

## Allen Howe shares his story for the Great Sock Appeal 2020



At just 16 years old, Allen Howe found himself homeless and alone. He fought hard to get himself into the world of work and once he was employed, he spent a number of years giving back to the homeless community. He is now a Senior Contracts Manager at Govia Thameslink Railway, working across the Southern, Thameslink and Great Northern networks; he's sharing his story to support this year's Great Sock Appeal.

"Unfortunately, I don't have very happy memories of my childhood. My mother died when I was just 10 years old and this was the beginning of some very hard times for me. I went to live with my father and step-family, where I very clearly wasn't wanted. I suffered abuse and as soon as I reached 16 I was kicked out by my stepmother.

"I'd just completed my O-Levels and then that was it; I was on the streets. I tried to seek help from the local authorities, but I was too old to be put into care and too young for the type of accommodation they had. Their advice was to move back home, which just wasn't an option for me."

Although Allen managed to find temporary work with a cement company, he was still sleeping rough at nights – finding shelter in abandoned buildings and bus stops. It went on for a gruelling six months.

"Although I could've easily just given up, I knew I had to keep on pushing to try and get myself out of the situation. I found better work with a local retailer, which had cooking and washing facilities. I was still living on the streets but could at least make myself look presentable – this helped to keep my circumstances a secret from everyone I worked with.

"During this time, I got into a relationship with an older woman. I didn't have any feelings towards her, but it was an opportunity to get myself out of a vulnerable situation as I was able to move in with her and get off the streets. In addition, things were starting to get better at work too as the retailer was very focused on development and due to my successful exam results, I was fast-tracked onto their management programme. As soon as I turned 18 I found myself a bedsit and started to become truly independent."

After being promoted to store manager, Allen went on to work in management in other industries – including hostels.

"I had applied to be a hotel manager but at the start of the interview, the lady apologised as there was a typo in the job advert and it was actually for a hostel. It was called Ridgeview Lodge, which was a specialist hostel for homeless families and individuals with drug, alcohol and mental health problems. Given my own personal experiences, there was no way I could turn down the potential opportunity to help others and I was fortunate enough to be offered the job.

“The Local Authority were keen to improve services and in the 14 and a half years I was there we introduced all kinds of initiatives, including outreach teams, an internal doctors’ surgery and a dedicated nurse to help the homeless people we were supporting. I helped to change the perception of the hostel from being little more than a doss house to somewhere that really supported the community; it became something we were all very proud of.”

Allen had a longstanding career with the hostel and, following that, the NHS. After a number of years there, he joined GTR in March and encourages anyone else going through a difficult situation to never give up.

“There’s a huge stigma around being homeless. People often think it’s related to drugs or alcohol – or that you’ve done something to get yourself there. The average person doesn’t realise that if you miss just three mortgage payments, you too could find yourself on the streets. There were many times I felt like giving up, but if you do then you’ll never experience the positive side of life. I’m now in a happy relationship and have two daughters that I absolutely adore. Don’t be too proud to ask for help – there are ways to get you out of whatever situation you may be facing.”

**To find out about this year’s Great Sock Appeal and donate to those in need, please visit**

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