



Baobab

“Imagine seeing the unimaginable and being 14 years old”

Imagine you’ve been raped or tortured. Forced to kill someone or watch your parents murdered. You flee your country for a place of safety. But people call you a liar and want to send you back. Now imagine all this happens when you’re just 14 years old.

A handwritten sign stuck to the door says please be quiet, there is a session in progress. Through the door you can hear a murmuring adult voice. It sounds gentle and reassuring. There is a pause and then a younger, less certain voice speaks. Another pause and the conversation continues.

This side of the door, in the room that doubles up as reception area and lounge, a young man is doing some research on a computer. Another teenager, impeccably polite, is asking whether anyone would like a cup of tea.

The air of calm is interrupted when a new arrival announces that he’s just passed his driving test. People emerge from different rooms to congratulate him. Their pride in his achievement is clear, the smiles infectious.

If it wasn’t for the murmured conversation still going on behind that door, you could mistake these rooms just off North London’s busy Holloway Road for a friendly student flat-share – albeit a very tidy one.

But this is the Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile, a charity that helps children who have fled violence in their home countries, in the hope of finding sanctuary here in Britain.

They include Mimi from Eritrea, who escaped to England aged 12 when her

father disappeared and her sister was killed. And Fakirzai, smuggled out of Afghanistan when the Taliban murdered his father. And Moses, who was forced to join the same group of rebels who had just brutalised his sister, before he managed to run away.

Wherever their terrifying journeys began, whatever horrors they endured along the way, they all made it to Baobab’s door.

A record 1,861 “unaccompanied asylum-seeking children” applied for asylum in this country last year. While these youngsters account for just 7% of all asylum applications, their stories are surely among the most desperate.

Many of them have been raped and tortured. Some have been forced to kill, or watch the murder of their parents. Others have been trafficked into the sex industry.

And to make it all worse, when they finally make it to what they think will be a place of safety, they find their stories are not believed. That has a very deep effect on them, because they know how painfully real their experiences have been.

“It makes them feel crazy, completely crazy,” says Baobab founder Sheila Melzak.

“It would be hard enough if you were an adult. But they are children. They don’t leap

off a boat or jump out the back of a van and say yippee, I’m in England. They are exhausted, often ill and unprepared for the suspicion they experience. It’s a huge shock to them.”

And as they start to navigate their way through a complex and hostile asylum process, “Their credibility is constantly challenged by different professionals who have to assess them,” says Sheila.

“You may feel safe to stay once you get asylum, but these young people are expected to live with a level of uncertainty that at their age they can’t manage. It is very hard for them.”

Last year 992 people aged under 17 applied for asylum, with 415 of them receiving refugee status. The rest were refused or given some form of temporary leave to remain.

They can appeal or reapply if they have fresh evidence, but if they haven’t secured refugee status by the age of 18, they need very good legal support to enable them to negotiate the asylum system. This support is not always available especially currently after cuts in the legal aid services. Some will be deported.



Sheila founded Baobab in 2008 to help such young people to cope with their pasts, to adjust to their new lives and to apply for asylum.

They often feel isolated, helpless and consumed by guilt and shame about what’s happened to them. The effects include depression and other forms of mental illness. Baobab offers psychotherapy and therapeutic activities like music making, philosophy discussions, arts-based workshops and social outings.

“We are a community, rather than a clinic,” Sheila says. “That’s very important for people who have been forced to leave their own communities. One of our aims is for them to find ways of living in a community again.”

So they get involved in running the charity. They work in reception and sit on interview panels when it hires new volunteers. They go on therapeutic retreats, where shared moments in groups such as cooking and eating together create a sense of belonging.

There are about 120 people in the community, of whom 60 or so are regularly involved in attending weekly and participating in communal activities. Nationally, two-thirds of the young people seeking asylum are aged 16 to 17, with most of the remaining third aged 14-15.

At Baobab, the youngest child coming for treatment is just six years old.

Immigration lawyers, social services and other charities refer most of them. Some are in local authority care. Others live in flats and houses provided by the National Asylum Support Service, part of the Home Office.

“That is often appalling accommodation,” says Sheila. “I saw a 17-year-old girl yesterday who was living in a NASS shared house with several other women. The house was infested with mice and the hot water had stopped working. They had waited three days for the hot water supply to be restored.”

Baobab gets no statutory funding. So the £37,000 donated via The London Community Foundation has been a lifeline, says operations manager Verity Spence.

“The Foundation have been great. They came to talks we organised and met people and have been very engaged. They made a real effort to connect with us,” Verity says.

“They even found us an individual donor for our fund to help young people who are destitute or facing financial hardship. Such funds are traditionally very approachable. And they’ve been very approachable. We can go to them for guidance and have

a conversation without feeling awkward.” Working with the young people who come to Baobab is completely absorbing, Sheila says. “You learn so much about survival and resilience. Every day I hear about extraordinary ways that people survive.

“These people are on the margins of British society. Many have to get by on just £36.95 a week. Our aim is they will find a place in the wider community and contribute to this country. And I believe that given the right support, they will.”

Just like Ronnie, who fled the Rwandan genocide aged 14. He now has a BSc in mental health nursing and works in community psychiatric care. He also has a partner and two young sons.

“Meeting people who shared horrific experiences like mine strengthened my understanding of hope, belief in positive change, forgiveness of those who wronged me and belief in life,” he says.

“Baobab shaped me into the person I am now.”

Some names have been changed



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