volunteers have challenged their own preconceptions and gained new perspectives. In these moments it's easy to see our shared humanity and the connected fabric of our society.

Greater understanding of the reasons why people are forced into homelessness not only increases empathy but leads us closer to the solutions needed to prevent and ultimately end it. Being a Crisis volunteer means that you share our belief that everyone deserves a safe and stable home. Thank you for being part of the Crisis family. Together, we will end homelessness.



34



I remember working on the night shifts in 2019. Whilst in conversation with a guest, he told me the medical names of his aches and pains in Latin. For the next few nights we'd test each other on the Latin names for body parts (he always won). I knew I'd learn a lot whilst volunteering with Crisis, but *I hadn't predicted learning Latin!*

Elizabeth Briggs



35



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I volunteered at Bermondsey in 2017. I thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience, and in fact had fun! One of the things that really stayed with me was meeting a guest from a very similar background to me. It turned out he was an ex professor at the university I was teaching in, even in the same department. So this really emphasised how *homelessness really does affect people from all walks of life,* and made me reflect upon my own life somewhat.

David Johnson

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36

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One of my favourite memories from volunteering with Crisis was chatting with the most fascinating lady who had a world of experiences and was trying to study for her degree like myself. We talked and talked throughout the day in between my shifts and it always *makes me smile remembering that day.*

Faith Israel

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57

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I had heard of Crisis many years before I volunteered and following a relationship break up I decided to spend my first “alone” Christmas with what has now become my Crisis family. I have been so happy to see the impact that the Crisis approach has in terms of helping people who are often dehumanised. Listening to the guests’ stories makes you realise how fragile life is and how close each of us are to becoming homeless. Indeed, I myself became homeless after volunteering and luckily for me, I was not on the streets. Before volunteering, I had no appreciation of just how important an assignment it was to oversee people sleeping, protecting them and making them feel safer than they do throughout the rest of the year. Our homeless guests are people with some truly remarkable stories to share and playing a small part in helping them get the help they need has been an honour. Overseeing one especially vulnerable guest with cerebral palsy being able to get a good night’s sleep was the most rewarding point.

Michele Parker

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38

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I enjoyed doing Crisis at Christmas since I have joined! It has been always a pleasure to do multiple tasks and be able to interact with guests. I have many memories of guests which were happy with my presence. One of my favourite memories was doing the overnight shift when I had a 'sleeping shift'. I teamed up with other volunteers, we were sitting and watching guests sleeping - *making sure everyone felt comfortable and had everything they needed.* It is one of the best memories because looking at all guests sleeping and feeling safe brought me joy but at the same time sadness: joy because they had a chance to have a great sleep surrounded by people who were providing safety for them, but also sadness- because it should be a normality for the guests. Crisis at Christmas definitely changed my life and ever since *I always recommend it to my family and friends* - as well as I encourage them to make a small donation during Christmas if they are not attending the venue in person.

Sylwia Zawisza

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39

I had very little idea about the causes of homelessness when I first volunteered for Crisis. This was 2016 and on one of my first shifts I found myself chatting to a nice young man who was very appreciative of what we were doing and wanted me to pass on his thanks to all the volunteers. *He told me he felt that he is one of the "lucky ones" as Crisis had been able to help him obtain B&B accommodation, so he had a roof over his head. He went on to tell me how he became homeless, it was simply that he'd been made redundant from his job in retail where he'd been employed for the last 5 years. He was unable to get another job so soon fell into arrears and was then evicted from his flat. He was from Eastern Europe and had no family in the UK who could support him.*

It really brought it home to me just how easily homelessness can happen. and I was really impressed with this young man's attitude, he didn't feel sorry for himself, and he was appreciative of the help he'd been given.

Lesley

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It changed my life

For the better



Many have come to describe Crisis at Christmas as a transformative experience. Guests who arrive on the brink of despair – hungry, unkempt, and worn down by the constant pressures of being homeless – leave feeling refreshed, more confident, and hopeful.

Guests often take their first steps out of homelessness during Crisis at Christmas, accessing vital support and continuing their journeys with Crisis through our year-round services. And they frequently come back to show us how far they have come. We've heard from many volunteers how uplifting and inspiring it is to see a former guest return to speak to current guests about how they have left homelessness behind, or to join the volunteer team as a way of giving back.

But it's not just our guests who are transformed by Crisis at Christmas. So many volunteers find their experiences lifechanging too. Interacting with guests and supporting them through challenging periods has undoubtedly opened eyes to the multiple pressures, prejudices, injustices, and system failures that push people into homelessness. Volunteers often express that these interactions give them a new perspective on life, and teaches them compassion, humility, and respect for others.





40

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Volunteering at Crisis has changed my life in ways that are difficult to describe. It's taught me humility and also *renews my spirit in the good in people.* After 8 years of volunteering, I'm not sure my Christmas would be the same without it.

Simone Wright

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41

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In my Advice capacity I was able to help someone start a universal credit claim despite the guest not having an address, mobile number, nor email account. *This stands out for me because it is such a simple task yet during the Christmas period, no other service was able to assist our guest. It took some time, but with a slow steady pace, our guest was able to get all they needed to set up a universal credit claim.*

Tony McKenzie

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42



I saw a petite woman sitting in a throng of men in the dining area who seemed very alone. I went and made a space by her. She was newly homeless, didn't speak English and didn't know where she would sleep that night. It was wonderful feeling how the whole Crisis support system clicked into place. Within an hour, she had been given a medical, a space in a Crisis hostel was booked and as I waved her off with the transport volunteer knew that THAT was why I volunteer. It was spectacular to be a part of making her Christmas happen.

Madeleine Baird



43

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A guest was brought in via the outreach team who had been sleeping in a skip. We helped wash him and gave him fresh clothing. We showed him the care and respect that had been missing from his life for so long. He regained some dignity in his time with us. Every vol/service gave him the privacy he needed whilst addressing his needs. I will never forget the day he left us with his head held a little higher.

Anonymous

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A moment which comes to mind is that there was a particular guest (young chap) I would often see year on year at Crisis at Christmas. However, one day as I left work in the city and made my way to the train station, I saw a very well dressed young man commuting and on closer inspection noticed this was the same chap I had previously seen year on year at Crisis. This was such a heart-warming moment for me as it really brought home to me the great difference Crisis can and does make in people's lives! And made me proud to volunteer with this charity.

Rhoderline Kyeme



45

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I just know it's one of the best things I've ever done.

Otisha Sealy

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46

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I met a gentleman who hadn't been aware of the centres. He happened to walk past. He told me he had thought about taking his life but was so happy to have a warm space and for someone to chat to. It was great to feel as though we had made a difference to his feeling of happiness over the Christmas period.

Sarah Taylor

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47

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I was volunteering 7 years ago at a south London centre for a shift of manning one of the exits. The hairdressing room was right next to it. For hours I kept seeing guests walking in, and then out after 20 minutes, a fresh person who had an extra glow of confidence on their face. Their hopeful faces gave me energy.

Benjamin Lee

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48

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My very first year as a Crisis at Christmas Edinburgh (CCE) volunteer I was in the general welcome area on Christmas Day. The place was buzzing with energy, people pouring in when a woman came in and took me aside...” I had to drop in and say hello... I was here last year, homeless and desperate. I had run away from a domestic abuse situation in France leaving behind my daughter, job, home and dignity. When here last year I was spoken to by someone in Skylight. They found me part time work and accommodation. *Now look at me...* I have a rented flat, reunited with my daughter, a different job and I’m about to start on a training course. That happened because I dropped into Crisis at Christmas as I was tired, cold and hungry. I want to speak to the homeless here today to say *‘don’t give up hope,* by walking in here you have taken the first step to a better place; there are people to help you here’... Thank you.” How I managed to not shed a tear goodness knows... it was truly a magical moment and as I recall the memory now the hair is up on my head and I feel overwhelmed at what Crisis does, so thank YOU Crisis.

Judy



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49

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There's nothing better than the end of shift debrief when you're absolutely exhausted from running up and down many flights of stairs, but your shift leader makes you forget all that by telling you about the guests who have secured accommodation that day. You might not have been the Advice Centre volunteer who filed the paperwork, but you could have been one of many general volunteers or welfare volunteers who encouraged the guest over the past week to start that conversation with Advice and accept help. Crisis is one of the few organisations where being a tiny cog in a big wheel makes you feel incredibly proud.

Shona Barker

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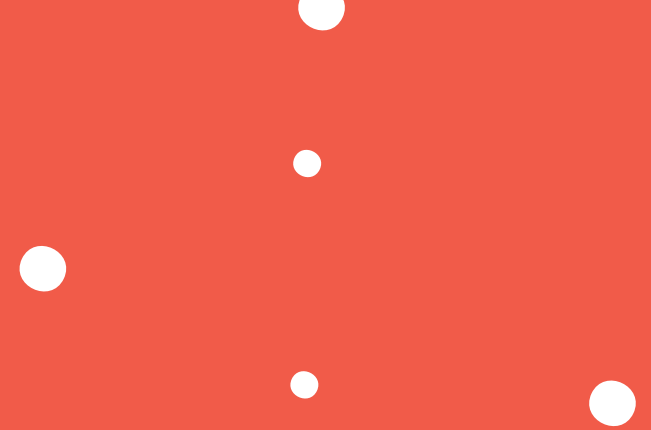
“

Seeing a previous guest return to the centre to tell the volunteers of his journey out of homelessness.

Gives us all hope and belief.

Louise Edwards

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