

# REFUGEE SUPPORT DEVON

## NEWSLETTER

Winter 2021



### Happy New Year...and THANK YOU!!

We would like, through this newsletter, to thank everyone who responded to our December 'Giving Tuesday' appeal. We have been overwhelmed by the generosity you have all shown during the festive season. RSD trustee Liz Oxburgh, who coordinated the appeal, said, "I went into Giving Tuesday thinking people would have too much on their minds to give it much attention - and I seriously misjudged you all. You found the time and the money to support us - and on behalf of all the trustees, staff and clients - thank you so much!" In the run-up to 'Giving Tuesday' Liz sent out a series of e-mails about the 'Eat With Us' recipe book to all RSD's supporters and videoed her own attempts to make one of the book's recipes. "I had a lot of fun making Maamoul cakes," she said, "and learned how difficult it is to make a video. I'll take cooking a new recipe every time!"

RSD Manager Annette Hughes confirmed the success of December's fundraising efforts. "To date we have sent out 83 Recipe Books and raised £554 doing so," she said. "During the month of December we also received an extra £2150 in donations - £900 of this on Giving Tuesday itself! We also received generous donations to our emergency fund from the Exeter Quakers and the South Street Baptist Church, which means we were able to provide extra help to those in real need over the holiday period." Liz, meanwhile, has not yet finished with her cooking experiments. "As we go through this latest lockdown I'm going to give 'Eat With Us' a real work-out," she says. "I've been reading recently that the way to keep a healthy weight is to take daily exercise and only eat home-cooked food. That ticks all the boxes as far as my New Year



Liz discovering that date syrup is very different to date paste.

Resolutions go and I'm sure it will help get past these dark times. I'm looking forward to the day when once again we can again share a feast with neighbours, friends and family."



'Eat With Us', RSD's recipe book

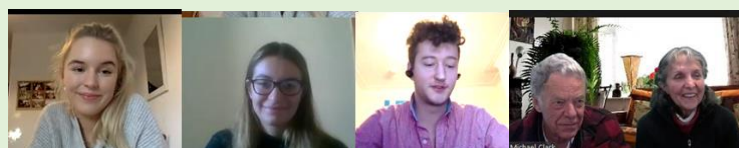
We all feel the same way and we are sure you do too. If, like Liz, you have tried making recipes from 'Eat With Us' why not send us some pictures of your dishes? We'd love to see them, and will perhaps publish them in our next newsletter. If you have not yet ordered a copy of 'Eat With Us' but would like to do so there are still a few copies left for a suggested donation of £6.00 including postage and packing. It is a beautiful little book which

makes a lovely gift. Please e-mail [info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk](mailto:info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk) to order your copy. Liz's cooking videos are still available by visiting <https://refugeesupportdevon.org.uk/news/giving-tuesday-1-dec-giveback-2020-part-2-liz-shares-a-video-making-delicious-maamoul-cakes-from-our-very-own-recipe-book>. We are also thinking about producing a follow-up to 'Eat With Us', so if you have a recipe that you would like to donate, please e-mail it to us, explaining why it is important to you. Finally: To everyone who donated so generously in December, and to all our regular '400 appeal' donors we would like to offer our HUGE THANKS for your support - it is so very much appreciated, especially while times have been so tough for everyone. We wish our readers a Happy New Year for 2021 and hope the problems of 2020 will soon be behind us all.

## Focus on RSD's education and employability project

RSD's education and employability project is perhaps one of our less high-profile services, but it is definitely one of the most important. "The project was set up in direct response to requests from clients," RSD Manager Annette Hughes explains. "Most of them are speakers of other languages and the principal barrier to their social integration and financial independence is their inability to communicate effectively in English." What started as volunteer-led English language teaching has expanded to a professionally-coordinated education and employability project involving a team of 25 qualified volunteer tutors. "Our focus is on giving the clients the language they need to live independent lives as part of their new community," Project Coordinator Denise Parker says. "We have recently expanded our provision hugely and now offer classes in grammar, conversation, preparation for IELTS exams for those wishing to study at university, a very popular Book Club and even a class on how to deal with practical daily issues, such as talking to doctors, requesting repairs from a landlord and discussing children's progress with teachers. Our classes are now attended by an ever-growing number of refugees, thanks to the wonders of Zoom."

Until last March this project was delivered one-to-one in people's own homes, or in classes, but of course the pandemic changed everything. "We had to adapt to doing everything online," Denise says, "and there were problems to overcome on both sides. The tutors weren't all familiar with online teaching methods and resources and had to learn quickly. We have offered training



Members of Denise's ESOL team at a recent Zoom meeting

on the use of Zoom for teaching - it has been a steep learning curve for us all." Clients have also faced problems with lack of IT equipment and experience, as well as having to deal with lots of distractions at home. However, they are becoming much more confident about using computers for study now, so the pandemic has at least given them a chance to improve their digital skills.

Denise is quick to praise her team of tutors and the STAR (Student Action for Refugees) volunteers from Exeter University that assist them but great credit is due to her for the way she coordinates this very wide-ranging project. "Improving people's language skills is absolutely vital to increase their self-confidence and cultural awareness," Annette says. "It also makes them less socially isolated. Eventually it will enhance their chances of finding employment and help them establish themselves in their local communities." Which is, after all, what RSD is all about.

**If you are a qualified ESOL teacher and you would like to join Denise's team of volunteer tutors she will be very happy to hear from you. Please e-mail [info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk](mailto:info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk) for more information. Thank you!**

## Exeter Community Centre

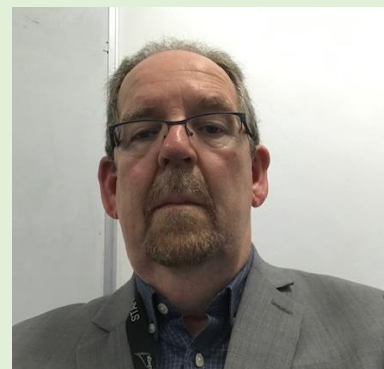
The Community Centre is only permitted to open for certain exempt activities during the current lockdown. As our support work falls into this category Neli and her team of volunteers are able to offer essential face-to-face meetings with clients. Whilst much of RSD's work is currently done via the telephone or online as the staff work from home, there are some things which can only be done in person, such as helping clients complete forms (especially those that then need to be signed); providing financial support to those who are destitute and do not have bank accounts; and performing initial consultations with new clients. We hope to resume a drop-in service as quickly as possible but in the meantime entry to the Community Centre remains restricted to pre-arranged appointments only so any clients wishing to see Neli or one of her team should call 07498 723345 to book an appointment.

## Getting to know RSD's trustees - Bob Mycock

Bob Mycock (pictured below) recently retired as ESOL Manager at Exeter College. He has been an RSD trustee since 2008 and is the second-longest serving member of RSD's Board. Bob has seen the organisation - and ESOL at Exeter College - evolve significantly over the years...

### Bob's background

I started as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher in 1975, first in Northern Spain - just before Franco died! - and then in Germany and Japan, essentially giving lessons in schools to people who could afford to pay for them. I stayed in EFL for a number of years, getting promoted first to School Manager and then Principal, but those roles were mainly concerned with recruiting students and getting the books to balance. I didn't enjoy that so much, so on my fiftieth birthday I gave it up and, after a short time, got a job shadowing teachers in Dartmoor Prison. This led to me being



appointed as an ESOL (English as a Secondary Language) teacher at Channings Wood Prison, near Newton Abbot, dealing with people who had very low literacy levels and some very colourful backgrounds. It was very different from EFL but I found it interesting and rewarding. In 2005 I applied for the post of ESOL Manager at Exeter College. I already had all the management credentials but by then I also had a year of ESOL experience and got the job. I have been in that role since then.

### How did you first get involved with RSD?

Fran Jenkin used to organise monthly meetings with representatives from various organisations around Exeter - housing, education and so on - in which she would ask them how they were treating RSD clients, what they had achieved working with ethnic communities, how they were promoting diversity within their organisations. I represented Exeter College and, to begin with, found these meetings quite nerve-wracking as Fran was such a formidable character. After a while, though, she recognised the efforts I was making and in 2008 she suggested I join RSD as a trustee. I have been on the Board ever since. I believe I am the second-longest serving member after David Mezzetti.

### What do you enjoy about your role as trustee?

I have come to know lots of people in the refugee community and I feel I have particular expertise no other trustee has, for example in the fields of immigration law and current ESOL developments. Because of my commitments at the College I have not always been able to give as much time to RSD as I would have liked, and have often queried my presence on the Board; but the other trustees have always encouraged me to stay. I see my role as keeping a strong focus on education within RSD because I know the difference it makes to people's lives. It's very rewarding to see people growing in confidence, really understanding what their children's teachers say at parents' evenings, going to medical appointments without needing an interpreter and so on. Also...I've helped with so many UK passport applications now I keep my own passport number on my phone so I don't forget it!

### Has the teaching of refugees at Exeter College changed during your 15 years there?

There have been a number of very positive developments. Years ago there were often racial tensions within classes - thankfully these are now a thing of the past - and other faculties within the College were sometimes reluctant to offer places on vocational training courses to students from refugee backgrounds. That changed about five years ago, when we had a big influx of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). We had to provide extra courses for them and the College Principal basically told the other faculties that refusal to accept them would not be permitted. Within a short time the faculties realised that these UASC are good learners and highly motivated and they are now much more willing to offer them places.

(Interview with Bob Mycock - continued...)

Unfortunately I think Brexit will have a negative effect on ESOL provision at the College. There will be fewer migrant workers now so ESOL classes will have a higher proportion of refugees than before. The College will have to adapt to these challenges and find a new student base - for example, it will soon be starting courses for nursing auxiliaries at the hospital, people from places like India, China, Pakistan and the Philippines, who have been in the UK for a long time but lack the language skills to become fully qualified as nurses in this country - but sadly there will probably be a decrease in what the College can offer, both in terms of the variety of levels at which lessons are pitched and the schedule of lessons offered.

### **What do you see as RSD's strengths?**

As an organisation RSD is always striving to improve itself. Over the years it has expanded its scope and developed better links with other organisations. It is also always looking for better ways to serve its clients. Neli and her team of volunteers getting accreditation as immigration advisers is a prime example. The Board is, I think, more professional now and has a range of people with strongly relevant, specific skills.

### **How do you see RSD going forward?**

There has been some discussion recently about whether or not RSD should extend its remit, for example: offering assistance to EU nationals with their applications for settled status in the UK. My own opinion is that RSD should remain as an organisation that supports refugees. Within this there is, I think, an ongoing requirement to define the needs of each client or client group, and to decide how those needs might best be met. The support required, for example, by an Afghan who has been in the UK for ten years will be very different from that required by a Syrian family who arrived last week. The ultimate aim, though, should be to build resilience within each community so that they are best able to help themselves. I also think some consideration should be given to issues related to growing up in a bilingual household. It's important, for example, that children born in the UK to Afghan parents should be able to contact and communicate with their grandparents in Afghanistan.

### **And finally...what's next for you?**

I recently retired as ESOL Manager at Exeter College and we are currently in the process of moving house, which occupies a lot of my time. I intend to keep teaching part-time for at least one year, maybe longer. After that I look forward to having more time to read and travel - when we can!

**Our thanks to Bob for giving so generously of his time: we wish him every success and happiness with his future plans. Interviews with other RSD trustees, staff members and volunteers will follow in future newsletters.**

## **RSD drop-in client awarded UK citizenship**



We are delighted to report that a long-term RSD drop-in client (who we have not named in this newsletter, to protect his identity) was recently awarded UK citizenship. He has been attending the drop-in since 2009 and has faced a number of very difficult challenges throughout his time in the UK. Owing to problems with his health there were even doubts about whether or not he would be well enough to make it for his online citizenship ceremony. Thankfully he was able to participate and the picture shows him 'attending' his ceremony in the RSD office. His citizenship is now confirmed and he is currently in the process of applying for a UK passport. This is a great achievement and we would like to congratulate him on this wonderful outcome. Congratulations also to Neli and her team of drop-in volunteers for all their hard, patient - and ultimately successful - work with him over the years.

## Refugee Week 2021 update

Refugee Week 2021 will be held between 14 and 20 June and this year's theme is 'We Cannot Walk Alone'. RSD trustee Liz Oxburgh comments: "This year's Refugee Week theme really strikes a chord with me. We're all missing the easy chat and gentle companionship from family, friends, neighbours and passers-by. Still, all things must pass and with any luck, by June, things will start to get back to normal...fingers crossed!" Before Christmas Liz sent out a call for assistance with this year's Refugee Week events and she was delighted with the response. "A number of people have already made themselves available," she says. "Some are experienced RSD volunteers, but others are from the wider community in Exeter and beyond, which is absolutely fantastic...but there's always room for more people." Liz, together with fellow RSD trustees Jenny Longford, Grace Frain and Bernadette Chelvanayagam, Wendy Milne from City of Sanctuary and RSD volunteers Jeremy Toye and Anna Jameson Evans, recently met to start formulating plans for the summer. "For the time being we're still anticipating that social distancing will still be a thing during Refugee Week so we're on the lookout for socially distanced ideas." Liz says. "If you have a cunning plan or simply want to join in, then please contact us." We will publish further Refugee Week updates in our next newsletter and online but in the meantime if you would like to help out with Refugee Week please e-mail [info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk](mailto:info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk) - many thanks!

## RSD needs YOU!

Much of RSD's work is entirely reliant on private grants and donations and, regular or one-off, large or small, we are very grateful for them all, they allow us to continue our work with people who need long-term support as they strive to make a new life for themselves in the UK.

- £10 - pays for a vital medical prescription for those who are destitute
- £20 - provides mobile phone credit, enabling vital communication with solicitors and family
- £50 - purchases a bus ticket to attend an immigration hearing or legal appointment
- £100 - helps to equip someone's first home with essentials after long periods of destitution or insecure accommodation. It can also pay for a team of volunteers to be trained to help respond to queries from asylum seekers and refugees
- £500 - funds a staff member for a week to coordinate volunteers and respond to queries from the most vulnerable

So when lockdown ends, if you're intending to do something like a triathlon or a marathon - and you will be collecting sponsorship - then please could you 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. **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 donation please ask us about our **400 appeal**, which aims to get 400



The 400 appeal

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](http://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 details: 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 please telephone 01392 682185 or e-mail [info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk](mailto:info@refugeesupportdevon.org.uk) . **Thank you!**

## Finally...

This year we remembered Holocaust Memorial Day privately by lighting a candle in memory of those whose lives were cut short by genocide. We thought about the families who still grieve for the ones they have lost and the futures that never came about.