

Mile in My Shoes: Jo-Dee's story

Estimated reading time: 8 minutes

I am Jo-Dee Walmsley, and I volunteer full-time at The Lighthouse. We help people in lack. So, what do you lack? You lack community. You lack food. You lack money. You lack clothing. I cannot tell you; we get hundreds and hundreds of people every day.

The housing is – just a terrible situation and I'm seeing that more and more and more of the people that are sleeping rough. But there are also other people that are suffering mentally and would come to us, you know, because maybe they're a bit depressed or sad or lonely.

We give money advice because we want to get people independent and looking after themselves. So, we help them go through their debts and if we can write off any debts and things like that. We have something called Nurture, which is just for women, which is nurturing your body inside and out. You know, we even have a wonderful stylist that comes to help you style – yourself, your particular body shape, whatever – on a budget. We have people that come and talk to us about stress, resilience and taking care of yourself and knowing your triggers. So, we go into quite a lot of detail and it's just lovely to watch people blossom from there.

Some of the main things that can cause you pain – *laughs* – are a breakup in a relationship, you know, moving countries, a big health thing, also not having somewhere to live. Now I had all of those. So that was me – splat – *laughs*. Yeah, I was really down. I mean, anyone that's got kids knows if you're separated from your children, it's really hard. And yeah.

So that left me a bit stranded, and I found myself back home in South Africa. And I was with my, my sister and I was telling her, 'You know, I'm so down and out and I know that, before I was – when I had a problem, I was in Macau and I start laughing, and I'm sure there's something in this.' And my sister said, 'Well, Google it!' *Laughs*. As you do, I Googled it. And what do you know, there was something called laughter yoga. And not only was it like, out there, there was a training course just in the city I was living. So, talk about meant to be. And... so yeah, so then I spent 10 years travelling around the world as a motivational speaker. And I spoke about laughter and how good it is for your wellbeing and your mental health.

But because of my passion, I was working too much, and the company didn't really appreciate that. So, that kind of burnt me out and then just everything went wrong... A friend of mine that I'd met in India – here we go – she needed help to start her laughter business. And I said, 'Well, you know, I'll come and help you.' And I came here to Woking, and I stayed with her a few days. And then I said, 'Well, I don't really have anywhere to go, so I'll stay with you.' I asked if I could stay, and she said, 'Sure, you can stay.' And just a few months after that, I got diagnosed with end-stage kidney failure.

I started to feel really down and tired, loads of headaches and now suddenly I'm getting told well, 'Hello, you're gonna have to go on dialysis and need a transplant very soon.' So now I can't work, and my friend needed – needed – *laughs* – was getting married, not needed to, but she was getting married. And so, it was only right that I moved out. Wow... That led me to become homeless. And I was just about to go on dialysis too, so I was freaking out, you can imagine. And the lady I was staying with wanted to help but she couldn't, it was not fair and – there you go. So I found myself homeless.

So, I went to the council, and I needed help and they said, 'Well we can help you, but you have to come here on the day that you are homeless'. I had told them before about having kidney disease and, oh my gosh, they gave me a bed and breakfast in town in Woking. And it was a room on my own with my own bathroom. Fortunately for me, I never had to sleep rough. Because... in my case, which is not the same as everybody else's case so I'm very lucky, I knew I was going to be homeless.

If you want to know – *laughs* – how hard it is for someone that doesn't have money to get an apartment. You need an address to get benefits. If you don't have benefits, you can't get any help. I don't know if you know that. So, some of these people on the street can't get benefits because they don't have a place to stay. You know, people say, 'How do you get that way?' I'm telling you; you don't realise, you can try as much as you can, but sometimes just you get a few knocks or just a few things go wrong and that can lead you down that road and it's very depressing.

I was lucky enough to be put on universal credit, but I was on a, like a jobseeker's one at the time so that's not very much. And... yeah. Eating is difficult but then that's kind of where I met The Lighthouse which is where this is all going, is to this wonderful place that saved me.

At the lodge where I was staying, there was a couple of other people staying there and they offered me to go into The Lighthouse for a coffee and I said, 'Oh, okay.' So, walked into this wonderful place. Was greeted with smiles and love and had a coffee, had some cakes. Wow, that became like a place... I could go to.

I was very lucky because I had a friend that would knock on my door. Because when you're depressed, the last thing you want to do is go out of your room, you want to hide. And he used to say, 'Come on, walkies time.' And he'd take me to The Lighthouse with him. So, we were each other's buddies, and we managed to go every day. And we'd get a hot meal every now and then, or there was also a food bank. I was really blown away which is why I've stayed with them, and I've crossed the road and helped, now I'm part of The Lighthouse.

When people are down and up, that's all they've got. They think about, you know, my problems, my this, my that and it's really sad. But I give them a break because we pick topics and we say, 'What's your favourite food, what's your favourite movie,' or 'Have you got a place that you used to love to go,' or... It just makes them think of their good times and to think about something different instead of just where they are. And that just gives their brain a break.

I offered to go full-time as a volunteer because, for me, it was a reason to get out of bed. They asked me to join the welcome team. What I do when someone walks in is I have to assess them. Whatever they say to me when they walk into the door I go, 'Hello, how can I help you today?' I have to find out where I'm going to put them, what I'm gonna do with them, how I can help them all in one go. And some people go, 'I just need help.' Okay. where do I start. 'I'm homeless. I'm sleeping on the street.' Okay. So, then I go, 'How about I get you a coffee and a meal?' And then in the meantime, I'm busy booking them clothing, arranging them food bank, and I'm arranging all those things that we can do for them.

The Lighthouse is a one-stop shop. We try and do everything for everybody, and we get them hooked up, you know, from the beginning. And then hopefully in a few months they will be fully fledged – *laughs* – left us, found a job, and all of that. And that's why we take them in, and we look after them and keep them safe.

They're treated like normal people. We don't judge. We don't care where they've come from. They are whoever they are, and they will get love and get help. And you know, so many times the problem is they get, 'No' as an answer everywhere. So, a lot of people come to us really aggressive, but then I say, 'Yes'. I've seen some very hard characters warm up to me and then become really nice to me because they go, 'Wow you actually say yes, or you try and help me, you don't just brush me off.'

Yes, you do suffer because you know sometimes you get someone with domestic violence for example, and they come in and they just fall into pieces. And then how do you help that person – can't be left alone. It is so hard. And so, you see this, and it does take its toll. But we try and do our best and we help so many and so I think... it is great and that's why there should be more Lighthouses.

I'll give you an example. This is, this is a friend of mine. She has an autistic son. Her son is 10, was non-verbal until about five and he needs a lot of attention. Autism is not easy to deal with and he gets very aggressive and all that. Now, she wants to work, but she's alone with him. And she's been here a year, and he hasn't been placed in a school. She doesn't get a break. She's been given a respite now, thank goodness, it's happened. But in a year, I've watched her suffer. She's been told to come in and go to the jobseekers and to look for work. She can't look for work because she can't leave her child. So why are you forcing her to look for work? She can't. She wants to, but she can't find any work. She can't leave her son. So now why are you putting her through that pressure to have to meet every week on a little bit of time that she's got free, when she hasn't got any time free? So, there's one big gripe I have.

But there are a few people out there that are battling, you know, to find work. There are people that are trying and then they get stuck. I had a case the other day at The Lighthouse where this gentleman is a chef and he's been looking for work and he didn't have money to go for the interview. And he came to us going, 'Help, I don't know what to do. I've been called back for the second interview, but I can't get there.'



So, we luckily, we did help him. I haven't seen him; it was just before the holidays but that's what goes on. It is not – everybody's lazy. I'm sure there are people that are lazy. I must be honest about that, but we are not all trying to – to get something for nothing.