



Laura's Story

I came to the refuge early in 2008 after I confided in a college tutor about my life at home. My parents were heavy drinkers and my older brother often hit me. I told my tutor I did not want to live there anymore but, at 18 and in full time education, I didn't think I had any other option. My tutor helped me to look into emergency accommodation which she said I'd be able to move into immediately, meaning I could get away from my family as soon as possible. It was through ringing the local housing office that I became aware of Wear Valley Women's Aid.

I was apprehensive at first, as I'd never been to a women's refuge before so I didn't know what to expect, but when I arrived the staff made me feel at ease. They showed me my room, which was big and light, and explained that most other rooms were shared by all of the residents. This included the large kitchen and lounge, four bathrooms and laundry facilities. It was a little bit scary at first knowing I'd be sharing my new home with five strangers, but coming from a big family myself I was used to other people being around.

As it turned out, the other families staying at the refuge were pretty quiet so I was able to spend the next couple of days relaxing and getting settled in! I was so pleased to be away from the chaos that was my life before, but it was big change which had happened very quickly so it was an emotional time. I met some lovely women who were very supportive, and I learned in turn to be supportive back. We had all come from abusive environments and were slowly getting used to the fact that we had an opportunity to make a new start. The staff helped me to do everything I wanted to do while living at the refuge. They told me that they would also support me if I wanted to speak to the police about the abuse at home, but I didn't want to do that, I just wanted to put it all behind me.

I spent 9 months in the refuge – a long time compared to most of the women I met. Some spent only a couple of nights in the refuge, taking a short break from their turbulent home life. Others spent weeks and months there, taking the time to plan their next steps. I used the time to continue my education and prepare to get myself a house. My emotions were up and down at times so it helped that staff were able to support me with my college work when I needed it. They also provided me emotional support, as well as helping me to get counselling through my GP and my college. These services were invaluable as I definitely needed to talk about my experiences in order to come to terms with what had happened to me, and to leave these experiences (and the people involved) behind me. It was hard to totally cut myself off from my family, but once I began to make good friends, many of whom had had similar experiences; it became much easier to see how much my life had improved since making the move away from my abusive family members.

Towards the end of 2008, I was offered a house in the centre of Durham. I was delighted. I was supported to fill out applications for grants to furnish the house, and was



...the refuge at Bishop Auckland

given help to move my belongings from the refuge to my new home. The refuge staff told me that they would continue to support me if I wanted the support, and that I would be able to choose when, where and how often I saw them. It was reassuring to know that I had this support if I needed it, as well as the support from staff at my college, which I would continue to access.

Shortly after moving into my new home, I found out I was pregnant! It was a shock, as my relationship with the father had ended, but I was overjoyed nonetheless.

My baby boy, Thomas was born in June 2009. Looking at him for the first time made me realise how far I had come since making the move away from my family. I had my own home, good qualifications, good friends and had now started my own new family. I took some time off from education to care for Thomas, but I plan to go to university to study social work once he is a bit older, and work towards getting a job in the field of social work/ social care. I had always had an interest in this area before I stayed at the refuge, but since this experience I am certain that I would like to work in this field to support others to make life better for themselves.