



I have been asked, as a volunteer, to write about the personal impact of the Alyth Refugee Drop-In Project

I became a member of Alyth five years ago, its Social Justice Programme being a major reason. Having worked with intercultural students and staff throughout my career, I was delighted to find that this Programme included, amongst other things, a monthly Refugee Drop-In at the Synagogue. It's been a way to consolidate and continue my skills, having recently retired, but also so much more.

From the warm welcome at my first meeting from Cheryl Brodie and Debbie Rose, Project Leaders, and other volunteers, I knew this was to be a special and rewarding experience. We are encouraged to establish appropriate friendships with our refugee guests who hail from nearly thirty different countries and who all have Leave to Remain. We have all signed very well thought-through Guidelines to which we adhere, for the safety and well-being of our refugee guests and ourselves.

The Drop-In takes the form of two to three hours or so on a Sunday afternoon at Alyth at the end of each month. We serve rather wonderful meals (cooked and prepared by volunteers) to our guests, who are encouraged to sit at mixed nationality tables, and who tell us what a great way this is to get to know and understand the situation of others from cultures different from their own. It empowers them to develop their own network.

Along with getting to know our guests and other volunteers better, I've appreciated the sheer fun of so many activities initiated by our Project Leaders and other volunteers. These have included matching the baby pictures to the volunteers(!), making T-shirts from newspaper, quizzes, Bingo and more. Our Synagogue Choir Leader, Katie Hainbach and her husband, Tom, came to sing on one particular Sunday afternoon which was wonderful! What a treat to see the expressions of appreciation and delight on the faces of our refugee guests! We have twice invited a

group of drummers into the Drop-In, a terrific participatory experience hugely enjoyed by all. A knitting table group has been established, along with a children's supervised area with games and books and a separate chess/draughts area for adults. Sitting unobtrusively at a computer in a corner, a volunteer has been available on each Drop-In occasion to advise and research for individual requests, such as English classes. Another volunteer has brilliantly provided unobtrusive easy-listening piano music which contributes to the atmosphere of pure enjoyment.

We set up a Refugee Choir, led by the ever-able Viv Bellos, practising intensively in order to hold a highly successful concert with Wyaala, a famous Ghanaian singer-songwriter. Wyaala, gave her services free of charge at this fund-raising event. Our

refugee choir rehearsed and performed with her to great acclaim from a packed audience! I never need much persuasion to join choirs, as singing is a huge passion in my life! What a joy it was to see the growth of confidence, ability and sheer enjoyment in our refugee choir guests! The process of meeting regularly to practise our singing enabled us to further establish our relationships and form deeper bonds.

Project leaders organised a great number of outings, and I enjoyed a visit to the Guildhall Art Gallery, which was a huge treat. Our refugees were also fascinated to see the origins of Londinium in the basement of The Guildhall. An Abba Tribute Concert at the Royal Albert Hall was another notable outing, where the look of wonder on our guests' faces as they entered the beautiful main arena was something I will never forget. I accompanied the curated visit to Westminster Abbey including Poets' Corner. A picnic with dancing in Golders Hill Park one sunny pre-pandemic afternoon was another joy. Our guests had many more such opportunities, arranged by our Project Leaders, including a visit to Buckingham Palace.

Our role changed of course with the onset of the pandemic and particularly during Lockdown. We held periodic themed Zoom meetings with our guests, our Leaders having provided training where necessary, enabling people to access Zoom. We encouraged goal-setting to motivate our refugee guests. These were online meetings between our refugees, ourselves and renowned speakers, such as doctors, speakers giving healthy eating demonstrations, keep-fit experts and a volunteer's marvellous illustrated talk on David Hockney's paintings (later followed up by a real-life gallery visit to see these).

Additionally, each volunteer undertook to telephone given named guests regularly to ensure that no-one felt neglected or forgotten. I established even deeper relationships during regular phone conversations in lockdown, where we were encouraged to respond to the needs of 'our' allocated refugee guests. We divided up numbers of guests to telephone, in order to help prevent feelings of isolation and to identify and signpost need. I spoke regularly to four women. I found a Salvation Army foodbank and liaised with them to help a refugee in Croydon. Cheryl and Debbie activated a scheme for a free iPhone and a half year contract for another of 'my' refugees, 'A'. How rewarding to see the transformation on A's face which regularly wore a depressed expression to one of sheer joy as she was now able to communicate regularly with her family and friends in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I told her she looked like a new woman!

The simply humbling feeling when receiving a "G-d bless you" during a phone call can't be over-estimated. One of my own personal challenges was to make my "telephone people" laugh during our conversations.

Support for volunteers has been extensive, each Drop-In being preceded by a half-hour meeting to update us all. Debbie and Cheryl have provided access to in-person and online official training meetings and workshops from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Each session has focused on a different country, representing our refugee guests. These have been invaluable, and have included Eritrea and the DRC.

Casting an eye over five years' worth of emails from our Drop-In leadership, I am all too aware of the shortcomings of this article, which gives only a fleeting impression of the extraordinary work of great substance initiated by our Project Leaders. The Project received an award for significant Community Achievement in Barnet from the Mayor. At the invitation of HM The Queen, our Leadership attended a Reception for All Faith Projects at Buckingham Palace.

As we approach the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Alyth Refugee Drop-In, the Jewish ethic of "Welcoming the Stranger" is more important than ever. Never has it been more apparent that the needs of refugees are, sadly, an ongoing universal feature of the world. Please support our Project in whatever way you feel able.

Marilyn Grossman

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