

## Simon's Story

As I drove up to the prison gates I saw Simon was already waiting for me, his belongings piled up in a neat stack by the side of the road. He looked the smartest I had ever seen him. He was smiling! He had hope in his eyes. How very different from the man I first met a few months ago.

When Simon approached Ford Forward for resettlement support he was in a low state. His mental health was difficult for him to handle and being in Covid lockdown had made things significantly worse. The full time job he had been working in from prison had been stopped suddenly, leaving him shocked and dismayed. How would he manage on release without having that income? Would he lose the job completely through no fault of his own? The virus repercussions had hit him hard. With nowhere to live and no family support, things were looking grim.

During those early days of our contact, I sat with him and listened as he poured out his story, and I could almost see the tension within him reducing. I acknowledged his journey and the value I put on him sharing it with me. He breathed a little easier. I explained how our charity aims to support men coming out of prison into the West Sussex area, and how we work alongside other agencies and charities and the prison structure to facilitate and attempt to action key goals like finding accommodation, applying for grants and small loans, linking with faith communities, (where requested). Simon seemed overwhelmed, 'I've been in and out of prison a few times and have never been given that kind of help!'

When I explained that he would also be allocated a personal volunteer mentor, who would get to know him whilst still in prison and give him support on leaving, he was so happy and smiled for the first time in the meeting. Within 2 weeks we had connected him to his mentor (Paul), by phone from the prison chapel. Simon seemed excited about the call and chatted away to Paul in an easy manner. Things were looking up.

Over the next few months our charity worked alongside the prison resettlement team and two outside charities to apply for housing for Simon. Due to his mental health he had requested that he did not go into a hostel situation, but would wish to be in a self contained unit. We all respected this request and began applying for suitable accommodation locally. At the same time we made application to a local charity, who awarded him a non-repayable grant which would cover 11 nights in a local Travelodge, should this be needed. With Covid-19 still spreading, seeing Simon homeless was not an option to our team.

As the release date loomed Simon had some very good news: his pre-Covid employers guaranteed him his job back on release! With this fantastic news, a caring mentor for support and the Travelodge option coming good, there was one more thing to try and secure: a self contained flat. Not any easy thing to find for someone coming out of prison! Was there someone out there who would be prepared to give someone who was trying so hard to change, a chance of a new start in life?

The day before release Simon was with us in the chapel when the news arrived: the housing charity we had been working with had secured Simon a self contained flat in the exact area he had wanted! Funding from another charity would be applied for immediately to assist with the deposit but might take 7 days to secure..... so the Travelodge option was booked!

On 6<sup>th</sup> August 2020 I sat with Simon in MacDonalds, sipping coffee, as we waited to go and book into the Travelodge, hand sanitiser and face masks to hand! He was a free man again! A shy and reserved man naturally, he was looking thoughtful and smiled. "I can't thank Ford Forward enough for what you've done for me" he said, with wide eyes and a new look of self-assurance about him. "I have never been given so much support on release and you have done it all for me and believed in me and my future. Your charity is doing great work. I'm very grateful."

A text pinged in: 'Mick here. Your flat has been approved and your request to paint it yourself has been granted. The landlord will be in touch but you should be in, in a few days!'

August 2020