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An Oasis of Hope in South London

Baytree Centre works to create supportive pathways towards social inclusion for inner-city families in Brixton, south London.

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Located as it is in Brixton, in the London Borough of Lambeth, the Baytree Centre lies at the heart of an area of great ethnic diversity, of a vibrant community that reflects the richness of many cultures.

The borough attracts a high percentage of immigrants and refugees from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, but it is one of the most disadvantaged areas of Britain. According to official government statistics, Lambeth's population has one of the highest indexes of social needs in the country. It is ranked as the seventh most deprived area in England and the twelfth in the United Kingdom.

The origins of the work carried out in Baytree are to be sought precisely in the area's deprivation. "Back in 1985" says Marie-Claire Irwin, one of the first volunteers, and now Baytree's Training Co-ordinator, "we started to develop here some of the activities promoted by the Dawliffe Hall Educational Foundation (DHEF), an educational charity. The need to care for the girls and women in Brixton was apparent. Before we knew it, the activities had begun to grow. We

carried out a survey in the area to identify the most pressing needs.

The results showed that women in the area wanted the knowledge and skills that would allow them to find good jobs: computing, English, nutrition, keep fit, child care and child hygiene. So we started looking for premises where we could start running the courses.”

A building was found in 1987: a derelict warehouse. By 1995 it had been transformed into a training centre complete with classrooms, computer bays, spacious rooms for meetings and offices, a small canteen etc. “We started activities when we could still use only one room, and at the same time we were trying to find the money to complete the rest of the building. For years we have been moving around the builders!” says Marie-Claire.

Thanks to private sector and local government funding, as well as European funds, the Centre is now able to provide not just professional training courses, but, more importantly a whole environment geared towards total personal development.

“Brixton has a multi-racial community, with a large refugee population, and high unemployment and crime rates,” Marie-Claire explains. “There is poverty, but the worst poverty of all in this area is social. ... My reaction to these situations, and my effective and constant desire of working to improve them, is born of my frequent reflection on the teachings of Saint Josemaría.”

Marie-Claire quoted a passage from one of Saint Josemaría's books, *Christ is Passing By* , to explain this point: “There is only one race, the race of

the children of God. There is only one colour, the colour of the children of God."

Adapted from an article by Carmen Vida

Photographs : Lisa Clapham and Carmen Vida

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