



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Baytree Centre

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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, etc."

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. There is poverty, but the worst poverty of all in this area is social. Lots of the local women are very isolated: I have met some who have lived here for 20 years and do not yet speak English. 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 explains. "For example, in one of his books, *Christ is Passing By*, he writes:

"There is only one race, the race of the children of God. There is only one colour, the colour of the children of God. And there is only one language, the language that speaks to the heart and to the mind, making us know God and love one another. His concern extended both to the great crises which affected humanity, which affected many people, as well as to the problems and daily tensions of those who are nearest to us, and he said with strength gone are the times of giving a few coppers and old clothes. We must give our hearts and our lives!"

It is this firmly Christian conviction of the people who work in Baytree that leads them to appreciate the value of each person, over and above any racial or social difference.

"This is why the Centre users are not exclusively Catholics or Christians. We are open to everyone: we are here to help any woman who needs us. We are here because we want to help society at large, and contribute specifically to the development of this local community. Baytree was born to fill a gap in this area, so that women may discover the value of their family lives and learn to combine them, when necessary, with a job outside the home. What we are trying to do is to strengthen the family by helping the women, in order to rebuild the social make up of the area."

A Family-Oriented Centre to Help the Community

"When women, especially mothers, are in particularly difficult situations, because of being on low incomes - often they are single, or they are lone parents if the husband is still in their country of origin - their whole environment suffers. Unhappy women make unhappy mothers, and the whole family suffers", explains Cheryl Piggott, Fundraising Officer. "Naturally, this has social repercussions. Many of them need to find part or full-time work but lack the skills and

self-confidence. Besides, finding a job also poses them with a choice between working or looking after their children, who are already growing up in a difficult and tough environment. To solve Brixton's problems it is not enough to just pour lots of money into fighting drugs. You need more preventive programmes. If you can help the mother not to lose control over the family, then you are helping the whole family and improving their chances in life.”

In order to carry out its work of social regeneration, Baytree has developed a programme of personalised formation, aimed at the individual's needs, especially in the context of the family. The Centre describes itself as family-oriented: it helps women not only with their education and job seeking, but more importantly, to discover their abilities and possibilities as individuals. This contributes to their keeping their self-esteem and a positive attitude in difficult situations. The Centre also provides the childcare facilities often needed by mothers, to avoid the family-work conflict.

A whole range of youth activities complements the work done with families in the area. “Our programme is innovative and reaches people who are sometimes deemed to be socially excluded”, Cheryl Piggot says.

The programme works, and Baytree has been growing and expanding since it opened its doors back in 1991: from the 31 who enrolled at the time, numbers had risen to nearly 600 in 1999. Youth activities attracted over 500 enrolments in the same year. Adult courses alone – each catering for 150 students each term– offer various nationally recognised Certificates and Diplomas: three levels (beginners, Level 1, and Level 2) of the City & Guilds Certificate in Information Technology, and several English for Speakers of Other Languages classes at varying levels. Besides the Certificates and courses, the students are helped to find work experience and placements.

The Value of Each Person

Yet despite its growth, Baytree has kept its original focus: “We keep class numbers small, to give individual attention. The attention to small things, the specific need, is what counts”, says Cheryl. “Our students know that they can always ask for help. I remember seeing Mae, the Centre's Manager, drop everything she was doing one busy morning to focus on a woman's housing problem and get the legal advice she needed. It's things like that that make a difference.”

The Centre - inspired by the teachings of Saint Josemaría - is open to everyone. “In Baytree we care not just about poverty or material needs, but above all about

the human and spiritual development of each person. Each one deserves respect simply because of having been created and personally loved by God”, Marie Claire explains. Baytree student Corrine Francis agrees with this: “You can go to any of the staff and you are not scared to say, “Can you help?” I’ve seen them help. They know our needs here”.

Susan Solanke, a former trainee who now works for the “Save the Children Fund”, explains that she went to Baytree after a long spell out of work. “When I came to Baytree I did not know what to expect, but it gave me a sense of belonging among people I could trust and rely on. (...) Their excitement and joy when I got a job surpassed mine. That is what I call the family spirit of Baytree. I owe it all to them.”

What these women appreciate is not just what they learn, but how they are treated, and the genuine human friendship they find. Claudie Gauriau, a Baytree student in 1997, recently wrote back: “After spending a few years at home bringing up my daughter I decided to go back to my studies. It was not an easy decision because my self-esteem was pretty low. (...) The concept of small classes, informal teaching and the human approach suited me completely. This was a breath of fresh air. It was the first step towards my return to an active working life. Without it I am not sure how I would have gained the confidence to carry on my studies. (...) I have now been working for a firm of solicitors in the City for six months and have already been given one pay raise. (...) Thank you to the Baytree for giving me the opportunity to start.”

Some Local Facts

- Lambeth is ranked as the seventh most deprived area in England and the twelfth in the United Kingdom.
- The area has the third highest crime rate in London.
- Over a quarter of dwellings in the area are classed as unsuitable.
- In the 1991 census, ethnic minorities made up 42% of its population. Many are immigrants and refugees.
- The rate of unemployment is high: nearly 37% of the children in the area live in households with no earner.
- 70% of school leavers in Lambeth have less than the required level of qualifications to compete in the labour market or proceed to higher education.
- The area has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe.

Working with young people

Together with its training for adults, Baytree runs youth activities for local girls. Margaret Brown, Youth Officer, explains: “The most successful venture is the

Study Club. In Baytree they get a quiet work environment, tutorials in the different subjects, and encouragement, which is what they value most. Many of them have never learnt to concentrate and can be very disruptive, so we try to teach them to work.”

The Study Club is run together with a volunteer service for university students to tutor the girls. The Volunteer project is known as GOAL (Get On And Learn): there are over twenty students from London university coming every week.

Baytree — growing to meet the needs of the community

- 1985-90 Youth activities organised by the Dawliffe Hall Educational Foundation. Following a request by mothers, activities start for women in temporary premises. A derelict warehouse is acquired and refurbished to house the new Baytree Centre.
- 1991 The Baytree Centre opens offering short courses on Information Technology, and youth activities.
- 1993 Full-time training begins. The Centre becomes a City & Guilds accredited centre for IT and is awarded a TEC (Training and Education Council) contract to give training to unemployed women and those returning to work.
- 1994 English courses start for speakers of other languages, mainly refugee women. A language laboratory is set up from donations from local government and the industry. Evening classes on cookery, keep fit and sewing begin.
- 1995-96 Building works are completed. Play schemes for children start. A new course is offered on Computer Installation and Maintenance.
- 1997 Partnership with Lambeth College. More groups and new levels are added to the courses. The after-school Study Club begins.
- 1998 Crèche is opened to provide support for students with young children. GOAL volunteer scheme starts.
- 1999 With the increased demand for places, more computer courses are offered: three new beginner classes start up thanks to funding from the European Fund.
- 2000 Over 600 local people benefit from Baytree courses and activities.

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