

# The Befriender



Number 2

March 2008



Supported by  
**The National Lottery**<sup>®</sup>  
through the Big Lottery Fund



## All Change at Medway Street

Recent months have seen a couple of changes at Medway Street, with the appointment of Heidi Allemeersch as our Befriending Supervisor and Pauline Austin becoming the Project Director of the new 'London Through The Gate' Big Lottery funded befriending service for short term prisoners.

Heidi has introduced herself in a letter to volunteers which appears on page two of this newsletter. After starting at Medway Street in early February, Heidi has already been on her travels attending group meetings.

When New Bridge advertised for someone to lead the new London Through The Gate project, we received many strong applications. After a tough round of interviews, Pauline Austin was appointed to this role and started early in March after helping to introduce Heidi to the world of befriending.

Pauline will be based at Medway Street but her new role will rarely take her outside London. Pauline tells us more about her new role and the new volunteer opportunities it creates on page 3.

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 2** Hello from Heidi
- 3** Which prison is best to visit?
- 4** Feedback – what do prisoners think of New Bridge?

## Prisoner launches petition to highlight insurance problems

The offender's charity UNLOCK has recently promoted a petition on the 10 Downing Street website to highlight the problems faced by ex-prisoners in getting household insurance on release. The unnamed prisoner wrote this open letter;

**Hi**

**I am currently a serving prisoner at HMP Downview in Sutton. I'm at the end of my sentence, residing on a resettlement wing and undertaking voluntary work at the local Citizens Advice Bureau.**

**I've had several friends recently leave prison, who have found it very difficult to get insurance. As you probably know, there are a very limited number of insurance companies who will consider ex-offenders, even when their convictions are totally unrelated to fraud. When they do, the rates are high; this just encourages ex-offenders not to get insurance and therefore the risk of re-offending is high also. I'm fully aware that this issue has already been highlighted in the press, but I would like to try and help in my own small way to getting things changed.**

**I have created an e-petition on the 10 Downing Street website: <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/exoffenderinsure/> where people can electronically sign if they agree that things need to be changed with regards to this matter. I'm now looking for ways to advertise this, so am writing to you now to see if you would add a link to your website and/or publications. Anyone can add their name - the only details are that they are living in the UK and are willing to provide a name and address, so the more friends, families and colleagues the better.**

**Any help, guidance, inspiration gratefully received!**

**Kind Rgds  
(Name withheld)**

*continued on page 3*

## Letter from Heidi

Dear volunteers,

In our autumn newsletter this space was reserved to promote the role of New Bridge Befriending Supervisor and to call for eager applicants. This time the column has been given to me to let you know that the seat has been taken and the supervisor – being me – is launched.

Some of you, members of the Manchester and Liverpool groups, have known me for a while now, ever since I became a prisoner befriender in March 2007. Others have met me during the last week or will soon find me attending their group meetings too.

Getting to know all of you in person is at the top of my list of priorities. In the next few weeks I want to establish the beginnings of what should become a fruitful relationship. Most of you have been with New Bridge far longer than I and there can be no doubt that I will learn quite a bit from your experience which, in turn, will enable me to offer you more and better support.

One of the things that I would like to bring up at the next group meetings – and that you may already want to have a think about – is this newsletter. Imagine what a wonderful instrument this could be to strengthen the ties between New Bridge volunteers across the country; to share stories; to provide a bit of inspiration and, basically, make it into anything and everything you feel a newsletter should be. Your ideas and input will be much appreciated.

To top up our ranks we have got a training weekend for new volunteers planned on the first weekend in April. Three more will be organised later in the year. Meanwhile I hope you will keep on writing with the same zeal as you have shown in the past. With your help I am sure I will have a marvellous time, both as a befriender and as Befriending Supervisor.

Be in touch,

Heidi

## London Through The Gate

Project Director, Pauline Austin tells us more about the new project

The Through the Gate Project is targeted at short-sentenced prisoners and will build on the work that New Bridge's Befriending service has been delivering for over 50 years - providing links to the community when family and friends have gone away or can't be depended on. The project aims to demonstrate that befriending can have an impact on reducing re-offending and an evaluation will be embedded in the project from its inception.

The numbers of prisoners serving 12 months or less have more than doubled in recent years, rising from 18,500 in 1992 to nearly 48,000 in 2002. This group of prisoners receive no statutory support or supervision on release. Unsurprisingly they have a particularly high re-offending rate (over fifty per cent) and are estimated to cost the Criminal Justice System £80,000 per year -which is more than double the average annual cost of keeping a person in prison.

During the course of our research in setting up the project three quarters of the prisoners we spoke to said that they were on their own and had no one to support them on release. They felt that without help they had little chance of successfully resettling back into the community and would be coming back through the revolving door into prison.

Offenders who participate in the scheme will be those who for one reason or another are unable to make the necessary changes to their lives without any support or encouragement. Because of the brevity of their sentence short-term & remand prisoners are often unable to access education, work skills; or complete offending behaviour programmes. Our service will aim to motivate them to make the most of any opportunity; both in prison and following their release. *Continued on page 3*

*London Through The Gate – from page 2*

They will be encouraged and supported in accessing education, finding accommodation, making contact with health services and addressing their substance misuse.

We recognise that befriending shorter-term prisoners will present new challenges as there will not be time for prisoner and befriender to gradually build up a trusting relationship, but we hope to explore different ways of working with prisoners for instance by having a befriending circle rather than one to one support. The circle of friends will be a group of people who will meet together on a regular basis to help the offender reach their full potential. Ideally three to four volunteers will work with each prisoner and the circle will act as a community around that person.

A minimum commitment of one year will be expected from all volunteers. This type of volunteering could be attractive to younger volunteers whose motivation for volunteering might be to develop and enhance their career, as well as those volunteers who fit within New Bridge's usual volunteer profile.

*Look out for more reports in future issues of The Befriender*

### **Best Prison to visit?**

Visiting prisoners can be stressful and difficult at times. On other occasions at certain prisons it can be a joy.

Last year, we awarded HMP Grendon our first 'Best Prison to Visit' Award. Where have you had a good visiting experience? Where have you found helpful staff, eager to ensure your visit goes well?

Contact us at Medway Street and tell us which prison you think should be awarded the prize in 2008.

The winner will be unveiled at the Volunteer Seminar in the autumn.

Is this a worry for prisoners you are in contact with? Are they coming up to release but have not thought about the issue?

If you share the concerns of UNLOCK and this prisoner, please 'sign' the petition.

### **Longford Award for Outstanding Volunteer**

Since 2003, New Bridge have recognised the contribution of an outstanding volunteer through the Longford Award. It has been bestowed on the winner at the Annual Open Meeting, held each year in May in London.

There will be no Annual Open Meeting this year. Trustees have decided that after falling attendances in recent years, we will have a break in 2008 and return in May 2009 with a bigger and better event. The Longford Award will be given at the Volunteer Seminar in the autumn.

Is there an outstanding volunteer in your group? Someone who frequently goes the extra mile for the prisoners they befriend? If so, write us at Medway Street telling us who deserves the award and why.

### **2008 Volunteer Seminar**

The annual volunteer's seminar will be held in the autumn. We are currently negotiating dates with the venue and will get details out to volunteers as soon as we can.

### **Visit a Magistrates Court**

London volunteer and member of Group 2/6, Pam Dixon is also a serving Magistrate with many years experience on the bench.

Following a successful visit with volunteers in March, Pam would like to offer more volunteers the chance to look behind the scenes at her court and gain an insight into how things work.

If you would like to register interest, please let Heidi know on 020 7976 0779 or

[heidi@newbridgefoundation.org.uk](mailto:heidi@newbridgefoundation.org.uk)

## FEEDBACK FROM PRISONERS

Volunteers have received a number of letters from prisoners recently, telling them how much they value the friendship and support they have found through New Bridge. Here is a selection of their comments;

"thank you so much for being there for me and not giving up on me"

"I thank God everyday for having you in my life, I don't know how I'd cope without anybody being there for me cos everybody need's someone in there life, so thank you"

**"I don't know wot i'd do if I never had you I think I really would of killed myself by now cos life's hard on your own."**

"I want to take this opportunity to thank you from my heart for your persistence, your unfailing loyalty to what you do for us and your friendship. Not once have you looked down at or belittled me, but instead you ceaselessly encourage me which tells me of the strength of courage that you possess"



New Bridge  
27a Medway Street  
London  
SW1P 2BD  
020 7976 0779  
[info@newbridgefoundation.org.uk](mailto:info@newbridgefoundation.org.uk)

## After release: Should we keep befriending? What is your experience?

Offering the hand of friendship to the 'newly released prisoner' was the founding work of New Bridge. Notes of early meetings talk of the frustration in not being able to work with serving prisoners because of resistance from the Prison Service. There are tales of volunteers in the early years, taking ex-prisoners into their homes and leaving them to baby-sit!

At some (unknown) point in the last 50 years, the emphasis shifted to befriending prisoners and the volunteering stopped when the prisoner was released.

There has been much debate in groups on whether we should keep befriending a prisoner once he/she has been released. Your commitment is to befriend until the point of release. Volunteers can and do continue and we recommend continued discussion in the group for support and advice if you want to keep up contact. More frequently, whilst the prisoner seems keen to maintain contact on release, they are not heard from again.

If you are still befriending after release, we want to hear about your experiences. How often do you keep in contact and meet? How do you ensure your safety? What if you want the befriending to end?

Please send your thoughts to Chris Thomas at Medway Street, or e-mail

[chris@newbridgefoundation.org.uk](mailto:chris@newbridgefoundation.org.uk) We would like to compile your experiences to formulate guidelines and if there is interest, run a workshop at the seminar.

*New Bridge was founded in 1956 to create links between the offender and the community. The intention is not to forget the victims of crime but to prevent more people becoming victims.*