

WHAT DOES WINTERCOMFORT DO? (article by Sheila Merrick)

Wintercomfort "supports those who are homeless or at risk of losing their homes by offering them basic amenities, opportunities for educational development and recreation and a range of services designed to help them achieve greater autonomy"

I'm now in my 6th year of being a volunteer at Wintercomfort by delivering fruit there weekly. I'm known as the fruit lady and I always receive a wonderful welcome. My mother and I started and funded this fruit donation; however since her death I had to seek others to help with funding so now our family with three other people from St.Andrew's fund the majority of the costs with the Church picking up the balance from our core giving.

Volunteers

Wintercomfort is committed to providing its volunteers with a safe, fulfilling and rewarding experience, in whatever capacity they choose to work. There is a booklet which tells you most of the things you need to know about volunteering for Wintercomfort on a preliminary basis, but as a volunteer you will receive a proper induction, one to one support, and your own signed copy of a volunteer agreement.

Volunteers play a vital role providing and maintaining Wintercomfort's services. They can work directly with the clients or in a supporting role by helping in the coffee bar, kitchen or clothing store. Volunteers may help with organising and publicising events or offering to help at times when Wintercomfort provides cold weather shelter to the homeless.

There are no specific qualifications or experience required for volunteering. The only real essentials you need to work there are a broad sense of humour and an open mind; if you have these, Wintercomfort is bound to have something to suit your interests.

A Brief History

Wintercomfort was founded in 1990 by Cambridge resident Henry Rothschild who was concerned about the city's ever growing homeless population. Initially, Wintercomfort was run by a team of volunteers from a bus where hot food and drinks were available. Blankets and clothing were distributed and emergency winter shelters established.

Wintercomfort became a registered charity in 1991 and purchased its current headquarters, Overstream House, in 1993. The daycentre, known as The Bus, opened in 1994 offering people a safe, sheltered environment, food and drink, showers and laundry.

More Recently

In September 2002, after refurbishment, the project was re-launched as The Centre as part of a 3-year development planning process following a survey with the clients who overwhelmingly requested more help to move away from homelessness. Wintercomfort also consulted its staff, trustees, the local neighbourhood, the police and other external agencies and now provides a comprehensive service to homeless people and those who are vulnerably housed or at risk of homelessness. They have worked with many other partner organisations and skilled individuals to provide counselling, support and advice (about the law, physical and mental health, drugs, alcohol and housing benefits).

Today

Today the focus is very much centred round Learning and Development. While the centre still provides the basic services of the provision of food, shower and laundry facilities etc, they strongly encourage the personal development of their clients, particularly through education and training. Clients can improve their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills and the centre can help find work placements off site to boost skills for the employment market. The staff also encourages the development of personal interests through recreational activities such as sports, arts and crafts, quizzes, film club, and more. At the heart of all this they offer all of their clients regular, one to one support with a client led approach to promote empowerment.

Looking Forward

One of their latest ventures, Winter Willow, looks set to provide them with a social enterprise venture based on the production, harvest and crafting of willow products for retail, which will offer opportunities for occupation, training and employment across a range of disciplines including conservation, craft, sales, marketing, distribution and more. Another venture is Roots'n'Shoots that makes use of a local allotment to grow fruit, vegetables and flowers for the centre.

Who am I? I'm Sheila Merrick (aka McNally) and if you like to chat to me further about being a volunteer at Wintercomfort I'd be delighted if you'd contact me on 01223 510456 or email sheilamcnally@ntlworld.com . Or contact Cathy Hembry, director of the Wintercomfort on 01223 518140, or email cathyhembry@wintercomfort.org.uk or visit the website www.wintercomfort.org.uk.

You could be one of our next much needed volunteers☺!!!