

Mile in My Shoes: Celestine's story

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes

I'm Celestine Agbo and I live in South London. Originally, I'm from Nigeria but I've been here a long time, since I was 10 years old.

My role here currently I... facilitate the men's group, I work with amazing refugees, asylum seekers. At an early age I was fortunate to actually know what my purpose is in life, which is to serve. And that's the amazing thing that I do. I serve and I'm really proud of that.

Everything can change. Anyone can be in that situation. And some of the people I work with probably never thought they'd end up leaving their... loved country.

There are so many barriers to their wellbeing. To not be able to provide for your family, I can't imagine, I cannot imagine what that must be like. And the children not allowed to play in the back garden of the hotel. How many of us can imagine the dehumanisation of humanity, right before our eyes. It's dystopian really. But we're living in it.

When you become a refugee or asylum seeker or migrant, no-one cares what you used to do in your previous life. Might have been a doctor, lawyer, you know, builder, painter. It doesn't matter. No-one cares. You're just a refugee, or just an asylum seeker. It's just so, so humiliating to see those guys and how demoralised they are, you know. Castrated, even. Not knowing if they're going to have a future here, or if two weeks' time they're going to be moving to another hotel. And then another hotel. And then to another place where their kids are going to be abused at school and it's okay, no-one says anything, because they're not worthy of being represented, because they don't have the dialogue, they don't have the language to defend themselves.

How can you just stay in the room all day just listening to the TV that you can't really understand very much.

[Sounds of a TV]

It impacts their mental health. It impacts their physical health. They put on a lot of weight because there's not... food's really bad. Food's really bad. We explore that, what it must be like for them. Talk about their relationships. They talk about inability to provide for their family and how it must reflect on them. So, all these painful, painful scenarios that they have to mask every day just to get on. We... we all think it.

When I was much younger my parents left us to come to England and we were left with relatives in Nigeria. And then a few years later this horrible thing happened which was called the Biafran civil war, and we became estranged from everybody we know. And became



refugees. And... I was seven, and my sisters was nine and ten. For three years we survived as children of war, the Biafran War.

My sisters were an early example of service for me. They went and sold biscuits, or whatever they made, to the soldiers on the roadside which was really dangerous at the time. And they made sure that I was okay. I captured bugs and shot birds with my catapult just to kind of, you know, have some kind of, something to eat.

Doing what we can to get by you know. Take shelter, run into the woods in middle of the night when you're being strafed by you know, Russian jets and bombed. Or even the fear of soldiers coming in and grabbing kids or maybe conscripting them to Biafran boy soldier. And all that was there. My sisters taught me kind of, you know, 'Put this dress on if you see the soldiers so they think you're a girl,' kind of thing. And they were only children themselves. They were only children themselves. How did they know, how did they know to look after me?

Obviously that all contributes to the person I am now because I was looked after by my sisters. Yeah, I learned a lot from them.

My parents were here, they didn't know where we were. So as far as they were concerned, we might have been killed, had no news. My mother had two jobs, and she would rush home at the end of the day to catch the 10 O'Clock News. She put the news on one day, so the cameras was on the refugee camp. And they zoomed in, there was a group of children in the refugee camp. Me, in the refugee camp.

So, she mounted this rescue mission. Yeah. Against Foreign Office warning not to enter the war zone. And she flew into Biafra to look for us. And she found us in the camp. And she flew us out. Yeah, so it's a miracle. So that's why I don't really have much fear because I think, actually I survived that. I see it as a blessing because it really has honed just a value for people and a value for love and compassion.

Them coming to the group is just liberating for them. I can understand how they feel, and you know, trying to settle and wanting to be accepted. Someone had referred to it as advanced empathy or lived experience even. It enables me to really touch base with where they're coming from, what they're feeling and the struggles that they're going through.

We might take a trip to the bowling alley or grab a swim in Brighton. It's amazing because it's... life and they're actually out there and even if the water's cold and they're... living it, they're living it. Because it's different to being locked up in there, cooped up in their hotel.

For me it's... absolute honour and privilege to have them in that space. And to have that trust from them which enables them to open up because they know I'm there for them and I will listen to them. And that, when they leave, we're going to try and patch them up before they go out into the big wide world again.

I'm asked, 'If you had the choice where would you live, or the best place.' And actually, I'm living there now. Because here, the humanity in this country is incredible. It would be amazing if the system was slightly more fine-tuned, so it enables them to work whilst they're here, whilst they're trying to get their immigration sorted out, their status sorted out. Irrespective of what the result might be, because they have so much skill to bring. So much skill that will enhance this country and bring in more – resources, more money, more everything.

Someone wants to help you. And you say, 'No, no, no, no, no, no. We're just going to keep you caged up in this little space and damage your mental health.' Which is going to impact on the health system anyway. So why don't we just limit that by finding ways to enable them to contribute, which is what they want to do. It sounds simple to me.

I want to imagine the future is going to be great. And change a different thing to accept. But change happens, irrespective of whether we like it or not. And I'm just hoping the change, it will be a good change.