

Samaritans Crisis Christmas Volunteers Experiences

A First Timer's Experience

By Teresa

I volunteered to be a Samaritan with Festival Branch at Crisis Open Christmas for several reasons and thought after having read the information provided many times that I was prepared. Little did I know! We arrived at the main shelter, an abandoned office building in Central London, just before noon on Christmas Eve. After registering with Crisis on the 5th floor we were then given the good news that Samaritans were based on the 8th and no the lifts were not working! By the end of the 48hrs I could walk up all 8 floors without stopping to "look at the view"!

We were welcomed by the Festival Leader and given an introduction and tour of our base including our sleeping quarters in empty offices - they were warm (no need for the hot water bottle!), clean and had carpet on the floor and believe me when you're tired and have sometimes only 3hrs before being woken for your next shift you'll sleep anywhere! I was reassured to see lots of goodies - chocolate, crisps, biscuits etc on the table in the "office" and also a kitchen with toaster, kettle and some basic food items. Although there was in theory food available for the volunteers it was a bit unpredictable to say the least. My Christmas lunch consisted of a toasted cheese sandwich and a jam doughnut! The nearest toilet and washing facilities were down on the 6th floor - but at least there was hot water.

We had the rota explained to us - we were covering the main site 24hrs a day and the secondary site 12 hrs a day. We worked in 4hr shifts with anything from 4 to 7 hrs between. Before and after each shift there was a briefing with the shift leader and usually the festival leader. These were extremely useful and the feedback given very helpful. Each shift consisted of 2 or 3 volunteers plus a shift leader. The shift leader was on the floor with us but did not deal with callers directly. Their role was primarily to support us and act as liaison with the Crisis shift leaders and the Festival leader.

Due to a misunderstanding about our arrival time I was due on a shift straightaway - in fact it had already started. This shift was in the secondary shelter about 10 mins walk away so after a quick coffee I was taken there by one of the shift leaders and introduced to my co-volunteers and shift leader on site. I was very apprehensive as I really hadn't been able to picture how we would work at all - and this smoky, busy, noisy space was quite intimidating to start with. From the feedback I received this obviously showed in my face! However after a quick chat with my shift leader, I decided I wouldn't know what it was like until I tried it so in I plunged.

It's a totally different experience walking around and soliciting callers as opposed to waiting for them to come to us. We were told to look out for guests who were alone or who looked withdrawn and approach them. Sometimes we were asked by the Crisis shift leaders to talk to someone and sometimes our own shift leaders would point someone out to us. Body language was not always easy to judge and you have to be prepared to be rejected, sometimes this was done politely, sometimes not - one guest I approached, on seeing my Samaritan badge, described us as "another bunch of arseholes"! It was important to be on the same level as the guests and to try and create a private space - sometimes literally on the floor and try not to worry about the wet patches! I was concerned about the confidentiality aspect - no nice private befriending rooms here. However I soon found that you could almost create a bubble around you and the caller and shut out what was going on elsewhere - it did mean talking very quietly and getting physically very close to people - not always pleasant in terms of odours - tobacco, alcohol, unwashed bodies - but worth it.

When we did get to talk to guests we had to be mindful of our role, which, as always, was to offer emotional support and encourage callers to talk about feelings including those around suicide. This was not always easy and callers often wanted to tell their stories, which were all different and fascinating if sometimes harrowing. Quite a few of the callers I spoke to were actively suicidal or had been in the past. However lots were very upbeat and determined to change their lives for the better, often having given up alcohol and/or drugs as a start to this process.

I found the whole experience intense, challenging, tiring but amazing and extremely rewarding, I felt very humbled by the callers and also very privileged at being allowed into their world (both emotional and physical). The Festival and shift leaders were fantastic, very supportive and caring and I was extremely grateful for their help and experience. I also enjoyed meeting the other volunteers; lots from Festival branch but not all, and look forward to seeing some of them again. After sharing such an experience we felt we'd known each other for much longer than 24 or 48 hours. When we left I felt like I'd been living in a different universe and coming back to real life was quite strange - thankfully I wasn't going back to the guest's real lives.

Would I do it again? Definitely!

Volunteering with Festival Branch at Crisis Open Christmas

By Marian

My family thought I was mad;
My friends thought I was mad;
And when a very smelly man sat next to me on the tube the day before I started my stint with Festival Branch at Crisis Open Christmas, I thought 'I am not sure I can do this'.

How can I describe the experience?

I was totally removed from real life as I know it and became part of an amazing team of people working in a completely separate world. I made contact with some very special callers, some of whom I will always remember. I feel as though I have known the volunteers I worked with for all my life.

Crisis Open Christmas was for the main part housed in a couple of derelict office buildings around Liverpool Street which are due for demolition shortly. The Samaritan team were based on the eighth floor of one building - with no lift. Our toilets, complete with basins with cold water (our washing facilities), were on the sixth floor. We slept in offices with the luxury of old carpet on the floor. My sister asked how I found sleeping on the floor. 'It was wonderful', I reminisced, and because we were so grateful when we got a chance to get some kip it seemed wonderful.

Food was random. In our kitchen on the eighth floor, there was a toaster, a kettle and a sandwich toaster that someone had brought and Festival branch had provided cheese, bread, etc (there was no fridge) but supplies were limited. There was some chocolate, fruit, cake and Pringles and there seemed to be a lot of nuts, for some reason. Whilst working on the sites we sometimes got fed. The food for volunteers was unpredictable and not in great quantities. Christmas lunch was a paper cup of soup and a slice of bread at 3 pm, eaten as I walked between sites. Later on that day I got a scoop of some tuna pasta bake. That was chance. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, gobbled my share and dashed up to the 'floor' to alert my fellow Sams.

The work itself was all face to face. We worked four hour shift patterns, often four hours on four hours off, in teams, on the main floors of Crisis Open Christmas. The callers with whom we worked were Crisis 'guests', mostly homeless people, who lived and slept in the buildings for up to a week whilst Crisis is open.

There were about 600 'guests' across the 2 sites where my shifts were located. Each guest had their own story, usually unconventional, always unpredictable and invariably fascinating. If you are a Sam you are interested in people and boy, were these interesting people.

It would have been so nice to just chat, but as Sams, our role was to focus on areas needing emotional support, and on suicidal feelings in particular. No change there then? Well, yes, the connection with the caller was just the same. Making that connection, however, was quite different.

On a four hour shift in the brick branch centre, we may be busy for most of the time as we respond to visitors, telephone callers, emails and texts. With Festival branch, a four hour shift is four hours of damned hard work as between contacts, volunteers are initiating contacts. How does this happen? Well, I had to wander about looking approachable and seeing who would respond to eye contact and a smile. If a 'guest' seemed willing to engage, I then had to open conversation with something like 'how's it going for you?' or that great Sam fallback phrase 'how are you feeling?'

The conversations that followed took place in whatever corner or space we could find. Confidentiality, as important as ever, was sometimes difficult and we had to work to create a mini-environment where just the volunteer and caller existed, whilst surrounded by large numbers of people. At one point I was kneeling on the floor next to a caller in a sleeping bag when I felt my leg become damp. I am glad it was on my last day. I had someone else's piss on my jeans for the rest of my stint.

Like with all calls, we had to assess whether this was just chat or genuine emotional support, we had to assess the suicide risk and we had to constantly check with ourselves that we were supporting the caller's needs not our own. In many ways the work was just the same. I have probably forgotten most of the callers already (in fact I had by the time I got chance to log them - oh, dear). Others however, made a profound impact. It can be so hard for people to articulate feelings. We are so privileged that people open up to us in our role. Humbled, I am.

And I do feel lucky. Lucky that after 2 days I could go home to my bed. I can sleep peacefully, knowing that no-one is going to attack me or pinch my belongings if I drop my guard. I always have a roof over my head and even have heating as well in the cold weather. I can have a shower whenever I please and can cook fresh vegetables every day. (Don't worry, I'll be back to complaining about everything soon).

Would I do Crisis again? That's a bit like asking someone being wheeled out of a labour ward if they would have another baby. Would I recommend a stint at Crisis to other Sams? Yes, Yes, Yes.

But right now I want to catch up on sleep (in a bed, mmm)

Crisis Open Christmas

By Jason

Our journey started at 5.30am on Christmas Eve, I had accepted a lift from a fellow volunteer for which I am eternally grateful. We stopped on the way, near Northampton for some much needed breakfast, and arrived in London around 11am.

We walked around Petticoat Lane market, during this time I tried to compose myself, and contain my excitement and nervous anticipation. Returning to the car to retrieve our worldly goods for the next 48 hours we then headed for the unknown and expected arrival time of 12 noon.

As this was the first time at Crisis for both of us it was nice to be greeted by a kind friendly smile which softened the blow when told report to the fifth floor and "by the way the lifts are out of order." So off we trekked with all our worldly goods crammed in holdalls and carrier bags. Once signed in on the fifth and in receipt of our 'badge of honour' for the preceding hike, I was just regaining my breath when I heard "Samaritans, eighth floor" imagine my glee ☺.

As I reached the Sams office on the eighth, complete with carpet burns on my knees from dragging myself the last 100 yards on all fours☹. There was an even bigger smile awaiting me from Bev the festival leader; it was a knowing smile as she had probably done that same climb many times in the previous 24 hours.

After finding my own piece of carpet in an old office, which I would lovingly call home for the next 48 hours (and I still look back at it with fond memories) then came the grand tour and vital information. So, with the shift rota explained to me, and the knowledge of where all the amenities were (toilets on the sixth floor, and yes, we were spoilt, hot water for washing) I was ready for action. Before my first shift, I got to meet fellow Sams from festival branch and from various branches across the country.

My first shift wasn't until 7pm that evening at the secondary site on Ledenhall Street. We had our pre shift briefing with the shift leader and festival leader around 6.30pm before we made our way over to Ledenhall Street. Wow, so many homeless people in one place, where do I start was my first thought. We were to mingle with the guests, making eye contact and passing pleasantries. Once we had made a contact we had to establish very quickly whether the guest was just telling us their story of which they all had one, and were probably very interesting and/or harrowing, or whether they were prepared to talk about their feelings. On my third shift which was at the main site on Christmas Day, I had just started to mingle with the guests when I made eye contact and acknowledged a young man sat by himself on the floor; he looked lonely and very miserable. I approached him and knelt on the floor next to him, using the Sams failsafe phrase "how are you feeling?" he moved his hand towards me for what I thought was to be a handshake but he replied with "not as good as you" as he stroked my leg and smiled. A sex caller at Crisis what a good start to my shift. "Merry Christmas"

It was so different to doing a four hour shift, in what seemed at that time our cosy sterile brick branches. It was intense, but despite having so many people around, I was pleasantly surprised to find that privacy was quite easy to get. You got so close to a guest at times that you made an invisible bubble around yourself and the guest, that everything around you seemed to disappear. I thought I would find it difficult to break away from a contact to inform the shift leader about the contact but again was pleasantly surprised to see that the guests didn't mind. The shift leaders were great, always letting you know they were there if you needed them but did it in a sensitive and discreet manner. If you have never worked in this way, it is nice to have your shift leader working on the floor with you, they don't take a contact where possible, as they were liaising with the Crisis shift leaders (green badges) and taking referrals from them. So, rescuing the shift leader was another thing you had to remember.

Ledenhall Street was one large main area but the main site was more complicated, it was on the first floor of the derelict office building. Rather than it just being one large area it was more like a rabbit warren, with a main corridor and many different rooms. Food was served at the far end of the building, down some stairs in what seemed to be a basement like area. We could partake in this food but it was very much hit and miss as to whether there was any left. On the eighth floor though we had a very basic kitchen where we had a toaster and kettle, also bread, cheese, ham, butter, cereal and milk (no fridge). In the Sams office there was also crisps, chocolates, Christmas cake and a lovely carrot cake one volunteer made and brought with her not to mention the jam doughnuts someone bought from Tesco, so all the healthy stuff was in the Sams office.

Would I do Crisis again? In a heartbeat, already planning for next year.

Would I recommend Crisis to other Sams volunteers? A big fat YES!!

What a humbling, exhilarating experience, it was like spending 48 hours in a parallel universe, am I finding it hard to explain the experience fully, there are no words to do it justice. I made some good friends from different branches and have been in touch with some of them since my return to this universe.

Just to say, the BEST Christmas I have EVER had!!! Without exception.