

What generation hostel did next

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HOW A PIANO came to grace the Old School House asylum seekers' hostel in Dún Laoghaire isn't known. All former resident Adeniyi Allen-Taylor does know is that it made life bearable. Most evenings, his impromptu recitals of Christian songs would find ears: teenagers sitting around lost in thought.

"Music has a way of healing people, of consoling people, of giving people hope," says the gently-spoken Nigerian. "I used to console myself. There were a lot of times I'd go on the piano and cry. I'd just play and cry."

Almost 10 years on the 27-year-old is still playing piano – and saxophone, bass, guitar and drums. But these days, it's in the more uplifting surrounds of his recording studio and music school in Drogheda, or on stage with the Oleku Band, an Afrobeat outfit.

Now a university graduate and married with two children, he says some don't countenance miracles but he's a believer.

Allen-Taylor's is an enlightening success story from "generation hostel", a legion of lone foreign children – or unaccompanied minors – who arrived during the past decade, with over 2,000 applying for asylum.

Nearly 6,000 referrals of unaccompanied minors were made to the HSE's Dublin Social Work Team for Separated Children Seeking Asylum during the past decade, roughly half reuniting with family members in Ireland.

Most of the remainder, aged 16 or over, were placed in hostels (the HSE admits some under-16s were also put in hostels) while their refugee claims were assessed.

Over 500 foreign children have gone missing from HSE care with many still unaccounted for and the overall approach to hostel accommodation has attracted concerns over child safety. The use of hostels is now being phased out, while claims from unaccompanied minors for refugee status have dropped from a peak of 600 in 2001 to just 56 last year.

The HSE says less than 60 such teens are living in hostels now, and by the year's end none will be.

RESEARCHER ITAYI Viriri has been analysing the challenges faced by former unaccompanied minors who were given refugee status and leave to remain. His study – facilitated by a UCD scholarship funded by the former Combat Poverty Agency – focuses on a group which accesses support from the Dún Laoghaire Refugee Project (DRP).

Of the 60 responses he received, some 43 people reported being in further education. The DRP, as well as being a social outlet, has provided over 180 young people – some still in the

refugee process – with small-scale college-related expenses (although this funding is “diminishing rapidly”, says DRP’s Mary King).

Viriri cautions that, more widely, many former unaccompanied minors struggle to gain a foothold in life. They face lots of obstacles and the lack of a familial network is an obvious drawback, especially where childcare is involved.

There are also literacy and language issues, burn-out from the stresses of a refugee process described as child-unfriendly by the Ombudsman for Children, and financial constraints (those with refugee status get “free fees” but not those who have been given humanitarian leave to remain).

THE PIANO MAN

Allen-Taylor came to Ireland at 17. He is one of several hundred former unaccompanied minors with either refugee status or “leave to remain” (data doesn’t establish how many of these were reunification cases or how many grew up in the hostels). Originally from Ogun State in southwest Nigeria, he arrived in September 2000 after “cultural unrest” back home. He came via Amsterdam: “I’d never heard of Ireland,” he says.

He was enrolled at O’Connell Secondary School, Dublin 1, where he got 420 points in his Leaving Certificate in 2001. Because he was not allowed to work and was subject to non-EU college fees, he’d hit his glass ceiling.

“I went back to Mr Kilbride crying, ‘I can’t just stay home and do nothing’,” he recalls. He’d seen other asylum seekers fade into “an emotional death” and he didn’t want to go there.

Michael Kilbride spoke on RTÉ radio about his ex-student’s predicament – drawing a dramatic response. A Dublin couple, Eddie and Doriel Molloy, came forward and, with close friends, they helped with Allen-Taylor’s college fees. And a Baldoyle woman, Laura Woods, also got in touch: she had a room that Allen-Taylor could call his own.

“There are some people,” he says, “who are sent from God.” The Nigerian, who received humanitarian leave to remain in Ireland in March 2005, completed a degree in computer programming and multimedia systems (while managing a petrol station), landed jobs at two multinational IT companies and has since opened a music school and recording studio called Allen Music Consult. He wants to provide an outlet for kids “stuck on the TV” and suchlike: “I feel so many people out there would benefit from what I’m trying to do.”

THE TRINITY STUDENT

Twenty-two-year-old Emeka (not his real name) is another person who has spectacularly overcome the anxieties of life as a young asylum seeker. He too lived in a hostel and had no family to lean on. Walking through Trinity College’s Front Square, the Nigerian student has to interrupt our conversation several times: he’s a popular guy.

When Emeka lived at Chester House hostel in Phibsborough, Dublin, he never thought he’d be studying at such a prestigious university. Projections weren’t in his armoury at all.

“I didn’t think about the future much, it was ‘leave the past, concentrate on now’,” says the thoughtful man, sitting in a college cafe. But this Buddhist-like adherence to now was thrown into disarray when Emeka got a deportation notice in 2005. “Though I had these little, little dreams, when I got the letter I just thought ‘oh, everything is crushed now, there’s no point in doing anything’.”

He was 15 when an uncle brought him to Ireland in 2002 – due to family and religious tensions, he says – and entered the refugee application process.

Emeka was interviewed at the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner – “It’s like being on trial for a crime you didn’t commit” – and his claim was rejected, a decision upheld by the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

During the process, he found solace in a youth drama project which brought together Irish and foreign youngsters, including other asylum seekers. “There were some people who’d been through a lot more and were still happy. I decided to do the best in everything I do, and got very interested in acting and singing.”

Supporters advocated on Emeka’s behalf, and he was granted leave to remain as an “extraordinary” measure in December 2005.

He retook his Leaving Certificate and achieved 450 points, having got 280 points the previous year while his case was undecided. He is now in his final year of a finance degree at Trinity.

Jobs with a mobile phone retailer, St Patrick’s Festival and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council have gone some way towards funding his studies (he pays EU rates), as has assistance from Trinity’s access programme, St Vincent de Paul, and a bursary from friends and patrons of O’Connell Secondary School, where he studied.

“A great woman from the Dún Laoghaire Refugee Project took me in,” he adds, “and today I’m still living with her in Bray. I’m very, very grateful to her.”

THE ACCOUNTANT

For some, part-time evening degrees are an option. Ben Daniel (24) from Nigeria, who has humanitarian leave to remain, took this route and graduated in accountancy last year.

The lack of work opportunities has left Ben deeply frustrated but he’s a world away from hostel life – a strange existence he navigated thanks to a strict upbringing in Nigeria. “Without those morals, I don’t know where I would have been,” says Daniel. “You have people who are doing drugs in the hostel, people who are drinking in the hostel . . . doing so many things.”

Daniel has played for Shamrock Rovers’ first team but his greatest achievement is surely off the pitch and away from the books: his marriage to Magda (22) over three and a half years ago. She also arrived in Ireland alone seeking asylum and they met in a hostel.

Of Eritrean nationality but born in Ethiopia, Magda was deported with her family due to tensions between the countries. But as she was a Jehovah’s Witness, Eritrea was unsafe for

her (human rights organisations have documented evidence of such persecution). She applied for asylum in Ireland in July 2004 and was accorded refugee status one year later.

Magda is now fluent in English – though her writing skills need work, she says – and is doing Fetac modules at Level 5, with an eye on further studies in graphic design.

Daniel first heard of Magda from a mutual friend, Nadia, who was moved from Magda's accommodation at the Old School House, Dún Laoghaire, to his hostel in Donnybrook.

One evening, Magda came to visit her friend. It was Christmas 2004. "Nadia was like 'oh, Ben this is Magda; Magda remember Ben who I was telling you about?' And I was just there, speechless," says Daniel, smiling.

"Immediately when I came in she said she should be going; I said 'is it that I'm that repulsive, that immediately I come in and you're leaving?' She said 'no, no, no, it's time I got back to the hostel'."

The pair began meeting up as friends, developing an easy rapport and sharing a quick sense of humour. They married in November 2006. And in the finest traditions of Irish weddings, the groom was puzzled as to the identity of many in attendance.

"Half of the people who were there, I personally don't know them," smiles Daniel, genuinely puzzled.

"It was a really great wedding," says Magda.

THE FATE OF CHILDREN

THE PLIGHT of the 6,000 or so children who are separated from their parents and who arrived in Ireland seeking asylum in the past decade has not been easy.

Some fled war-torn countries and torture while others escaped poverty. When they arrived here, those who could not be reunited with parents or family living in Ireland were put into the care of an overstretched HSE.

Last year Ombudsman for Children Emily Logan identified 124 children under 18 in hostels in Dublin with no access to care staff from 5pm to 9am. Between 2000 and the end of 2009, 501 separated children went missing from the care of the HSE. Just 67 of them, or 13 per cent, have been traced. There are concerns that some missing children have become prostitutes or victims of trafficking.

Irish children in State care are not left in unsupervised hostels overnight, which led one HSE childcare manager to suggest this year the policy may be racist.

Changes are taking place. The HSE recently agreed a deal with the charity Crosscare, which provides care workers in hostels at night. And use of hostel accommodation is expected to be phased out by the end of the year.

But there are new challenges. The Reception and Integration Agency recently began removing separated children living in Dublin from their schools at 18 as part of its policy to

disperse asylum seekers around the country. This can result in the young adults not completing Leaving Cert exams. They are also removed from friends and other support structures they have built up. It could also damage prospects of obtaining leave to remain in the country. One student at DIT facing deportation was released from prison recently following an appeal to a High Court judge. Legal counsel said the student was “highly educated” and studying for a masters.

A person’s enrolment at college would be among the factors taken into account when the Minister for Justice decides whether to make a deportation order. – **Jamie Smyth, Social affairs correspondent**

Hassan, from Somalia, paid his college fees by inventing a road-safety dance

NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD Abdul Ali Hassan looks every inch the freshman, clad in DCU hoodie and all wide-eyed enthusiasm.

“Mechanical and manufacturing engineering, or biomedical engineering,” he ponders, sipping his hot chocolate. “I’m not really sure yet.”

But degree specialisations aren’t his main concern. When classmates ask, Hassan says he lives with an uncle in Dublin.

Home is, in fact, an adult asylum-seeker hostel in the inner city, where he returns each night after study or mentoring at the Computer Clubhouse, an after-school learning space for young people from Dublin’s southwest inner city.

Arriving from war-torn Somalia in September 2006, aged 15, and with the assistance of an “agent”, Hassan says he’s from Kismayo and is a Bajuni, an ethnic minority persecuted by members of larger clans. His family organised for him to leave, he explains.

In Dublin, he was placed in a hostel and enrolled at O’Connell Secondary School. He won pupil of the year in 2009 and a bursary contributed to by friends and patrons at his school covered his first-year fees at DCU.

He was awarded a \$5,000 (€3,886) Clubhouse to College Scholarship, which will go towards his second-year fees, after designing a road-safety device.

“I was reading an article in a newspaper that said many road accidents happen around sharp corners,” he says.

“In the countryside, you have these mirrors but if it’s night or foggy you can’t really see. So I came up with this idea for a pressure sensor on the ground that the car goes over which activates flashing lights – to say there’s a car coming around the other side of the corner.”

The entry included a model. “I did a prototype,” replies Hassan casually, “with the help of one mentor from DIT.”

He says his mother was overcome by pride and disbelief when he phoned her with the news.

Hassan says his application for refugee status has been refused, and he is appealing at the Refugee Appeals Tribunal. If that fails, he will seek leave to remain.

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