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‘Carrying on through COVID’ : My experience of becoming a Host Family Supported Carer during Lockdown – Catriona’s story...

“just having him around and watching him blossom has been the best bit”

I made a list of my top 5 questions and answered them as best I can from my own experience to help you learn about the role of Host Family Supported Carer:

1. What’s it like when your young person first arrives?

This is how it happened for me: I got a call from Fiona one lunchtime; she explained they had an emergency case; a boy who had escaped from his traffickers and been found by the police on the south side of Glasgow, and they had nowhere to put him over the weekend except in a B&B, unless I was willing to take a young person who hadn’t been in self-isolation that afternoon? The details were heart-breaking and the decision was easy. My lad arrived 3 hours later, accompanied by 2 social workers and a plastic bag with a toothbrush and a change of clothes in it. No matching process, no time to over-think it, here he was. There was a call with a translator, to explain to him what was happening and then the social workers left, and it was just us.

I’m sure neither of us really knew what to do next, but in the absence of a plan, I just did what I would with anyone else who came to stay; show them around and try to make sure he had everything he needed; a towel, a glass of water, a smile. Having a dog was a bonus. She liked him straight away and he liked her too. I left them getting to know each other and made dinner. I used Google translate to tell him a few things about me and the dog while we ate. I didn’t press him about himself, he clearly wasn’t ready. He was obviously exhausted so I suggested he go up to bed. Then I watched him walk round the house, checking the doors were locked and looking fearfully out of the window. He asked me, “Is it safe. You are not afraid?”. The question and the thought of him alone in a B&B in this state broke my heart. I told him this was his home now, and yes, he was safe in it. He had nightmares anyway, but it was a start.

2. What about the language barrier? Is it hard to communicate?

Surprisingly no. Google translate is your friend – use it! For me, the fact that H couldn’t speak English but wanted to, helped us to connect. Instead of awkward silence, our dinner conversation for the first week or two mostly consisted of pointing at things and naming them, having it repeated back etc. I also labelled large parts of my house with post-it notes; which told my young person that I cared as well as being helpful to him. Once he thought he knew

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the word, we'd take the post-it note down. 6 months on, there are no post-its left and we hardly ever need google translate.

He was also able to get English lessons from a friend online during lockdown because she was furloughed and bored, and he's now at college learning English as a foreign language, so he's still improving all the time.

3. What was the most difficult part of taking a young person into your home during Covid?

For me, bizarrely, the thing that caused me the most stress was feeding him. He eats so much. I was fully aware of this phenomenon in teenage boys before H arrived, but I still wasn't prepared correctly. I'd think I'd got loads of food for us for the week in the weekly shop on Saturday and we'd have almost nothing left by Monday (remember, this was middle of lockdown and H was self-isolating so couldn't go with me)! I would take some meat out of the freezer for us to have for dinner and when I went to cook it found it had already been eaten for his breakfast or lunch. A pan of chilli that would have lasted me 4 meals lasted one. The bread and cheese and ham that I'd stocked up on for him snacking was left untouched – that's not his cultural food – and I had to scour shops and put out SOS's for rice, which he generally eats at least 2 times a day in great quantities, along with meat and veg. I used to have 1 fruit bowl, now we have 3. I made the adjustment in the end. He loves the weekly trip to the supermarket, which we do together, and he loves going to the Chinese supermarket too, and coming home with all sorts of foods which both delight and horrify me. We both eat well, we've enjoyed trying new things, and we have learned to be honest about which we like and which we don't.

4. What was the best thing about taking a young person into your home during Covid?

I've only done it once, so I have very limited experience, but basically just having him around and watching him blossom has been the best bit. A terrified, withdrawn, damaged kid came to my home, and 6 months on a relaxed, funny, hard-working and considerate young man lives in it. There's still a long way for him to go, he occasionally still has nightmares and bad days and he's not as confident outside the home. Never forget, there's 2 years of his life that he's essentially lost, along with his family and that leaves deep scars. But seeing the progress he's made, how resilient and determined he is, gives me hope that he'll be ok, that his life will be ok, and that's the joy of it.

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5. How is the assessment process done in Lockdown?

When lockdown started in March, I was already most of the way through the assessment process. I didn't know what lockdown would mean in terms of finishing, but suspected it would mean further delay, possibly indefinitely. I was pleasantly surprised therefore, when I got a call to ask if I'd like to continue, and I did. I finished up my paperwork and created a profile to help a young person decide if they would want to live with me, while Lorraine, my assigned social worker from the team, interviewed my referees by telephone. Everyone fed back to me on how well it was done; very thorough, longer than they expected, but also friendly and relaxed, with some very good questions. We went to panel in late April. This too was done by telephone for the first time. The panel met to go through my submission and then once they had considered it, I was dialled in to answer any questions and find out what the recommendation would be. Everyone was lovely, very positive and the recommendation was to approve me. The final decision would be made by the ADM and the paperwork would take about 3 weeks to come through. We would start the process of matching with a young person after that. I do know that the team are great: they are considerate, they are creative and they will make the process work. I hope that after reading this, you are ready to begin.

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