

The Work of the YMCA

Wednesday April 1 Helen Wright

“It’s fun to stay at the YMCA”

Or so the famous song by The Village People goes. Now, whilst it might not be “fun”, exactly, it sure beats life on the streets as a rough sleeper, as Helen outlined today.

Helen Wright is Director of Housing for Lincolnshire and has been for over three years. She has been involved in social housing for 30 years, so has an in-depth knowledge of the problems faced by the county’s homeless. The YMCA was originally founded in London by Sir George Williams in 1844. Despite being only 22 himself, he founded the Young Men’s Christian Association with 11 others to help meet the moral and social needs of the new labouring classes. It is the oldest charity in Lincolnshire, having run for 154 years.

There are two stages to helping the homeless. The first is the Nomad Centre, which can be used as an overnight drop-in service. Then the YMCA takes over and helps with preparation for an independent life. The two organisations amalgamated in 2013 and work closely together. Their main aim is to break the vicious circle of homelessness, as without an address, finding employment, opening a bank account etc is well-nigh impossible. They only work with single people over 18.

Their residents tend to be ex offenders, rough sleepers or sofa surfers. They aim to build them up with regular meals provided by Simon the chef; encourage regular sleep patterns, as many tended to sleep during the day as it was safer on the streets and help them access a GP and the Benefits system. The limit of a stay at the Nomad Centre is 56 days, then they move on to the YMCA. Here they are taught budgeting, clean habits, social skills and volunteering for a variety of projects to establish a work ethic and routine. Some go on to further education or retraining. They are not the people in sleeping bags you see on the streets, as it is safer to sleep unseen and thus avoid attacks.

The average rough sleeper is male, aged between 31 and 40, many having a local connection to this area. The causes of homelessness used to largely involve drink and drugs, but now it’s often a mixture of increased mental health problems, bad luck or the cost of living crisis, issues which could affect any of us at any time. One resident was a paediatric nurse, whose stressful job led to a mental breakdown. Another took to drugs to cope with his wife’s suicide, both leading to loss of job, home, family etc. The biggest challenge is moving them on due to lack of community support or social housing and the cost of rental properties. Helen has noticed a staggering decrease in such facilities over her 30 years.

But there is also “fun”, with bingo, chess, cycling and many clubs, plus voluntary projects. There is a psychotherapist who helps those with mental issues. Helen stressed that they never judge or stereotype and treat each client with respect, which they insist on in return and set strict rules of behaviour. They are heavily reliant on donations and many supermarkets help with food supplies. Each March there is a Sleep Easy at the Cathedral, to let you know what it feels like to sleep in the cold. It is not pleasant!

Nowadays the YMCA is very much multi faith and gender neutral. They hope to admit dogs soon as many won’t leave their animals to join the centre. Helen has been threatened, but stressed that most were simply grateful that someone was willing to help. Today’s talk has taught me to be less judgemental next time I see a rough sleeper. In other circumstances, it might have been me. Thank you, Helen, for opening our eyes to the plight of those less fortunate than ourselves.

Barbara Pearce

