



Rock Solid Challenge

On a bright but chilly weekend in March, over 25 brave volunteers donned their lycra and proved their dedication by participating in Rock Solid a 5-15 KM obstacle course described as 'the muddiest obstacle race in the UK. The course involves crawling through mud and under barbed wire, climbing up ropes, hauling yourself over walls and splashing through ice, one of the obstacles is even named 'hurdles from hell.' The event was held at Escot Park and attracted hundreds of competitors of all ages and abilities. If you don't believe it, here's a video from Exeter's Rock Solid in 2013: <https://youtu.be/1b6U6NIRMxM>



Thanks to one of our trustees, Emma Finnlinson, for organising the team and of course to all the people who took part! Those running it for RSD managed to raise over £1300 which is an incredible amount and we are extremely grateful (and more than a little bit impressed!). If you would like to contribute, now that they have succeeded, please follow the link:

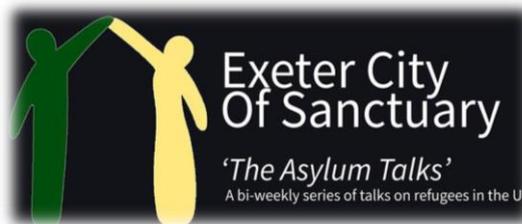
<http://www.totalgiving.co.uk/mypage/btcrocksolid>



City of Sanctuary

The City of Sanctuary group have been going from strength to strength recently and have received an overwhelming amount of support from the local community. The community lecture series, "Asylum Talks" was held at various locations across the city including The University and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum and was a great success – they covered a range of perspectives, from academics working in the field, to charitable organisations, refugees themselves and, finally, from the City of Sanctuary National Coordinator, Tiffy Allen.

We really enjoyed having Tiffy to visit and took the opportunity to meet with local councillors and discuss potential ways in which Exeter, as a city, can extend a culture of welcome to vulnerable people seeking sanctuary in the UK. We were pleased to have opened up space for discussions about how to enhance Exeter as a City of Sanctuary as well as about possible schemes for resettlement.



We were also joined by various organisations from Plymouth and it was interesting to draw parallels between our work and identify areas from which we can learn from other groups. Similarly, on the 6th March, a group from Exeter including Abbie (staff), Emma (trustee) and two service-users attended a conference in Bristol about ending destitution for asylum seekers. It was very useful to meet with other groups from around the country and discuss steps we can take to stop asylum seekers being left with no means of supporting themselves.

As part of the City of Sanctuary initiative, staff and volunteers have been meeting with local groups to raise awareness about refugees and asylum seekers in Exeter and about the work we do at RSD. The idea is to meet with people delivering frontline services, such as the jobcentre and the CAB, as well as local interest groups such as NHS retirees and the Young at Heart over 50s club, to have an informal chat about how and why we should be welcoming people into our communities.

If anyone is interested in becoming involved with the City of Sanctuary project please let us know!

Abbie Grace

Young at Heart Talk

As part of a new initiative between RSD and the City of Sanctuary Group, one of our volunteers gave a presentation on the work of RSD to 'The Young at Heart Group'. This group meets once per week in St Sidwell's Community Centre. They invite a variety of speakers and also run other games and activities. The group varies in size from week to week, but there were about 15 people for the RSD presentation. The presentation took about 30 minutes and was followed by a Q&A session. Most of the group were very interested in the history of RSD and the service users we help. At the end of the session there was a collection in aid of RSD and some very positive feedback forms were completed. One member of the group has offered to volunteer for RSD and another has invited RSD to do a presentation to the NHS Retirement Fellowship in September.

June Marshall, Trustee

Exeter's Refugee Week

During mid-March the university's societies concerned with refugee issues inaugurated Exeter's first very own Refugee Week. As representatives of the Exeter branch of Student Action for Refugees, along with several other societies we collaborated with we were aware of the significance and impact Refugee Week provides annually as an educational and awareness opportunity on all issues concerning refugees in the UK. However, as Students we also noted that as soon as freedom from the dreaded summer exams is upon us that most of the student body leaves the city. Consequently we decided to hold our own Refugee Week in order to raise awareness of issues facing refugees nationally, globally, and in Exeter itself. The main aim of the week was to have a presence in the University of Exeter Forum; the heart of the university. We collaborated with other societies and held a different stall every day, except Wednesday when the university open day took over campus.

On Monday Be the Change societies Project Refugee section held an inventive *craftism* project whereby students, staff and members of the public were encouraged to trace their journey's to Exeter on tracing paper over a map of the world. All of these journeys are to be assembled in order to reveal the diversity present in our small city. On Tuesday Exeter University's British Red Cross society presented 'Trading in Flesh' in order to highlight the issue of Human Trafficking in the South West, raising awareness of the anti-human trafficking work of the British Red Cross, which culminated in an evening presentation on the subject. Guest speakers included a Detective Superintendent from Devon and Cornwall Police and speakers from the British Red Cross Refugee Service who have been involved in Anti-Human Trafficking operations in the South West. Thursday was the turn of Exeter University's Amnesty International society which highlighted to UK's refugee obligations and specifically focused on the call for more Syrian refugees to be settled in the UK. And lastly, the week ended with our very own STAR group who spent the day combatting myths and perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and introduced people to Exeter's very own refugee community and volunteer opportunities therein. In addition to this, STAR launched a raffle, with a wide range of highly generous donations from the local community, in order to continue funding conversation classes for refugees in the UK.

In addition to this, each day stall members collected donations and clothes for the Syrian Clothes Appeal project which all the societies collaborated in establishing together at a joint social between the groups the week previous. A video was made to advertise the appeal to the student body and reached the local community through social media with the Exeter STAR group managing to get local candidates in the upcoming general election and local organisations to tweet about the appeal.

The week was a resounding success and reveals the importance collaborating with broader societies. All those involved feel confident that we have conveyed the message that *refugees are welcome here* and it's a message we will not tire of repeating!

Lauren Carrington



Christmas Meal and Raffle

Prior to Christmas Refugee Support Devon held a raffle, with incredibly generous donations from a wide range of Businesses in Exeter; including much the much coveted vouchers for meals at The Hub Box. The lucky winners were drawn during RSD's Christmas Dinner celebrations, at a delicious meal at the Dinosaur Café. The raffle raised £250 which has contributed to RSD's destitution and emergency funds.



Refugee Week 2015

Every year across the UK Refugee Week takes place. *Refugee Week is a UK-wide programme of arts, cultural and educational events and activities that celebrates the contribution of refugees to the UK and promotes better understanding of why people seek sanctuary.*

This year, between 15-21st June there will be a whole host of activities occurring in Exeter including a community football tournament, radio show, coffee mornings, school assemblies and a film screening!

To find out more about Refugee Week and what is taking place outside of Exeter: <http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk/About-us>

If you are interested in volunteering, baking for, and just attending an event then please contact us via telephone (01392 682185) or email (info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk)

STAR Conversation Classes

This term the STAR conversation classes, held on Mondays from 12.30-1.30pm, continued to flourish, with enthusiastic participation from the women and volunteers alike. Each week a different topic is presented and engaged with through discussions, pictures and examples, news articles, and written exercises, with subjects ranging from health and education to food and lifestyle. The learning process goes both ways, as whilst we teach the women about life in Britain, the situations they might encounter on a day to day basis and the vocabulary they might find useful along the way, they in turn tell us tales of life in their own countries of origin. It's interesting to see how there is such great cultural difference around the world, and yet things like children refusing to do their homework are so universal! That really is the wonderful thing about the classes, that rather than drawing a distinct line between teacher and student, the relationship is reciprocal, and real friendships are being made in the process. One week we decided to have a bit of a party and share something more tangible – or rather, edible! We all brought various snacks and baked goods along with us to the class, and several of the women from Afghanistan amazed us with delicious home-baked breads and mouth-watering bolani, a traditional flat-bread stuffed with vegetables. It was another great way to share our cultures with one another, and as always there was lots of diverse conversation, and much laughter. Once you can share a joke in another language, you're really getting somewhere in my opinion! Festivities aside, the women are so enthusiastic to learn, and with the variety of topics and resources used each week, it is a delight to see them making fantastic progress and generally feeling more confident and happy speaking, reading, and writing in English. Hopefully the classes are helping them to feel more engaged in the wider community as well. The classes are drawing to an end for this term, but will continue in the future so keep an eye out for them starting up again soon if you're interested in joining in.

Miranda Cunis

Student Action for Refugees Conversation Classes: Perspectives from Service Users and Volunteers.

We asked the Student Action for Refugees Conversation Class volunteers; Why do you think the classes are important? What in particular do you enjoy about the classes? What do you personally gain from the class?

'I think the classes are so important not only to make the refugee community feel more confident and comfortable speaking English, but also to make them feel engaged with and appreciated by people outside of their own culture group, which helps towards larger integration. I absolutely love the classes, the women who attend are so chatty and full of life and I love being able to learn about their lives and cultures whilst teaching them a little about my own. Genuine friendships are made in the process.'

Miranda Cunis

'I can give my favourite moment: There's a particular class I remember really well as one of the women received a text (in English) from her son half way through the lesson. She explained he had an interview and that she wanted to reply to his text and send him good luck. So I helped her to spell the words out. It's a particularly memorable day for me because I realised how we take the ability to send a quick text to a friend or family member for granted. I was so happy to be able to help.'

Jess Emsley

'The classes are important for the women to gain confidence in the English language and be in an environment where they can openly ask questions. It's also important to understand the lives of someone different from your own, the women have helped me a lot in this respect. I enjoy the chatting and getting to know people, it's also brilliant to watch the women progress. Personally, my communication skills have greatly improved. I get a break from my work, and I get to meet some really interesting people.'

Lilian Bankiyan-Monfard

Syrian Clothing Appeal

It has been 4 years since the crises begun in Syria, and it feels like Syria already had 4 separate crisis, hunger, danger, cold, and psychological. Amidst all this there are many people are trying to help or improve other's lives or suffering. Our appeal was a one of them. The aim of our clothes appeal, established during Exeter's very own Refugee Week, was to collect as much as we clothes as we could to send to Syria. In the winter of 2013, there were 13 instances of "cold dying" cases in the city of Aleppo, 8 of them are children.

At the University of Exeter there are several societies campaigning for the improvement of refugees' rights more broadly and the Syrian crisis. We all got together during Exeter's Refugee Week and made a video to raise awareness of our appeal: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FK1-kCp8aQ8>

Our collecting target was students, who often have a lot clothes, many of which they do not wear and do not know how to dispose of. Our aim was to take these clothes that people do not need, and give it to those who need it the most. As a result of the generous donations of the University of Exeter's students we managed to gather 10 big bags of clothes which we will be sending to Syria.

Although the clothes we received are nowhere near the amount needed to assist the ever growing number of Syrian refugees, now estimated to be approximately 4 million, our contribution will make a difference to some which could be the choice between life or death.

Baraa Kouja & Lauren Carrington



'It's basic human compassion to know that we would want better treatment for ourselves so why shouldn't we extend a hand to them?'

Lucy



'It could happen to anyone.'

Orhan



New Refugee Support Devon Board Members

If you are interested in becoming a RSD Board Member or would like some more information please email: info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk

Name - Fatima Teimoorzadeh
Board Position – Trustee Member.

Brief background of Person → Fatima has previously volunteered with RSD in several capacities, most notably in translation, interpretation and outreach. Specifically she has helped to interpret between Afghan refugees and RSG officers, taught English to Afghan refugees, participated in RSD’s befriending scheme, and helped a families change their housing, visa paperwork, English language assessments, and general paperwork.

Name – Lauren Carrington
Board Position – Trustee Member for Media and Publicity.

Brief Background of person → Lauren is a Masters student at the University of Exeter, and initially joined the RSD volunteering team through work of the Exeter branch of STAR (Student Action for Refugees), she has focused upon raising awareness of international and national issues facing refugees and asylum seekers through the Refugee Support Devon Facebook Page) as a consequence of this there has been increased activity on the page. In addition to this, Lauren, with the help of RSD volunteer Steven Maclean, is responsible for the quarterly RSD newsletter, coordinating a team of volunteers, suggesting topics, editing and composing the finished product.

Allotment Spring Saturday

On 7th March 7 people met at the allotment to wake it up for the spring. We enjoyed a lovely sunny afternoon and were also able to celebrate the new lean-to/picnic area which has just been built with some generous donations of time and money.

We removed the black winter coverings from the beds, dug in the manure and planted several rows of broad bean seeds and tidied away all the things that had been in the old lean-to. There are already onions & kale growing from autumn plantings.

We enjoyed a picnic in the sunshine before clearing up and departing.

There are several pieces of junk and a broken strimmer that need removing from the allotment. Does anyone have access to a trailer? We will also be short of volunteers for the next crucial 2 months as two of us are away for several weeks. Can anybody help? Gardening experience not essential!

Abbie Grace

Dates for Your Diary

Ubuntu Training

10th June

10-1pm

Ramadan Begins

18th June

Induction Training

30th Sept

10.30 – 12.30pm

If you are interested or plan to attend any training please contact RSD

On

01392 682185

A Farewell to RSD

I would like to say farewell to all of the people I have met during my social work placement at RSD. I have been struck by the passion, commitment and dedication of so many volunteers, supporters, board members, fundraisers and of course staff members. There are many challenges which face people seeking asylum, during the process, settling in and understanding the bureaucracy of our country, learning new skills, etc. and it is a real source of strength to know that there are so many people supporting the work which is done. It has been a real honour to be able to build up relationships with the people who use our services and I will carry the lessons I have learnt from them with me in my future journey. My wish is that one day, the United Kingdom will have an asylum system which is fair, clear and straightforward for everyone who is seeking safety. Over the last twenty years the government has been continually restricting the rights of people seeking asylum and in doing so has made the UK a much less welcoming country for people in need. At present there are 35 Cities (including Exeter) which are developing enough welcoming links and connections to be able to be recognised as a City of Sanctuary. It is fantastic to see people’s counteraction to the government policies and on this note, I will say farewell for now.

Ruth Mostert

