world habitat awards

FINALIST (SPECIAL MENTION) 2018

Startblok – Bringing young people and refugees together through housing

Netherlands

Adrian came to Amsterdam in 2015 as an asylum seeker from Jamaica. He has lived at Startblok Riekerhaven since 2016 and studies Creative Business at university.

Compared to where I lived before, it's more open - the neighbours are more friendly and there's a lot more to learn. Before there [was] just two others in the house and they were the only persons I know because I'd never met my neighbours. I lived there for six months and I never met anyone there.

Here you meet huge friend groups, you have activities that you share together. You exchange cultures so you learn about different cultures as well as showcase your own. They asked us - I'm Jamaican and there's only four of us here - to do something about Jamaica that everyone here wants to know; so we showcased our country. That's the beauty of living here. You meet people and then you understand people better.

When I came here, I was scared to talk to people because I'm gay and other persons didn't understand that. I experienced that already from the Asylum Seekers' Centre. When I first moved here I was kind of reserved and shy because of the same mentality that I had from being in Jamaica – you have to be what society expects of you. In the community where I lived it was a mess - I had to be straight-acting, nobody could know you were gay. I even wanted to move away from a community once because I couldn't feel safe there anymore. I didn't want to be there anymore. For me it was just fronting - being this straight person, just trying to get through life and living miserably every day.

But when I came here, I saw it was a lot more relaxed, I gradually started to be more relaxed and more expressive.

They accept me for who I am and that's the best part about living here.

I feel a lot more appreciated and I feel like I can be myself. After experiencing persons who are like 'he's gay – let's stay away from him', people here are more open to the idea of, 'oh okay, that's just Adrian and that's who he is'.