

The Day the Mayor Sat with Us

As a former resident of this emergency shelter for two years, I once called it 'home'. This piece is my way of remembering the mayor's visit: the spirit of the moments, the conversations, and the quiet things that won't make it into official reports.

Today, I didn't expect to feel the way I did during the mayor's visit to our emergency shelter.

Upon entering, Mayor Schouten chose to sit in the middle seat, surrounded by residents. We felt at home right away. When we told her that tea, coffee, and sweets had been prepared, she cheered the crew in recognition of their efforts.

When I began my welcome remarks, she stood up, reached out her hand to me and said, "Good to see you again!" I was surprised in a pleasant way.



Being someone from Myanmar, a country under military dictatorship, I was raised seeing those in power always act cold, distant, and unapproachable. Hierarchy is everything. We don't shake hands with authority. We don't even dare breathe near them. But here was the mayor of Rotterdam, standing up to greet me while everyone else was seated. I felt seen. I felt human.

As I told everyone that her visit was inspired by the photobook "New Eyes on Rotterdam" we had given her back in March, she smiled and gently interrupted to say how fascinated she was by the way newcomers view Rotterdam.

She admitted that she has never thought of the city as "green." Rotterdam, to her, is contemporary and industrial. Her remark made me smile. It was like a simple reminder that sometimes newcomers notice things locals often overlook, and that is maybe why these new perspectives matter more than we think.



During the introduction round, Stichting Mano and De Stadscoalitie explained the activities they arrange to support residents. Throughout their updates, the mayor kept asking questions that were spot-on and humane.

"How many residents live here?"

"What languages do you all speak?"

"How do you communicate with one another every day?"

"How long have these organisations been supporting residents on the boat?"

Her curiosity was real. You can't fake eyes that are filled with genuine interest.

Throughout the breakout sessions, her questions continued in a thoughtful and compassionate manner.

"Where is your church? How do you get there?"

"Which swimming pool do you usually go to?"

"Is your old shelter also mixed like this one?" (She was referring to a mixed of residents, including single women, married couples with no children, queer individuals)

"Do you hear any updates on your process?"

"Do you meet Dutch people in this neighbourhood and around Rotterdam?"

"How do other shelters organise night safety for women?"





She listened as if each person's story deserved a spotlight. She acknowledged something never rushed anyone.

In one sentence, she acknowledged something newcomers rarely hear: our value.

She never once asked about the time, although the visit followed the planned agenda. She stayed fully present until everyone had spoken.

When the visit ended, she even helped move chairs around for the group photo, just as someone would help others make space. No fuss, no drama. We all felt it. That simple gesture said everything.

There was one moment that stayed with me. When she noticed how many educated individuals were living at the shelter, she turned to the partner organisations and asked, "Why are we not using their talents? We need so many people in our country to fill various positions."

She carried the little gifts herself as she left, looking genuinely moved. And we were, too.

And when someone said, "Because they don't speak fluent Dutch yet," she responded, "But what about all the expats who come to work here? Many of them don't speak Dutch either."

Until the very last minute before her arrival on that day, I was anxious. Worried that we might say something wrong, something might go badly, or that the mayor might be distant or formal. But she was exactly the opposite. She was warm and kind. I first met her in March, and I noticed then that she was a people person. She proved me right again today.





"Het fotoboek 'New Eyes on Rotterdam' geeft een onverwachte groene blik op Rotterdam. Het is belangrijk om vanuit meerdere perspectieven naar onze stad te blijven kijken en daarvan te leren."

~ Carola Schouten, Mayor of Rotterdam

Two months ago, I was granted residency in the Netherlands. I chose Rotterdam as my municipality for a number of reasons, including its port-city atmosphere, which is similar to that of the city where I grew up; the friendships I've built over the past two years; the work and volunteering I do; and the familiarity of its streets and neighbourhoods.

But today, for the first time, I felt proud of my choice.

I am proud to belong to a city led by someone who listens.

Proud to be a tiny part of Rotterdam that has been shaped by many ethnicities and stories.

Proud to call Rotterdam my home.

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(This reflection is dedicated to Mayor Schouten's visit on 21 November 2025 to one of the emergency shelters in Rotterdam.)

Khin Khin
24 November 2025

The photobook "New Eyes on Rotterdam" can be found here: <https://www.stadscoalitie.nl/publicaties>

Image credit: Kamil Özdemir (IG: @kamil_ozdemir_photography)