

One luxurious London members' club is
changing our perception of the homeless.
Samantha Everett investigates.

Redefining Homelessness:

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The Modern Day
Eliza Doolittle

Photograph **LEROY SKALSTAD**



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> for the women inside the decision was made to close it. Schembri emphasises: “You had some women who’d been here a long time so actually moving on was quite scary for them. The transition had to be slow and had to be well managed.” In late 2006 the last regular visitor to the hostel was relocated.

The charity’s aim to help London’s homeless now takes the form of an Employment Academy, integrated with a not-for profit members club. Whilst on the programme, participants will spend their time in personal development learning in the Academy alongside eight hours of work experience in the club per week. The club is operated by Benugo, the House’s hospitality partner, who play a significant role in training the participants whilst they’re on work experience.

That experience could be anything from waitressing, bartending, administration or, in Denise’s case, cooking. Which, before coming to the house, she didn’t even like. “It’d never been something I was happy doing, but I love it now, I go in there and get to play with the best ingredients.” Growing up she was never taught to cook and regretted it. “I think it was something missing from my inner child, something I needed to learn to do.”

Sarah Rose is the Employment Academy Executive and believes the level of service they gain is “invaluable”. Out of the 60 the Employment Academy train each year 54% go on to find paid work within a month of graduating, and 79% earn a City and Guilds qualification. “Every single person is different and there are so many barriers that prevent people from finding work”, Rose began.

On the walls around her are large sheets of paper with inspirational phrases written on them. “Our wants and wishes” is the title of one – happiness, a job and staying sober is written below. Rose added: “This is our training room, as you can see from the stuff stuck up on the walls, it’s a very warm, friendly, open environment made to put people at ease and make them as comfortable as possible, and it works.”

STAYING SOBER is only one of Denise’s goals. “The big life plan is to work in the kitchen part-time, and the big, big plan is to write local social history books and become a local historian”, she states. She’s determined to progress her career in the kitchen and follow her passion in history - “I’m the kind of weirdo that gets excited about the Victorians.”

But none of this is possible without the help of donations and sponsors. One of which is the Monument Trust – a foundation that provides grants to charities for arts, health, criminal justice and homelessness. Mark Woodruff is the Trust Executive for Monument and thinks it is a “vicious cycle”. He explains: “If you haven’t got an address nobody will employ you, and nobody will give you anywhere to live unless you’ve got some work.”

Woodruff emphasises that a homeless person should not be a case to be “patronised” but someone to be looked upon as a “potential employee”. He says: “These are people that we can look on as people with skills, people who have got potential for development, people who can be assets for society.” Critics might accuse schemes like the House of St Barnabas of tokenism but experts from other

homelessness charities like Thames Reach and the Cardinal Hume Centre disagree. Jeremy Swain, the Chief Executive of Thames Reach, believes the scheme is a “unique take on homelessness” whilst Cathy Corcoran, the Chief Executive of the Cardinal Hume Centre, thinks it provides a “positive and motivating” structure for the participants.

Back in the kitchen Denise has almost finished preparing the sauce for her dish. The corner of her lips gently twitches into a smile. She says: “I’ve kind of been offered a job, working in the kitchens, so hopefully in another month I’ll be in paid employment.”

SIX WEEKS LATER

The sound of people clapping resounds across the Chapel as the last of this year’s graduates mount the stage. Denise had graduated, and secured herself a paid job working for Benugo in the kitchen at The House of St Barnabas . “A job will give me money, but more than money it will give me pride back, satisfaction, and a purpose every day”, she says. She is wearing a smart black dress with her ash blonde hair straightened in a neat bob. Taking to the stage a second time she began a speech. A speech comparing herself to Eliza Doolittle from My Fair Lady and the similar transformation she has undertaken.

“When Eliza entered Professor Higgins’ house, the fictitious 27a Wimpole Street, it was to change her life forever. Half a mile away and over a century later, Soho Square has done the same for me. Just like Eliza I have found my happy ending.” ■

The sculpture is the centerpiece in the entrance hall at the House. Behind it is the painting ‘Sisters’ 2015 by Wanda Bernadino



The charity (above) was founded in 1846 and continues to support the homeless. It was originally a hostel but after falling into disrepair it had to be closed

“It’s a very clever illness. You’re not actually living you’re just existing

Cascading down from the ceiling is an ornate gold sculpture. Delicate leaves swirl around the middle, with soft light illuminating them from behind. If you look closely there are small engravings on the leaves – words like ‘inspire’ and ‘thrive’. The sculpture is the centerpiece in the hallway of a Grade 1 listed building in Soho. Down the hall from the entrance room people are gathered, socialising and sipping

champagne. And down another level, only a few metres away, is Denise cooking.

Denise is on work experience as a commis chef for this London members’ club. What many of the members may not realise is that only a few months ago she was on the verge of homelessness and struggling with alcoholism. “I was an alcoholic. I’d run away from Essex back to London and left my two daughters. I just couldn’t cope anymore.” She then moved from place to place until joining Turning Point, a support service that helped her into recovery. Denise adds: “The only way I can describe alcoholism is that it’s a very clever illness, you think that what you’re doing is quite normal, but you’re not actually living, you’re just existing.”

And now she’s at an exclusive members’ club in Soho. Using a knife, she finely chops a chilli before grating the zest of a lemon. She’s making a scotch bonnet sauce to accompany a king prawn platter. A big step up from the stereotypical soup kitchen role associated with homeless people. So how did she manage to get there?

Denise heard about the club from a friend at Turning Point. He had turned his life around and she wanted to do the same. Called The House of St Barnabas, it runs a 12-week programme designed to help people that have been affected by homelessness get back into lasting paid work. Participants work towards a City and Guilds qualification in either Hospitality or Business Administration. After graduating, they are then provided with a year of progression support focused on getting them into employment.

But Denise is only one of thousands that need to find paid work. According to Crisis.org, the

number of people sleeping rough on any one night across England has doubled since 2010. The main reasons behind this are the cuts to government funding, the rise in immigrants working in minimum wage jobs and a lack of affordable housing.

Gerard Lemos is an expert in homelessness, having researched extensively and written two books on the subject. He believes the solution for homelessness is not through housing at all, but through nurturing people’s aspirations and interests. “Giving people a job and somewhere to live doesn’t really give them enough to have a good life. It’s about giving them purpose and drive.”

According to Lemos the way to tackle homelessness is a long process focused on building people’s self esteem, not just relocating them and expecting them to automatically migrate back into society. He explains: “I think there’s a lot of emphasis on getting a job and finding a house, and actually these people have a lot of emotional problems and without acknowledging that you’ll never find a solution.” Whilst Lemos questions whether The House of St Barnabas directly gets people off the streets, he believes it is a good way of helping people who are “work ready” back into employment. “I think it’s very creative what they do, they’ve got a lot of flair and originality”, he adds.

And it’s this creative approach to employability that The House of St Barnabas is trying to provide for Denise and other participants that come onto the programme. Sandra Schembri is the CEO at The House of St Barnabas, or the “Chief Encouragement Officer” as she likes to be known. “People come to us when they’ve made a decision, they want to get back into work” she explains. “Our job is to understand about that individual, that individual’s background, where they’ve come from, what they’ve done recently, where they would like to go.”

BUILT IN 1679 the House has been around for generations. “It’s a jewel in Soho, it has a warmth to it which is just magical” Schembri says. However the listed property comes with its downsides: “it’s also increasingly difficult because you can’t change or adapt the building.”

Prior to being a social enterprise, the charity operated as a hostel up until 2006. But the house was old and fell into disrepair. No longer safe >