

Listening Tent: Action for Aspergers 11 September 2020.

Sometimes having a safe space can be especially important. Action for Asperger's is a charity that has benefited from a free stay under Landmarks. 50 for Free scheme. Our buildings can provide a controlled and safe place for people with Asperger's to take a brave step outside their daily routines, often overcoming severe anxiety to do so, while also appreciating the enjoyment of a short break. This summer, Action for Asperger's stayed at Belmont in Lyme Regis just through the scheme with the help of Elaine Nicholson MBE, who almost single handily steers this small charity in its support work for those with Asperger's. We hear her talking to Sonia Owen and Robert Mann both diagnosed with Asperger's about what their stay at Belmont meant to them.

Elaine: So Belmont-seems a long, long way away now doesn't it?

Sonia and Robert: It does.

Elaine: So when we arrived, you know, everything was in order. It was clean. It was lovely.

Robert: It was great. Well looked after, all clean and presentable.

Elaine: Yes. What about the building itself?

Sonia: I thought the building was lovely. Great looking building from the outside. Like Robert said really well kept inside. And yeah, it was just beautiful.

Robert: It really, really nice. The whole building was really nice. There's so much space in here as well.

Elaine: I also I think the surroundings lend themselves to the way autistic people are, you know, if it was to sort of high tech and jazzy, that might not be comforting. What would you say Sonia and Robert?

Sonia: Yeah, I would agree. Yeah, it's just so relaxing.

Robert: Yeah, very peaceful.

Elaine: And I think, you know, the fact that during this time of COVID it was nice for us to be together like that wasn't it? And again, the place afforded us the space for that to happen. So, I mean, what was your most enjoyable parts of the stay?

Sonia: I think for me just in general, being away, being somewhere different, being around people. As like you say with COVID it had been really difficult and living on my own I hadn't really seen anybody. It had been quite lonely. So it was, for me, it was really nice to be able to go somewhere different, see people, you know.

Elaine: And what about your autism and feeling held and safe there, that sort of thing?

Sonia: Yeah, absolutely. I think if I'd attempted to go away anywhere on my own, it would have been a disaster. But going away in that situation with a AfA, having you there to take control of things and you know, knowing that I was safe, I was fine, nothing was going to happen, made the world of difference.

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Robert: I felt very safe and relaxed there. I didn't get out as much because I was still really dealing with anxiety about people a lot. It was nice the having the grounds as well. It just felt like a safe place We could get some fresh air there without having to deal with strangers, and dealing with that anxiety.

Elaine: And I particularly liked the 'family' dinners that we had. Having us all sitting together, because that doesn't happen a lot for many people on the spectrum does it you know, the opportunity of a nice family meal. More often than not, people can't sit with other people and consume food for a number of reasons. I think we enjoyed going to the beach, didn't we fossil? Fossil hunting.

Sonia: Yeah, location wise it was great because it was in the middle of everything. So it was easy to walk into the shops and come back, or walk down to the beach and come back without having to be out around other people for ages.

Elaine: I mean, it's going to be hard to beat that, isn't it? You know, it was just, how it felt going. I mean, for me personally, you know that I'm always seeing clients and working so hard, particularly over the COVID time. I know that technically your clients, but for me it was nice to have the break as well. Obviously Covid anxiety on top of autistic anxiety has been through the roof. It's been so intense and demanding. And as you said, Sonia, you know, you said it to me twice. It was nice to see you not working. I can't remember what you said, exactly.

Sonia: Well just normally every time I see you every everything's all about work. So it was just nice to see you just relaxing.

Elaine: Yes. And I really did relax. And it was lovely also to, you know like you read the fossil hunter book and we shared a lot of interest in that. And Robert, it's the first time I'd seen your vast collection of train of pictures on your laptop and to see your work. So, that was really enjoyable. It was a lovely way to touch base with clients who aren't in intensive therapy at that moment. It's a lovely way to say 'the door is still open'. And I know Sonia that you struggle in sort of bigger environments don't you, so the fact it was a smaller number this time was helpful to you. And I loved seeing you shine through that.

How did it feel going home? I know there were tears because I gave you a hug and there were lots of tears

Sonia: Well, it was just such an amazing week that it was sad to go home. It just didn't feel like long enough. It felt like we arrived and then we were leaving, in it went so quick.

Elaine: It was a very, very sad affair leaving. I don't know how you felt Robert? You sort of kept it all within, but Sonia struggled.

Robert: It was very surreal.

Elaine: And also what we haven't said - your big thing. Sonia has been doing Open University degree for the last five years. And she learned that she graduated during our time there. So we had a graduation dinner, didn't we?

Sonia: We did, yeah.



Elaine: And Prosecco, and I sort of went out on the behalf of the charity and bought her a special rock thing from the fossil shop to say well done. Because Sonia, if I can say, at 18, when you didn't know you had Asperger's, you went to university but struggled in the first term. You had to come home. Obviously, University life, as another person might enjoy, Sonia struggled with. And so it was all down to Open University. It was the perfect place to be with the right people and a marvellous opportunity. The trips have made many, many people who, can't leave their homes or can't interact with others to actually do those two things to leave home, interact and feel safe and everything.