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Meet the family giving away their luxury holiday let to victims of lockdown domestic abuse

It started on New Year's Eve, when a previous guest contacted them desperate for somewhere to stay

By Georgina Fuller
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The hospitality, travel and tourism sector was perhaps the hardest hit when the Government announced it would be enforcing a third lockdown on January 4, but instead of wallowing, one family turned the closure of their business into an act of altruism.

Vicky and Chris Saynor, who own [Bethnal and Bec](#), a luxury self-catering retreat in Hertfordshire, began offering their studios, for free, to victims of domestic abuse after a previous guest contacted them on New Year's Eve desperate for somewhere to stay. "Her husband had become increasingly abusive towards her over lockdown and was drinking heavily," Vicky says. "She knew that we were closed but couldn't afford a hotel so we took her in and she ended up staying for four days."

Vicky, who was herself a victim of domestic violence in a previous relationship, said they received very little from the Government in terms of financial support when their business closed. "We've had around £1,000 a month but have been running up losses of approximately £9,000 a month. So we've pretty much been living off our savings, which we were going to use to build our third retreat."

When the latest lockdown was announced, the couple, who met online in 2015 when Vicky was living in Tooting Bec and Chris was in Bethnal Green (hence the retreat's name), knew that they wanted to somehow pivot their business but weren't sure how until they had that call on December 31. They faced a few obstacles along the way.

"We spoke to a number of charities and organisations to see if they could use our properties, but as we hadn't been vetted we couldn't be used. So with their help and advice of a few friends, who are social workers and work for the police, we decided to create respite stays," Vicky says.

They have gone on to help over 20 families and will continue to offer free accommodation for up to four nights until early April, Vicky says. "We've been full since the January 6 with families, single adults and pets (mostly dogs, but also one cat.) We call it 'respite' care and offer it as a stop gap to help people in need before they sign a tenancy agreement or arrange more long-term accommodation."

They have to make some adjustments to their studios, which are usually for adults only. "We had one lady with an eight-month-old baby so we had to do a frantic call out for a high chair, cot, baby bath and a few other things," Vicky says.

Otherwise, the families are treated in much the same way as any other guest, and free to enjoy the roll top bath, rainforest shower and vinyl record player. They have come from all over the UK and have often had to leave their support bubble due to their abusive partners, Vicky says.



The luxury digs have been put to good use | CREDIT: Binky Nixon

They have, she says, seen the best and worst of humanity through offering the respite retreats. “Many of those we have had to stay have had very harrowing and upsetting stories and are not the sort of people you would think would be victims of domestic violence,” Vicky notes.

They’ve also had to turn some people away as they have had so many requests through social media and word of mouth, which was very difficult. “But the support we’ve received has been overwhelming and wonderful.”

Vicky and Chris, who bought their business in 2017 and have four children between them, Poppy, 15, Felix, 12, Mylo, 10, and Willow, 9, and Hendrix, the rescue pointer, say their children have also enjoyed the odd game of football with their guests and their kids.

The Saynors have been overwhelmed by the support they’ve received from social media (they have over 14,000 followers on Instagram) and their local community. They have had around £1,500 in PayPal donations and been inundated with clothes, food, gifts and offers of help, including domestic help and cookery classes. They’ve also set up an Amazon gift list and had a number of local restaurants donating meals, bread and cakes.

“We’re also able to offer free counselling; advice and support from a number of different charities across the UK,” Vicky says.



The family have supported more than 20 victims of domestic abuse | CREDIT: Binky Nixon

The couple are also ambassadors for the Something to Look Forward to charity, which helps provide gifts and experiences for cancer patients. Vicky, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2018 at the age of 43, currently has what is termed as a triple negative cancer. She finished her treatment 18 months ago but will continue to have annual mammograms for the next few years.

They also offer a 15% discount for anyone who works for the NHS, a care home or hospice, cancer charity, or anyone who has had cancer in the last three years.

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