

"SPAN gave me confidence to pursue my dreams"



When Raaho first came to SPAN she was a single parent with a young baby and a 4 year old child. She had arrived in the UK a few years earlier and felt very isolated and lacked confidence in herself.

"When I first came to SPAN it was a bit scary. I was thinking what will they be able to do for me?" Back then I was feeling frustrated, because I had been at home alone with the children for too long. When I came to SPAN I became more confident. My confidence grew and I started to do some voluntary work in the office. I also got involved in the Study Centre Advisory Group and supported Somali women with language barriers".

Raaho says she got involved in a lot of different groups and was given opportunities that helped her to gain confidence. Most importantly, coming to SPAN meant that she was able to pursue her ambition of working with children. Raaho started to do a level 1 course in working in early years setting and progressed to a level 2 course which was delivered at SPAN in partnership with City of Bristol College.

"I did my placement in the SPAN crèche and when I had finished my level 2 I was offered to work in there. I worked as a crèche worker for 3 years. Then I did a level 3, which I have just finished. I now work in the SPAN pre-school on a regular basis".

Raaho says that coming to SPAN changed her life and she feels a lot more confident in her self. Next year she is doing a course with the Open University which will allow her to develop her academic writing in the English language. She knows that she needs to improve her writing to be able to pursue her dream which is to study child development or child psychology at the university.

“Thank you to SPAN for giving me more confidence. When I first came to this country I had given up hope of going anywhere in life, I was only focusing on my children. When I came to SPAN I met many different people who encouraged and supported me. Confidence to work, to do everything...is the most important thing to me. To be part of society and to move on...”

Raaho says that she often tell other people about SPAN and encourage them to attend. *“I tell people to give it a try, that you can move on – look at me. Sometimes it take some time, but if you are given the chance, take it and don’t be afraid of trying”.*

"Volunteering helped me secure a job"



Sally started coming to SPAN 13 years ago as a service user and today she is one of our amazing Parent Support Workers. Sally was initially referred to SPAN by the Job Centre. She had three young children at the time and was suffering from depression. She wanted to work, but found it impossible to afford childcare. Instead she started to volunteer with SPAN as she was able to leave her children in the crèche for free.

"My youngest at the time was coming up to one and the Job Centre put me in touch with SPAN and Barton Hill Settlement as they did not find it feasible for me to look for work. The first thing I did at SPAN was a Boxercise class. I also started a Business and Administration course at Barton Hill Settlement and needed a placement. I saw an advert on a notice board at SPAN saying that they had volunteering opportunities. I applied and was offered to work on a national information project".

While volunteering for SPAN, Sally was able to access a lot of different training opportunities. She trained to be a facilitator for Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC) parenting programme, Speak Easy (about sex education) and the Freedom Programme (Domestic Abuse). Sally also completed certificates in teaching adult learners and community volunteering. By this time, Sally had four young children

and it was still difficult for her to work due to the very high costs of childcare. As a result, she ended up running almost 40 SFSC programmes as a volunteer and also a number of Freedom Programme and Speak Easy sessions.

“Originally my plan was to pursue a career in Administration, but all the training at SPAN took me in a different direction. I really enjoyed working with parents and particularly facilitating the parenting programmes. When the opportunity came up to do some paid admin and facilitator support work with the SFSC team at SPAN I applied and got the job. This was 5 years ago. I’m still at SPAN, but now in a different role”.

Since two years back, Sally is employed as a Parent Support Worker at SPAN. She also works a few hours per week with the Online support website One Space on the forums answering questions and offering support. She also continues to do volunteering work as a school Governor at her children’s primary school and she is actively involved with her local church.

“The support I have received from SPAN has been invaluable. I’ve had a lot of support and direction. There were many people with different skills and who have helped in different ways. It was not only the career development that was important. It was also to know that there were other people in similar situations as myself, which helped me to get over some of my personal issues. This made me feel more confident and empowered. It gave me the confidence that I needed to get in to the areas of work that I was interested in. When I said ‘I can’t do that’ there was always people at SPAN who said ‘yes you can!’. It was that kind of empowerment that I needed. I really don’t know where I would have been today, if I had not come to SPAN and started to do the volunteering. I think volunteering is one of the best routes in to work for people in my situation. I know it for myself and also through many people I have supported. It is a great way of gaining skills and confidence”.

"Without childcare I would not have been able to learn English"



Sibel first came to SPAN in 2009 when her daughter was only 6 months old. She had recently separated from her husband and could not speak much English which meant that she felt very isolated. With the help of a support worker she enrolled in a class of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at beginners level (Entry level 1). Sibel worked hard and over the next two years she finished Entry level 2 and Entry level 3 at SPAN. As SPAN's funding only allow us to offer ESOL classes at Entry level, she had to go to City of Bristol College to pursue her ESOL level 1 and level 2.

"Level 1 and Level 2 classes at the College are only offered in the evening which is difficult for me as a single parent. However, I really wanted to do it. Staff at SPAN helped me to find a childminder who could look after my daughter in the evening. However, after a few months she said she could not do it any more. It was very hard. I had to pay a student and also rely on friends. This year, I am doing level 2 and I have found another childminder. There is no childcare at the College even for day courses. At SPAN there is childcare also the times fit around my daughter".

Sibel's daughter has now started school and she is taking every opportunity to prepare herself to enter the labour market. At the moment she is volunteering in the SPAN pre-school to gain some work experience and she is also doing a level 1 course in Health & Social Care at SPAN.

"I also went to the Job Club at SPAN and the tutor helped me to prepare my CV. She was very nice. I am applying for jobs now. I have done so much at SPAN. You can find everything here...Sally [SPAN's Parent Support Worker] helps me at the moment when I don't understand letters and also with the Job Centre and job applications".

Sibel feels that the holistic support that she has been able to access at SPAN has been crucial for her to be able to move on and integrate in Bristol. She likes the fact that parents are able to access different things in the same place – childcare, 1:1 support, courses and volunteer opportunities.

"Personally I feel that I can feel more confident here than anywhere else. I don't know why... Maybe because this is the first place I joined. Everybody here knows...how can I explain that...so we are not English...it is not our first language so it is very helpful".

To somebody else, considering coming to SPAN she would say: *"SPAN is useful for people who have children. They can leave their child while they are doing the course. They might not find childcare anywhere else. For me this was the main thing. It was very important. Also, they can get a lot of different kinds of support while doing the course. For example after the course if you need support worker you can make appointment and see somebody. Other places don't offer this".*

"SPAN saved my life!"



Lucille is a single parent with a 9-year-old daughter. Lucille has a degree in English Literature, but found it difficult to combine work and parenthood when her daughter was little. When her daughter turned 7, Lucille was no longer entitled to Income Support. At the time she was working as a volunteer on a research project with SPAN investigating how single parents on job seeking benefits were treated by the Job Centre and the support they received to move into work. She saw first hand the negative experience of single parents at Job Centre Plus claiming Jobseekers Allowance and so decided not to move onto the benefit herself but instead go for any work she could find.

"I'd heard so many bad things from the people on the research project about how they were treated (by the Job Centre), so I took any job. I would have been better off being on benefits but I still chose not to as I couldn't face being treated so badly every couple of weeks."

Instead Lucille moved into low paid and insecure care work earning just £65 a week. *"It was really hard...I had to pay everything apart from the rent out of this (£65)... I was trying to get extra hours but people only need the care they need, and they only want to pay the minimum. If I'd got 16 hours I could have got tax credits but I couldn't get the hours."*

Lucille's fear of dealing with the Jobcentre meant she struggled to pay her bills and got into debt. She did everything she could to tackle the debt including selling presents she'd been given and visiting her family to eat meals.

"I'm quite a resourceful person, and we would eat pulses and things all the time, but it's depressing to eat it all the time, sometimes you just want some meat."

I tried to make sure we were eating by going to other people's houses at mealtimes, it was like an unspoken thing, but they knew I was coming to eat and people would give us doggy-bags. It made me feel rubbish, like a bad parent."

"I felt like I was just scraping by. All our presents and Christmas money would go on bills, I would sell Christmas presents on Ebay, take all my daughter's unworn clothes and sell them on Cash for Clothes."

But she just couldn't shift the debt and events reached crisis point: *"There was a time when they (the Electricity Company) were trying to get in to cut the gas off, they said next time if you don't let us in we'll get the police and get in with them"*. Lucille managed to borrow the money to pay the bill.

Lucille credits SPAN with helping her get out of poverty. She'd been a user of SPAN since her daughter was 1 ½ and had become *"a face about the place who would do whatever voluntary work was going."* After doing some volunteer work with SPAN she started to work on a research project on lone parents for which she gained 80 credits towards a Masters Degree. When the research was complete, SPAN presented the findings at an event in Parliament, and Lucille was asked to speak:

"I stood up and gave a speech to MPs and baronesses...I was shaking. I felt really good after, amazing – not many people have got to do a thing like that...I didn't think I would ever do anything like that in a million years."

Working on the research project gave her confidence and *"made me want to get a job, and I improved my CV, and kept volunteering."*

A much better paid job came up working for a Housing Association that she *"wouldn't have dreamt of applying for"* but *"the careers advisor at SPAN pointed me in the right direction, they said have you seen this job advert, it sounds like you ... Then someone else coached me for the interview and someone else helped me write a presentation to give in the interview."*

She got the job, and in September 2013 began working 25 hours a week. The hours fit in around her childcare responsibilities and provide her with a decent wage.

Of SPAN she says:

“SPAN’s amazing! Sometimes when I feel a bit over the top I think, SPAN saved my life. I was so miserable and it saved me, and most of the friends I’ve got and the support I’ve got came through SPAN. I did a parenting course and that probably saved my relationship with my daughter and because of SPAN I now have the job I’ve got.”

To give something back and to help ensure that other single parents also get positive support, Lucille has recently joined the SPAN Board of Trustees.