

## CHARLIE MAKUMBE'S STORY OF ARRIVING IN UK – 2002

I arrived at Gatwick airport very early in the morning in 2002 alone, cold, shivering, cold - with fear and cold because of the weather. Coming from a tropical country in Africa, Zimbabwe, the first thing that hit me was the weather, it was freezing.

“COLD”. Then I was gripped with a chilling fear. Fear of the unknown. I feared that I was going to be turned “BACK”, back to be tortured, back to inhuman and degrading treatment. And maybe certain Death. I had been tipped off back home that the police were looking for me. I was in grave danger. So I fled. I wondered whether I would ever see my wife and children again. Still, I had to flee.

I was faced with immigration authorities, who were very menacing. I said to myself I am not going to stand a chance. I was asked 100 to 200 questions about why I had come to this country; they wanted to know if I was a genuine Asylum Seeker or an economic migrant. Even though I was fluent in English it was difficult to understand them because of their accents, so communication was difficult.

The Arrivals desk is where the genuine cases are determined and those deemed to be fake Asylum Seekers are instantly deported. I was lucky to have a genuine reason to be in this country. I was petrified; afraid; I tell you, you could smell fear on me. My papers were processed and I was sent to Heathrow Airport by bus. The offices at the airport were closed from Friday to Tuesday so I slept on airport benches for 4 nights until the offices opened. I was sent to a hostel, Thornclyffe in Hounslow, where I stayed for 3 weeks then transferred to Newcastle Upon Tyne where I was put in another Hostel with more than 100 other Asylum Seekers who could not speak English. I stayed in this hostel from August to October surviving on basic meals. I was given Lawyers to represent me at the Immigration hearing. The hearing came in October in Liverpool. I went through the process and within three weeks I was given indefinite leave to remain in this country. (Refugee Status)

I was then allowed to work. I got a job, saved some money and brought my wife and 2 kids to England. I was lucky to get my papers within three months. Some people go for many years without getting any papers and some end up getting deported. Some genuine Asylum Seekers get deported because they did not present their cases very well, some because of disabilities like dyslexia etc.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work. These people suffer a lot. Most of them do not want to milk the country of benefits and would like to work for a living. These people left their families and loved ones back home and they have no contact with them. I know this from experience because I was an Asylum seeker myself 10 years ago. I am now settled in this country with my family and I am free from persecution, but some people are not so lucky

This Christmas, let's all think about Asylum seekers and their families and help them out if we can. They need our help, they live in fear, and they have no money, no food, no clothes and toys for their children. They are not allowed to work. These people have got professions; some are engineers, teachers, nurses etc. They need any help that we can give.

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