

REFUGEE SUPPORT DEVON

NEWSLETTER

Autumn 2021



RSD: 20 years old and still going strong...!

Bob Marley sang “Let’s get-together and feel alright” and that’s exactly what we did on a gloriously sunny Sunday afternoon in September as we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the founding of Refugee Support Devon. There was some sadness as well as joy... sad to think that more than ever we still need to deliver our services, sad to think that the crisis in Afghanistan that prompted the beginnings of the organisation is still unresolved and still forcing people to leave, sad to remember those that went before who are no longer with us...but joy too, seeing old friends and making new ones, meeting up with former and current service users, enjoying the picnic and the activities - we had some delicious food prepared by Ghaliya Kadi and Mohamad Subhieh, and centre stage was the truly magnificent cake (pictured below right) baked by Neama Haroun. Helping us celebrate

were the Chair of Devon County Council, Cllr Jeffrey Trail BEM accompanied by his wife Mrs Sue Trail, and the Lord Mayor of Exeter, Cllr Trish Oliver and her consort, duly guarded by the Mace-Sergeant. Exeter United came along to kick a ball about with the children, Pippa Marriot helped us make edible poetry - the children (and adults) took great glee in eating their poems written onto rice paper - and everyone helped make a superb birthday card (pictured below - the original is on display



in the RSD office). The Syrian Orchestra of Devon played for us too... I think we definitely need to invite them back! But best of all (for me - the lazy one!) was sitting in the sunshine on the grass enjoying others’ company. Of course, limitless cups of tea and coffee are always welcome and a fantastic job was done by Cllr Diana Moore and her friend Jo, who did the entire tea shift without complaint and with great generosity. Thanks also due to June Marshall for assembling a story board of our history, Wala Hemesho for coordinating the food preparation, Grace Frain and Bernadette Chelvanayagam for arranging activities and organising photographers, Jenny Longford

for being our MC - and our service users, volunteers and staff, all of whom came to celebrate - and all of whom, with unflinching cheer, pitched in to help make the get-together really rock!

Liz Oxburgh, RSD trustee



We would like to echo Liz’s thanks to everyone who helped to make RSD’s 20th birthday a success. There are more photos from the party over the page, we hope they bring back some happy memories.

More photos from the 20th birthday celebrations



Photos by John Hillman and Mia Hollywood

RSD awarded Lottery funding

We are grateful to the National Lottery Community Fund, who have awarded RSD a grant to help fund our Education and Employability project for the next three years. Our education support is available to any of our clients who want to improve their English skills, and is complementary to any formal or accredited courses they may also attend. Our employability



services are aimed at those who have permission to work and also includes support to access higher education or skills training as well as navigating the job searching arena. We help at least 50 people per year, with both long term language/employment support and teaching, and short term assistance with specific needs such as writing CVs, applying for scholarships and exam preparation, including the language test for visas and citizenship and Life in the UK test for their immigration applications. Our clients tell us that the principal barrier to their social integration and financial independence is their inability to communicate effectively in English. Providing them with regular opportunities to learn from English speaking volunteers builds their confidence and motivation, enhancing their potential to pursue meaningful employment and promoting integration, cultural awareness and community participation. Our thanks to the National Lottery Community Fund for helping us continue providing this service for the next three years!

Welcome, Rupert!

Rupert Blomfield has been appointed as RSD's interim manager until the end of March 2022. He will be covering for RSD Manager Annette Hughes, who remains on long-term leave of absence. Rupert comes to RSD with a wealth of relevant experience, having worked in the charitable sector in the UK and overseas for over twenty-five years, and in the refugee sector in the South West since 2002. He has held managerial/directorial posts with organisations such as Refugee Action, the British Red Cross and Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support, and has worked with rough sleepers, subsistence farmer blacksmiths, refugees, asylum seekers and victims of human trafficking and modern slavery. Everyone at RSD would like to welcome Rupert to the staff and we all wish him a happy and rewarding time with us.

Out and about

Every year our hardy supporters raise money for us by doing extraordinary things. We're very grateful to you all and think it is a great idea! So, if you decide to undertake a personal challenge, please consider supporting us while you do it. RSD trustee Liz Oxburgh reports...

As the vaccine does its wonders, we're beginning to get out more. This month I'm very happy to report on two sporting challenges and a talk...

The first one is very dear to me - middle son Stefan (pictured right) undertook what he called a "painathon" - otherwise known as a Half Iron Man Triathlon. This involved swimming 1900m in the sea, followed by cycling 93 km and finishing off by running 19.8 km. He decided to nominate Refugee Support Devon as his sponsored charity and managed to raise over £1,100 - a magnificent achievement. The funds are very gratefully received and will be used to support our work.

Thankyou Stefan - you've really been the extra mile!

The second sporting challenge is still taking place. Students of Exeter School's Crossings House are raising money for Refugee Support Devon by

undertaking a 14 km sporting challenge of their choice. Some are planning on running to Exmouth, others are thinking of stand-up paddling on the canal down to the Turf and back, yet others will be walking or cycling. This event is the brainchild of new student Joe Mann. He was living in Gibraltar



and became very aware of the dangers encountered by asylum-seekers undertaking the perilous crossing of the 14 km Straits of Gibraltar.

In support of the challenge, I was invited to speak at Crossings House to tell them more about our work and to meet Joe and his fellow students - and was very surprised and touched to be given a gorgeous bunch of roses. Here is student James presenting me with the bouquet.

Finally, I was very pleased to take part in a discussion alongside new

Trustee Anna Camilleri. We answered questions put to us by the Exeter Women's Labour Council who wanted to know about the local arrangements for supporting refugees and asylum-seekers, particularly with respect to Afghans who've had to leave in short order. At that time the situation was very unclear - and this remains the case at time of writing. The immediate pinch point is suitable rented accommodation. If you have an empty property available to rent, then please contact Devon County Council <https://www.devon.gov.uk/refugees-in-devon/landlords-can-help> or your local authority in the first instance.

If you would like someone to come and talk to your local group about refugees and asylum-seekers, then we're very happy to help... get in touch by emailing info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk or use the contact form <https://www.refugeesupportdevon.org.uk/contact-us>

Liz Oxburgh

If you're intending to do something like a triathlon or a marathon - and you will be collecting sponsorship - then please think about nominating RSD as your chosen charity. Let us know what you will be doing and we can help promote your challenge in our newsletter and via social media. Even if you aren't contemplating anything quite as energetic you can help. For more ideas about ways you can help RSD please go down to the last page of this newsletter - many thanks!



Getting to know RSD's trustees - Chris Hill

Continuing our series of RSD trustee profiles, Chris Hill (pictured below) - into his second spell as RSD's treasurer - takes his turn under the spotlight. We had to overcome some reticence when we arranged the interview. 'Who on Earth would want to read about an accountant?' Chris asked. Well, our opinion is that Chris is no ordinary accountant. Read his story and see what you think...

Chris's background

I was born in Scunthorpe and attended a Quaker boarding school in Yorkshire. I took a degree in Spanish and Portuguese at King's College, London, and when I graduated, having no clear idea what to do next, I was advised by a friend to contact all the big accountancy firms and seek employment there. I was taken on by one of the City firms and stayed there for four years whilst I qualified. I had never previously had serious trouble with exams but studying for the accountancy exams was amongst the hardest things I ever did. I qualified the day before I got married and



was then approached by a company based in New York. They were looking for Spanish-speaking accountants to work in South America. I went to work in Chile and had a wonderful four years there. Chile is an Anglophile country and I loved the people and the lifestyle. Unfortunately, during my time there a revolution started. The country became very unstable and many overseas firms closed down. We had two small children by then so, very reluctantly, we took the decision to return to England. I worked for a few firms in Wiltshire and Devon, eventually becoming Financial Director. I became restless, and after eighteen years we upped sticks once again, and I was offered the post of Finance Director for Kenya with Action Aid, a large international NGO. The job took me all over East Africa and it was a role where I was able to utilise all my qualifications and experience. I remember having the feeling that I had at last found my 'place' in life. Unfortunately, though, the rules at the time only allowed overseas staff to stay for a maximum of five years so we moved once again, this time to work for a climate change research institute in Brazil. The work was funded by the US, Canada, and several South American countries, and our job was to decide where and how the research money should be spent. It was rewarding work and Brazil is a very stimulating country in which to live. However, an opportunity came up to return to Africa as Director of Finance at the International Centre for Insect Physiology and Ecology in Nairobi, an NGO which researches ways in which insects can help farmers sustain their livelihoods and prevent famine. I was there for five years and was strongly tempted to stay in Africa. I applied for the post of Africa Director with Action Aid, and if I had got it who knows where I would have been by now. Likewise, if the political situation in Chile had been different I might never have left, as I liked living there so much. But the Africa job was offered to someone else and we had young grandchildren by then, so we returned to the UK in 2006.

My qualifications in accountancy and languages have given me great opportunities. One gets to know and understand a country far better when one lives and works there. I have also been very fortunate in having a tolerant wife who has always been prepared to up sticks and follow me round the world. I suppose life back in the UK does lack a certain edge when you have lived through tear-gas riots and curfews, or set out in the morning not knowing if you would be able to get to your destination because you had to drive across a river in flood. Coping with uncertainties was just part of those jobs but we should not disparage the ordered lives we lead here because, after all, those lifestyles are what many other countries around the world are currently striving for.

First involvement with RSD

I returned to the UK in 2006. After a spell as Treasurer for the Devon Community Foundation I was contacted by Colin Stiff. Colin is one of the founder members of RSG (as it was then) and had been around from the very beginning, when the first refugees began arriving in Devon. I joined RSG as Treasurer in 2009 and stood down in 2013 before rejoining in 2017.

(continues on the next page...)

(interview with Chris Hill continued...)

Opinions on RSD

The infrastructure of RSD has improved over the years and the move to Exeter Community Centre has given stability to the organisation. In the beginning the offices were very small, and what we have now is a huge improvement and has given the staff a good space in which they can do their jobs. RSD has always been associated with great individuals. Lawrence Sail and Fran Jenkin stand out in my memory from the early days, as does Annette Hughes, who has been around since the start. People with a range of skills and backgrounds have been elected to the Board and RSD has always had small, tight, and committed members of staff. The goodwill which exists among staff, trustees and volunteers has never changed. As for my role as Treasurer, we have a very efficient financial administration system these days, thanks to Ruth Eyles and Michelle Lambourne. The Sage accounting system is a very secure system which makes it much easier for us to keep on top of things.

Chris's personal qualities on the Board

I have a solid background in finance, administration, management and personnel and have tried to bring that expertise to the running of the organisation. I have served on several management sub-committees and am a member, along with Jenny (Longford) and David (Mezzetti), of the Strategic Working Party. Unfortunately, I live about 20 miles from Exeter so it is not always possible for me to participate as much in events and the day-to-day running of RSD as I would like to.

Chris's opinions on RSD going forward

The VPRS scheme has dominated RSD's operations in recent years. It has provided financial stability and allowed us to allocate overheads more evenly across the various projects. We do not know yet if RSD will be involved with the Afghan resettlement programme so, as the VPRS scheme winds down, strengthening the drop-in, VPR clinics and immigration advice services may be the way forward. The potential collaboration with the Justice Together Initiative, which is currently being coordinated by Ruth (Grove-White), may offer the possibility of networking with other organisations in the South West.

Challenges to RSD

Financial uncertainty is always my biggest external concern. We have yet to identify major funders for the 2022-23 financial year. Within the organisation the principal concerns are staff retention and the demands placed on individuals. The staff do a great job, especially as we cannot guarantee long-term job security, and we are also very fortunate in the quality of our trustees and volunteers. We must always ensure that the workload is spread and that no-one is being asked to do too much.

Plans for the future?

If I said 'I will stand down from the Board when RSD is totally secure financially' I will probably be around for a very long time!

Personal benefits from being involved with RSD?

I feel well informed on issues related to refugees and asylum seekers. A lot of incorrect information is bandied about and I feel better equipped to advise people when they make false statements. A few years ago I participated in a talk about these issues in my village hall with an audience of over eighty people and it provided a very powerful opportunity to inform them about the work of RSD. I also remember when one of our clients, a young girl (Ofa Al Matar), addressed a recent AGM, telling everyone how well she was doing at school and how she was helping to teach her parents English. She personified everything that is positive about RSD and was a reminder that everything we do is worth it.

Our thanks to Chris for the time he gave to this interview and also for the hard work he does for RSD, keeping our finances in order under circumstances which are seldom less than challenging. Interviews with other trustees, staff members and volunteers will follow in future newsletters.

A visit from the High Sheriff of Devon

The High Sheriff of Devon, Lady Lucy Studholme, came to visit us in October. She was very interested in what we do and is seen in the picture below talking to Neli Montes de Oca, our casework coordinator, and Jenny Longford, RSD's Chair of Trustees.

Lady Lucy explained that the High Sheriff was a role that had been around for about a 1,000 years and today is largely ceremonial but is also one of making links across the county.

In Devon the High Sheriff has a special interest in the institutions underpinning civil welfare and order - the police, prisons, probation service, judiciary - but also the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and the Ambulance Service as well as voluntary groups such as ours. It sounded like a demanding and, at times, troubling role that shows both the best and the worst of our society.



Lady Studholme (right) talking with Neli and Jenny

Lady Lucy was very keen to hear about the current arrangements in

Devon for managing the Afghan crisis and also about the work Neli's team is doing in providing legal advice. She offered to help us deepen our links with the University's Law Department and in any other ways that she could.

The last thing I must mention though is that if you weren't in the office that day, you missed a real Devon treat - Lady Lucy brought in a plate of scones with cream and jam for us to enjoy... We did enjoy them and thank you for visiting us Lady Lucy!

Liz Oxburgh

And, in case you wondered...

The Office of High Sheriff is an independent non-political Royal appointment for a single year. Each year 55 High Sheriffs serve the counties of England and Wales, supporting the Crown and the judiciary to encourage crime reduction initiatives, especially amongst young people, via active support to crime prevention agencies, the emergency services and the voluntary sector. Many High Sheriffs also assist Community Foundations and local charities working with vulnerable and other people both in endorsing and helping to raise the profile of their valuable work. High Sheriffs receive no remuneration and no part of the expense of a High Sheriff's year falls on the public purse. Further information can be found by visiting www.highsheriffs.com (where else?)

And finally...

For twenty years RSD has provided support to refugees and asylum seekers living in Devon. We hope to continue supporting these vulnerable people for at least twenty more, but much of our work is reliant on private grants and donations. If you do not yet donate to RSD but would like to do so we would love to hear from you. Regular or one-off, large or small, we are very grateful for them all. **Donations via bank transfer** can be made through our bank account, Refugee Support (Devon) Ltd., Cooperative Bank account number 65849280, sort code 08 92 99. If you would like to make a regular



The 400 appeal

donation ask us about our **400 appeal**, which aims to get 400 people to sign up to a monthly £10 direct debit. **To donate through PayPal or by using a debit or credit card**, search for Refugee Support Devon via the PayPal Giving Fund or visit www.refugeesupportdevon.org.uk and click on the 'donate now' tab. Lastly: please consider **leaving a legacy to RSD in your will**. For advice speak to a solicitor or a will-writer. You will need the following: Refugee Support Devon, Exeter Community Centre, 17 St Davids Hill, Exeter EX4 3RG, registered charity no.1143884. If you need more information about supporting RSD, call 01392 682185 or e-mail info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk . Thank you!