SUBMISSION FROM LIZZIE JOHNSTONE

Lots of people have said they don't know how to reach Gypsy/Travellers, how to work with us and we get called ‘hard to reach’ but honestly it is no different to anyone else. Yes, there are Travellers who are a bit wary, stand offish but that’s only human, especially if you’ve been treated badly. But I think it is just about building up trust, relationships.

To reach out to Travellers it is better if you do it face to face, person to person, cause that way you start to build up trust. You get to know that person, who they represent. Usually you can tell what their individual personality is like, you can sense if they are down to earth, easy to talk to or not. We can be wary of suits and briefcases, but if you are just in casual dress, and importantly with a smile on your face, and a sense of humour, me myself I would feel more confident speaking to them.

Take the first time I met Michelle, I can still remember I was on a camp at the side of the road near Edinburgh, heavily pregnant with my second child. This woman knocks at the door, well I was wary, what did she want, who was she. To be honest I thought she was lost or something but I just felt I could trust her. There was something about her!

The other thing for me is that is someone you know introduces another worker then that is a good sign. Cause you know they wouldn’t introduce someone who wasn’t okay, all aiming for the same thing. For me trust is very, very important, 100% and that does take time to build up.

The other thing for Travellers is that we do things and all seems well and good, we go to meetings, we give information, share stories and personal things and then things backfire, it feels like you are getting used and treated badly. The worst is when they don’t even bother to get back to you, even if just to say why something did or didn’t happen, that’s just respect isn’t it? This just ends up making it worse and so much harder for the next person who comes along and that’s why lots of Travellers don’t get involved because they’ve been let down and ignored for so long.

I would say if you are going to work with Travellers, put your fears aside, all things you’ve probably heard or seen, put that aside, just go personally and be yourself with a civilised manner. You’ll get respect if you show respect.

The other thing to remember is don’t just go to official sites, there are hundreds, thousands of Travellers up and down the country in houses or just at the side of the road and they usually get forgotten. I know I had to move into a house because of circumstances as a carer for my son but that doesn’t change who I am. I am still a Traveller.

In the house you can get isolated, you can lose communication with your own folk, it isn’t just that though. You miss the closeness, someone to chat to, have a laugh, share a story, your family, people you’ve been reared with all your life. And you lose the support you get from them too. When I got depressed in the house I wrote poems that was my way to deal with the depression in the house, instead of popping pills or taking to drink. It is my way of coping to put my words across in poems about having to give up my lifestyle and community. Don’t get me wrong I still get down but I know better how to cope now.

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