



Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group

Working with asylum seekers and refugees

Autumn/Winter Newsletter 2024

Charity Number: 1183558

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, Miriam Margolyes OBE, John Pilkington



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Mark Courtice (right) pictured with Cllr Victoria Ugwoeme (left) and Lord Mayor David Shields (centre) at Refugee Week 2024

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Memories of Mark

Catherine Hartley

By the time this newsletter comes out, most of you will have heard the shocking news that Mark, our wonderful Chair of Trustees for the last three years, has died. It's an almost incomprehensible loss.

When he joined SWVG, Mark became the dearly loved visitor of Tharshan Vettivel, someone he thought so highly of that he later put Tharshan forward to become the first SWVG Trustee with lived experience of the asylum system. When he stopped being Tharshan's visitor, remaining, instead, a close

He was gentle and kind, but also stubborn. He could see clearly, and also had a facility with words that enabled other people to picture exactly what he could see, and believe it possible. He was indeed an exceptional person.

friend, he gravitated towards the SWVG English teaching group, thinking that it would be easier to remain emotionally detached as a teacher than a visitor. But Mark couldn't do things by halves. He embarked on a full-time CELTA, the gold standard English-teaching qualification, staying in London for a month to devote himself to it, and of course ended up caring deeply about each of his students, too.

So much for remaining de-



tached. Within a few years, Mark had become a Trustee of SWVG, and then Chair of Trustees, at each step persuaded by people who saw his qualities from three miles off and seized them for SWVG. Persuaded, because what he enjoyed was not managing but doing, and what he did was personal and generous, not abstract. He saw sadness, loneliness, and wasted potential, and wanted to change things. And he changed so much. Even while growling at the mountain of work that he found himself dealing with as Chair, he never stopped coming up with exciting ideas, throwing his heart into new schemes, and persevering with whatever he knew was the right thing to do.

He created the Cultural Conversation Group at the library, sharing his love of theatre, art, literature and language, and seeing people make friends and connections that they wouldn't have made anywhere else. He was a prime mover in establish-

ing the art group that meets in the John Hansard Gallery; the Cooking for Friends project that not only brings people together around shared meals from all over the world, but also gains them a valuable certificate in food hygiene; and the reporting support group that gathers outside the police station where people seeking asylum have to report to immigration officials, reassuring them, taking down phone numbers of friends and solicitors, and letting those people know if someone goes into the police station and doesn't come out. Each of these things has had wider benefits that Mark, with his intuitive understanding of how ripples spread and people touch each other, probably anticipated from the start.

Mark appreciated the contribution of each group and member of SWVG. He was never territorial, but always saw the benefit of working with other organisations. Our partnership with CLEAR was so crucial that it was

a given to Mark that they must be part of AMC even after our joint insurance proved to have been a chimera. He spent whole Saturdays at Southampton Action's clothing events, delighting in his shopkeeper's role 'selling' duvet covers and second-hand sweatshirts to all comers. He made a firm friendship with Parvin Damani from the Medina Mosque, who saw his vision for Cooking for Friends and supported it with serious donations of staple foods; he reported gleefully on his visit to Christ Church in Freemantle; "Have you heard about my sermon?" was his favourite line for at least a week.

Perhaps Mark's greatest achievement, and certainly one that has been mentioned again and again in the past few days, was making SWVG a more inclusive place, as witness his conception of the most open and welcoming of Open Days ever devised. It can be hard to

lead a large organisation out of an established position. He achieved this by arguing passionately for his vision, saying, "I'm



going to say this once, and then I'll be quiet and never mention it again". A cautious discussion would follow, punctuated by, "I'll just say this just once, and then I'll shut up and go away", until finally we all believed that it was what we'd meant all along.

The messages written to Mark when he became ill, and everything people have said to me since he died show how special he made each person feel, and how much we loved him in

return. We are so lucky that not only was he hugely creative, imaginative and thoughtful, but also highly professional, capable and organised. He was gentle and kind, but also stubborn. He could see clearly, and also had a facility with words that enabled other people to picture exactly what he could see, and believe it possible. He was indeed an exceptional person. He would of course have denied this. He would have made fun of his own irritation at the chaos of

spreadsheets, the tiresomeness of handing over keys, the slowness of the oven, and most bitter of all, the perishing cold any time the temperature dropped below 22 degrees. He refused to see himself as a benefactor, because he knew that all of us in SWVG are beneficiaries. His admiration for the brave, patient, talented people we work with, "the best of the best", was unbounded.

It will take many of us to fill his role, but because we are the strong, flexible, compassionate organisation that he nurtured, we will do it.

If you would like to make a donation to SWVG in Mark's memory, please use the sort code 40-40-14, account 12318695, using the reference 'Mark Courtice', and your gift will be added to a fund in Mark's memory. We will decide how to spend this money in due course. If you pay tax, please consider [gift-aiding](#) your donation.



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Southampton City Council reaffirms status as City of Sanctuary

Tharshan Vettivel

We all gathered on 30th July, a day that was not just any day, but appropriately the UN International Day of Friendship, to celebrate an event in Southampton that reaffirmed its commitment to gaining full City of Sanctuary status. This was an important event in the historical setting of the Lord Mayor's parlour.

The event was attended by the Lord Mayor himself, David Shields, and the Leader of the

Council, Lorna Fielker, as well as representatives of local organisations, and people seeking sanctuary.

Southampton is an incredibly diverse place and has a proud record of supporting people seeking sanctuary, becoming a City of Sanctuary in 2017. Southampton City Library plays a key role and has received the country's first prestigious Sanctuary Library Award. Several organisations that provide support and friendship to people fleeing war and persecution were recognised and honoured, with SWVG be-

ing particularly commended.

In his short speech, SWVG Chair Mark Courtice welcomed Southampton City Council's reaffirmation and thanked the local authority sanctuary network for its commitment and support. Two asylum seekers were given a space to share their inspiring stories, which revealed their terrifying journeys, their bravery and commitment to helping others.

As a refugee and, therefore, part of this community, I see this sanctuary network as a collective of humanitarian-based groups that understand people seeking



sanctuary deserve our welcome and support, and do not limit themselves only to recognition that people seeking sanctuary are entitled to claim asylum under the law.

People must live their daily lives in these cities, which will be their adopted home for the rest of their lives. When a person seeks sanctuary, that person begins a new life in a new world; people have lost everything, they have left behind their families, friends and the community they lived in, and they are forced to start from scratch like a child, including often at the level of their skills and knowledge.

It would not be possible without the help of such an amazing group of people; it takes ages to stand on our feet and become independent.

Meanwhile, I see this as a principle of give and take with humanity and mutual understanding. Despite their struggles, the people also bring their enthusiasm, culture, experience, empathy, and an astonishing

amount of expertise and work ethic to the adopted city. Together they make the city a valuable, diverse and beautiful safe place that is inclusive of all. However, as a prelude to all this, the people seeking sanctuary must be welcomed and supported, and their

contribution must be recognised. This becomes a reality when all the local departments come together to form a sanctuary group and get the necessary support of the local authority. In this hostile environment, such a network is vital for people seeking sanctuary in this country. I am delighted that the city of Southampton has reached this milestone and included sanctuary people as part of the community.

I was very inspired when our Chair Mark addressed this in the following words, "Sanctuary is not just altruism but an essential building block for the future health of a community."

As we still see, we face some practical problems in our day to day, all of which can be rectified if this network is actively implemented. This will massively improve not only the lives of people seeking sanctuary but also the health of the city and the community relationship. I believe this is just the beginning of a long journey ahead as we all come together.

University of
Southampton
gains
Sanctuary
status



In October, the University of Southampton proudly announced its official recognition as a University of Sanctuary, awarded by the City of Sanctuary national charity. The University wrote that it is 'deeply committed to working with local and national communities such as SWVG and CLEAR. This also forms part of our work on being a Civic University.'

Its partnership with Solent University, City Life Church and Southampton City Council in the Southampton Sanctuary Network offers organisations a place to come together to support those seeking sanctuary in the city.

Amongst the initiatives the University has committed to, it is offering scholarships to support students who are seeking sanctuary in the UK. As Professor Jane Falkingham, Vice President, Engagement & International, at the University explained, recognition reflects their "commitment to supporting students and academics seeking sanctuary and safety from across the globe to realise their full potential."



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SWVG Chair Mark Courtice's address to Southampton City Council

Mark Courtice

At the end of April the government announced that they would use the regular Asylum bail signing-on sessions as a venue for the detention of those they wished to remove to Rwanda.

There's no need to go into how much distress, tension and difficulty this added to the lives of people seeking asylum. It also inspired a coalition of local activists to set up a reporting support team, and just a fortnight later a group was there to offer a friendly face, note names and the contact number of a friend or lawyer from those going in so if they were detained somebody would know. And every Monday come rain or shine the group (which includes a pop-up cafe) has been at Portswood Police Station, counting people in and counting them out. The immediate threat of Rwanda may have receded but people still need someone on the outside ready to speak up for them if need be. People are still being detained.

The point of talking about this is not (for once) to be getting at government policy but to describe how important in practical terms an underpinning partnership is in working with people seeking asylum. Southampton Stand Up to Racism, Southampton Action, SWVG, and in all 30

people, are all involved filling the rota, supplying graphics etc.

It's important that here in Southampton these partnerships involve so many different people. Refugee Week 2024 is an example of the width as well as the depth of support for those seeking asylum who have arrived in the city; the growing number of stalls at the picnic in Palmerston Park, the enthusiastic involvement



of schools are all evidence of this.

The Sanctuary Movement is a great expression of this impetus to collaboration and it's immensely cheering to me as I go about the city how many organisations are either signed up to the Sanctuary cause or are actively planning to join. It's not just libraries, it's schools, it's universities, it's theatres, it's galleries all striving

to make clear their willingness to get involved.

Allison and her team at our libraries are a classic example of understanding that signing up to sanctuary means doing things - making space available, supporting groups and in the case of our cultural conversation group buying 15 copies of Alice in Wonderland! Partnership is action, commitment - and a budget!

I think I speak for all of us when I say how very much we welcome Southampton City Council's reaffirmation of its commitment, made in 2017, to be a Council of Sanctuary and more recently a member of the Local Authority Sanctuary Network. That work I referred to outside Portswood Police Station couldn't happen if it wasn't for the active involvement of people with lived experience of the system. In our case there are people who go in, sign on and then come back out to help others. A city that commits to sanctuary gets huge benefits from the people who bring experience, empathy, understanding and the most astonishing work ethic to contribute to the health and well-being of their adopted City. Sanctuary is not just altruism but an essential building block for the future health of a community.

We wish you all the very best of luck in developing the meaning of Sanctuary in this city in the future and of course stand ready to be your partners in this great enterprise.

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A book club with a difference

Gopi Chandroth

Book clubs are two a penny these days. So, why an SWVG book club? The idea was mooted by Miriam Jones, a volunteer English teacher at SWVG: A book club with special focus on the issues of displacement of people and social upheaval around the world.

It would help us understand better why people seek refuge in a country not their own. Perhaps we would gain some insight into why entire populations are being uprooted.

Eight SWVG volunteers formed a WhatsApp group and agreed on our first book: *The Girl who Smiled Beads* by Clemantine Wamariya. It is a memoir narrated from the point of view of a child who was six when she left home with her older sister to escape the Rwandan genocide of 1994. They travelled through seven

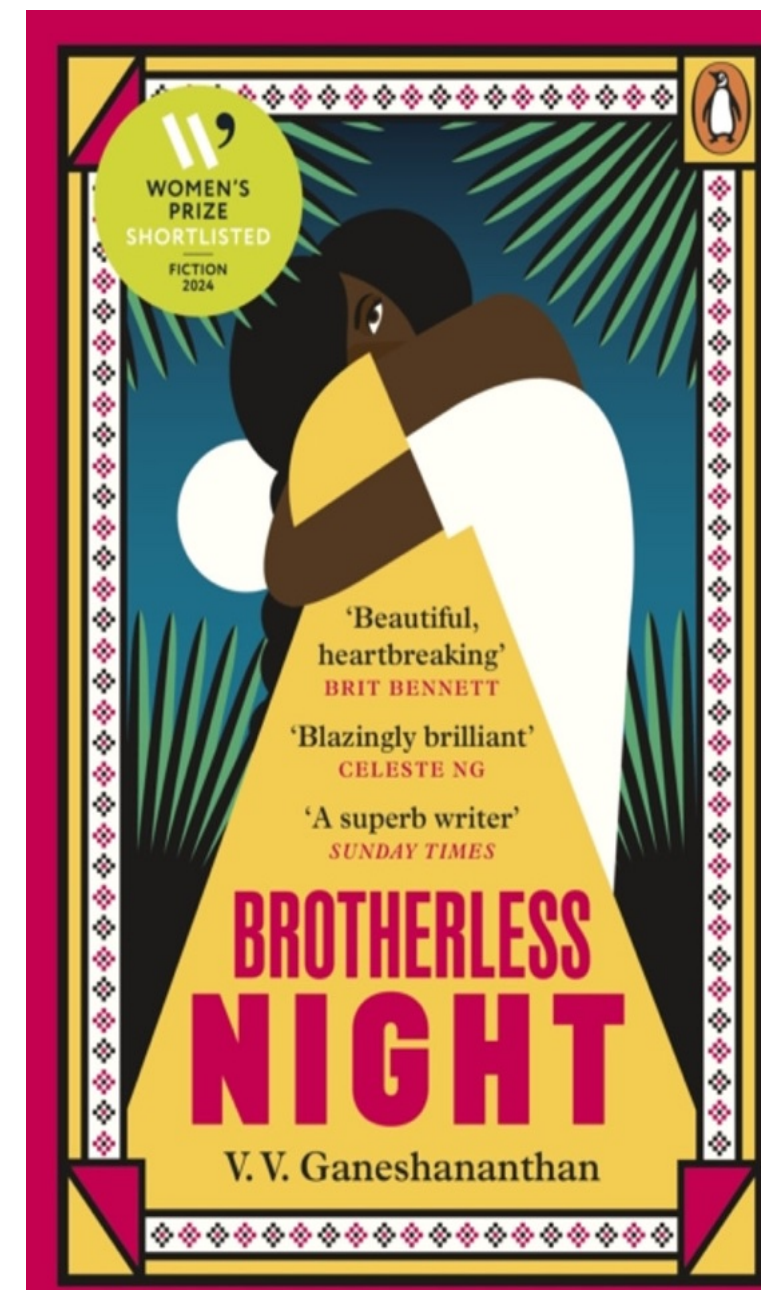
African nations for six years before being granted asylum in the United States.

On 25 July 2024, we came

to each other's impressions. We explored new places in our psyche. Our grasp of the trauma suffered by our friends improved.

We met again in October. This time the book selected was VV Ganeshanathan's *Brotherless Night*. Professor Mahesan Niranjan from Southampton University, a Sri Lankan Tamil by ethnicity, joined us for the evening. He gave an impartial and first-hand experience of the civil war, adding depth and substance to our discussion. *Brotherless Night* is the heartbreaking saga of the Sri Lankan civil war as narrated by a young medical student, Sashikala. The story is a finely woven tapestry interweaving vivid descriptions of the war and Sashi's loyalty to her brothers who were sucked into the LTTE (Tamil Tigers) movement. A subtle thread of unfulfilled love runs through the book between Sashi and K, a childhood friend turned LTTE leader. The vivid imagery and literary skill of the author left us reeling.

The third book for discussion in November is *Enter Ghost* by Isabella Hammad. We look forward to reading and discussing this book. Membership to the book club is open to anyone connected with SWVG.



together to discuss the book. It gave us a unique perspective of the Rwandan war. But even more than what the written words told us, our own comprehension of the words in the book was enhanced as we listened intently

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Surtierra project: Singing together with one voice

Miriam Jones

Every Friday, after English lessons, the hall at AMC is filled with the magical sound of Chilean music. Through their Surtierra project, the Chilean band Quimantu has formed a choir for people seeking sanctuary and volunteers. Anyone connected with SWVG can take part. Doris, my student from El Salvador, and I both jumped at the chance.

We're learning a piece of music called Misa de los Mineros (Miners' Mass), written by Quimantu's founder, Mauricio Venegas-Astorga. Mauricio came to the UK as a refugee from Chile in 1977. The lyrics are in Spanish, but the music conveys a sense of solidarity, community

and longing for home that transcends language.

I asked Doris what the project meant to her. "For me, it encompasses many things," she said. "It raises awareness, through songs, of situations people like Mauricio have lived through. As an immigrant, it touches you, because you imagine your own country. The songs have a meaning that goes beyond what we're singing."

"The musicians are showing their gratitude through songs to the nation that has opened its doors. And they're trying to help the world see things differently by telling people about our experiences. The song I identify with most is 'Pueblo del Alma' (People of my Soul). 'Now I say goodbye, people of my soul /

But my heart shall linger on.' It means a lot to me.

"It feels super good to be part of the group. Even though we speak different languages, we're like a family. And for those of us who have lived through this situation, it's an opportunity to express our emotions. It transforms me and transports me to a different world where there are no limits or social impositions. It's as if we're one voice."

The choir will perform Misa de los Mineros on Saturday 7 December at Avenue St Andrew's Church in Southampton and on Sunday 8 December at All Hallows church in Whitchurch. Please come and support us!



TICKET INFORMATION

Tickets for the concerts are £12 (£6 concessions). There is an SWVG discount (£10). Use the code SWVG10 at the checkout.

7:30 pm, Saturday 7 December:
Avenue St Andrew's URC SO17 1XQ

6:30 pm, Sunday 8 December: All
Hallows Church, Whitchurch, Hants
RG28 7AS

COMMUNITY TICKETS (FREE)

Everyone singing in the SWVG Choir will receive one Community Ticket for the 7 December concert. SWVG clients who are performing can request additional Community Tickets for members of their family or friends; a limited number are available for SWVG clients who are not performing. These can be reserved from Musiko Musika on Friday 29 November. For more information contact info@musikomusika.org



**Quimantu with
the Andover Museum Loft Singers
and SWVG Choir**



**The Surtierra Tour
"When Music is Home"**

Sat. 7th December 7.30pm
Avenue St Andrew's URC, Southampton SO17 1XQ

Sun. 8th December 6.30pm
All Hallows Church, Whitchurch, Hants RG28 7AS

Tickets £12/£6 booking via:
www.quimantu.net/touring-concerts

Artwork: Joaquin Ardiles & Musiko Musika



Activities and Outings

Amanda Caspari

We reported last autumn how important partnerships are when organising activities and outings for asylum seekers. Our outings have many benefits – meeting people from the UK, visiting places outside Southampton, giving a wider view of the country, and getting away from accommodation where people are often stuck, with little money to visit places themselves.

Although our outings are a relaxed day out they still involve practising English, learning about culture and history, and seeing new places. When our clients meet people outside SWVG and visit different places, they are being exposed to new

perspectives, an important addition to what SWVG can offer.

The New Forest National Park Rangers continue to work with us to think of ideas for trips and activities in the Forest. We were able again this year to go on organised walks, and join our friends at PEDALL for another Forest bike ride. Southampton National Park City kindly sponsored this trip for us and were able to join us on the day. We have new ideas for activities as well as volunteering days in 2024/25. Thank you also to the Park Rangers for the delicious picnic they always arrange for us.

In May and June this year, we worked in collaboration with the University of Southampton, Frames of Mind and the New Forest Rangers on a research project led by Dr Heidi

Armbruster. Frames of Mind is a charity involved in participatory film and digital arts programmes to support mental health. The project involved going into the Forest to gather material and produce content for a film. This was with the involvement of a team of asylum seekers who also helped edit the final film. [The film is available to view on the SWVG website.](#) This was a truly collaborative effort and enjoyable for all involved.

We continued our partnership with the Winchester Ramblers with a walk through the city. We had two walks planned but as with several of our outings this year we had to cancel due to the dreadful weather. We visited the Cathedral in the afternoon and were treated to a guided tour. The cathedral visit always stimulates interesting discussions about history, architecture, and



religion. We have ideas for future visits to other interesting locations in Winchester including the Hospital of St Cross.

Thanks to our contacts in the Winchester Ramblers we now have a new partnership with the Salisbury Ramblers. We headed off by train on a warm day in July to meet the group there, combining a visit to the Cathedral with a walk around the City; we also visited St Thomas's Church to look at the doom paintings followed by a walk across the lovely water meadows. Again we have more trips planned for next year including a visit to the Cathedral tower.

We only managed one trip to the beach in Bournemouth this year due to the weather (we tried several times to make our second trip but just couldn't find a suitable date when it wasn't raining!).

The Mayflower Theatre continue to work with us through their community programme, and across 2024 we went to a diverse range of shows including musicals, pantomime, opera and dance. We were able to include shows specifically for children and it was exciting to take whole families to the theatre. We are so grateful to the Mayflower



for including SWVG in their programme, and we are looking forward to attending more shows in 2025.

In June this year, we were contacted by No Fit State

Community Circus with a generous offer of tickets for their show in Eastleigh. Naturally we grabbed the opportunity and were treated to a wonderful and exciting show.

This financial year we have taken 160 people on outings; we have seen 9 shows at the Mayflower Theatre, taking 85 individuals to the theatre and 70 people to the circus.

The kindness of our partners and their continued involvement is vital to the overall support that SWVG can offer refugees and people seeking asylum. We can take people away from the difficulty of their daily lives waiting in the asylum system. They could not afford to make these trips or go to the theatre themselves. Perspectives are broadened, and people get to understand the history and culture of the UK better, all while having fun!



Activities and Outings (cont.)

Baba

The trips and visits we have made with you help me enormously, especially with regard to stress, thanks to this trip and visit gave me confidence, by talking with several people I don't know, plus it opened my mind a lot and today my morale is in its place, madam thanks to you.

You gave me more confidence. Really thank you very much, thank you very much.

B

A great opportunity to meet new people and new places to our location.

Spending time together release oxytocin which can reduce stress and lower blood pressure from my health and it make me to learning how to communicate with different people: my English is improving.

Mohamad Nour

When I first arrived in Southampton as an asylum seeker, I felt like a complete stranger. But meeting the kind and helpful people at SWVG made a big difference.

They helped me with many issues, and one of the most important things for me, they used to take me on trips that eased my anxiety and introduced me to new places and people. Every moment I spent on these trips was truly meaningful to me. My deepest thanks to everyone at SWVG.

Igor

Every time we go out together with Amanda, I discover new places and have new experiences. I meet animals that I had never seen in my country. I hear them and see different devices that I had never seen before: devices that help you hear birds singing from further away.

I also had the opportunity to go to other places, get to know other cities, new and different cultures. I'm listening

and learning more in English, knowing how to respond, knowing how to know what the person is telling me. Learning the history of that city, the history of that church, the history behind everything that happened in the past, how it was built in what time.

Whenever I travel I like to have more knowledge, more experience in which I know how to get to know new cultures and new people. I see that other people have the patience to teach us, show us, teach us more each day.



Nazir

The trips we took with SWVG gave me unforgettable memories and moments of strong support.

Under Amanda's guidance, we explored wonderful cities like Winchester, Salisbury, Bournemouth, and the New Forest. Visiting historic buildings

allowed us to connect with the past, and participating in theatre and dance events brought joyful moments that supported our mental well-being. The various activities we joined in Southampton were also a special part of this journey. Through these experiences with SWVG, I discovered not only new places but also new insights about myself.



My journey from Afghanistan to Southampton

Nazir

I was born in Afghanistan—a country where family and traditions are deeply intertwined with daily life. In my childhood, laughter echoed through the halls: our home was like a bustling sanctuary where everyone gathered together to eat and live happily.

Each corner held stories of generations past, and traditions connected us deeply to our roots. These memories of unity and warmth shaped my early years. For many, like myself, home embodies more than just a physical space—it's a repository of cherished memories and cultural connections that shape our identities.

As I grew older, Afghanistan's landscapes and history became a classroom that nurtured my identity and strengthened my bond with my homeland. However, alongside its beauty, our country faced challenges like decades-long conflicts. Nevertheless, our family remained resilient in the face of difficulties, holding tightly to our traditions and bonds.

At the age of thirteen, in



search of stability and safety, we made the difficult decision to migrate from Afghanistan to Kazakhstan. This transition marked a period of coping with life in a new country and grappling with the longing for the home I had

left behind. Education came with its challenges; I often felt like an outsider and was labelled as an "Oralman Afghan." Despite these hardships, I prioritised my educa-

family and Afghanistan filled my thoughts, a constant reminder of the place I carried with me wherever I went.

Settling in Southampton was filled with challenges, but here I found a lifeline in organisations like SWVG, Yellow Door, and SCRATCH. Their steadfast support and guidance helped me navigate the complexities of a new culture and forge meaningful connections. Gradually, Southampton began to feel like a sanctuary—a place where I could belong and grow.

Additionally, I found love and support from my partner in Southampton. My partner's friendship and understanding made me feel truly at home, adding another layer of warmth and comfort to my life.



Now, ten months later, I find myself embracing Southampton as my home. My journey from Afghanistan to Kazakhstan and finally

to the UK has been marked by resilience, community support, and unbreakable ties to my roots. I am grateful to SWVG for providing me the opportunity to share my story and reflect on the profound impact of finding a home amidst uncertainty.

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Welcome House

In July, after trying for three years to move from Winchester to Southampton, Hilary finally pulled it off, and started to realise the vision of the Welcome House that she'd held onto all that time. Hilary is an SWVG volunteer, but Welcome House is her own enterprise (and home!)

Hilary Preece

The aim at Welcome House is to do what it says on the tin! Beyond that, my vision consisted of no more than making myself more available to people needing support.

I hoped that I could teach English and English culture through normal activities and conversation, encouraging understanding and integration by giving students an opportunity to mix with my friends.

I had not realised the extent to which cultural differences would emerge, or how much easier it was to talk freely here. That has been so rewarding. My original aim was to have 50 percent English people in any group. That hasn't happened, but the folk who have been here have made such a difference to conversations.

The groups are developing. I thought the book club would appeal to those who speak good English, for whom there is little provided at the hotel. In fact I ended up with a group the majority of whom were listening to a book far beyond their ability, and

I think others may have been put off knowing there were beginners in the group. I also thought people would join the club and be committed... how naive I was! I have now started a second book club called 'baby book club', and I foresee a time when this will have to run on two consecutive nights reading the same book to cope with the numbers.

Work parties happen once every 5 weeks now. Some people have learned new skills,

Yasir Alnoor

Our dedicated English teacher, Mrs. Hillary is hosting a welcome book club at Welcome Southampton House. She lovely invites us to her house, where we read together, discuss stories, and borrow books to continue learning. Her kindness and hospitality make every session enjoyable and inspiring for all of us.

computer and a photocopier will be well used.

Two came an hour early tonight to copy documents and to work on the computer. Again, I didn't plan that, it just happened. I have been dropping big hints trying to find someone who will teach bike maintenance and I now have a volunteer lined

up to start in a few months. It has occurred to me that all this is a bit like watching eggs hatch. I just don't know what will emerge next. How exciting is that!

I would like to thank all those who have taken an interest in this project. Do pop in for a cup of tea any time. There's always a packet of biscuits and a cup of tea on the go.



some have taught, and some have shown off their abilities. I would be very happy to write references for them!

I have had my first cream tea and crumpets afternoon. No, I did not become the domestic goddess that I had expected to become, but I did make the scones.

Well, what next? It looks as though the kind donations of a

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Age assessment as an instrument of immigration control

Dr Ingi Iusmen

Hundreds of unaccompanied migrant children seeking asylum in the UK are being wrongly assessed by the Home Office as adults at the point of entry into the UK.

This flawed process, usually based on a short visual assessment, results in children being placed in adult accommodation (e.g. hotels) and immigration detention, exposing them to significant risks, potential harm and mental health deterioration (Helen Bamber Foundation and Refugee Council 2024). Moreover, the determined age of an asylum-seeking youth has implications for their ability to access health services, education and welfare support.

Recent asylum legislation (Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and Illegal Migration Act 2023) will introduce 'scientific' age assessment methods. These methods were introduced by the Conservative Government, but the current government has not amended the previous legislation, apart from scrapping the Rwanda scheme. These scientific methods (e.g. dental X-rays, bone age examinations) are disputed by many in the scientific community, including the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health, on the grounds that the methods are unreliable, unethical, and risk causing more distress to refugee minors. According to the Children Act 1989, the age assess-

ment of unaccompanied migrant children is, and should be, an exceptional measure of social/child care that should be usually conducted by local authorities via social workers, trained particularly for carrying out this process.

Our pilot project at the University of Southampton involved the collection of empirical data from a variety of stakeholders involved (directly or indirectly) with age assessment, such as refugee charities, social workers, psychological clinicians, medical statisticians, lawyers and members of the Independent Chief Inspectorate for Borders and Immigration. I was the Principal Investigator working with my University of Southampton colleague Professor Jana Kreppner: we worked on the research project from April to August 2024, and we will be presenting the findings from this pilot and other relevant research to Parliament on World Children's Day (20th November).

There were some key important findings. First, the Home Office conducts an excessive amount of age assessments in Dover: these are short visual assessments, lasting between 10-40 mins and the vast majority of these children are wrongly assessed as adults. Second, these children enter the system as "adults", being placed in adult accommodation and not having access to social services for children, unless they are referred to local authorities for a more detailed (Merton compliant) age

assessment conducted by social workers.

Finally, children who are age assessed, either by the Home Office or local authorities, find the process deeply traumatising from a psychological point of view, particularly as something as crucial to their identity, as age, is not believed. Our findings show that, given the predominant role played by the Home Office in establishing migrant children's age, age assessment has become a means to control and deter immigration (by the Home Office) at the expense of social workers' mandate, who are the legitimate professionals responsible for this issue, in line with the law.

Our research shows that flawed age assessment methods result in children being placed in adult accommodation and immigration detention, exposing them to significant risks, potential harm and radical mental health deterioration. Their rights as children, protected under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, are particularly violated by the latest age assessment practices, as enshrined in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and Illegal Migrant Act 2023, and as conducted by the Home Office in Dover.

Dr Iusmen is an Associate Professor in Governance and Policy at the University of Southampton and an English teacher with SWVG.

Charity Number: 1183558

Campaigning

William Brook-Hart

STANDING UP TO FAR-RIGHT CRIMINALITY

This summer, far right criminal extremists and their supporters set out to terrorise people in Home Office accommodation, and to carry out racist attacks on mosques. The hotel windows were boarded up and frightened people told to stay inside. We could do nothing but reassure them.

In the first instance, it is up to the police to gather intelligence and prevent these attacks; we cannot do this. What we can do is join together with other community organisations in solidarity and discourage the far right from trying it here. Being part of networking organisations such as the Southampton Sanctuary Network, Winchester City of Sanctuary and Refugee Week helps to do this.

We need to support our decent local politicians (of whichever party) who stand up for refugees. We need to call out those others who use language that vilifies people who need asylum. Please also be ready to join in peaceful rallies of solidarity – as we did successfully in Southampton in September – if we hear that the far-right is trying to intimidate people here.



MEETING OUR LOCAL MPs

We are inviting our local MPs to meet us during the next few months to talk about the issues that people seeking asylum face locally and to share ideas more broadly about how government asylum policies could be improved.

We hope that if we can start regular meetings, and include our partners such as CLEAR and City of Sanctuary, we may begin a fruitful dialogue. The meetings would not be intended to help people with their individual cases, which can be discussed separately.

These are some of the issues that we may discuss:

- How to reduce traumatic experiences coming to the UK and further traumatising in Home Office (HO) accommodation
- Severe shortage of immi-

gration lawyers, not enough Legal Aid, aggravating the backlog

- Lack of transparency in the asylum assessment process, poor communication, long delays
- Social isolation, few opportunities for integration, work experience, learning English, understanding UK culture, etc.
- Being moved arbitrarily around HO accommodation; spurious detention by the Home Office
- Hostile political and media rhetoric fuelling racism
- The short move-on period for those with Leave To Remain leaving HO accommodation causing homelessness and pressure on Local Authorities.
- In consequence, many with Leave To Remain being in a poor position to integrate and move on
- eVisas – concerns these won't function properly.

Patrons: Dr. Shirley Firth, Miriam Margolyes OBE, John Pilkington

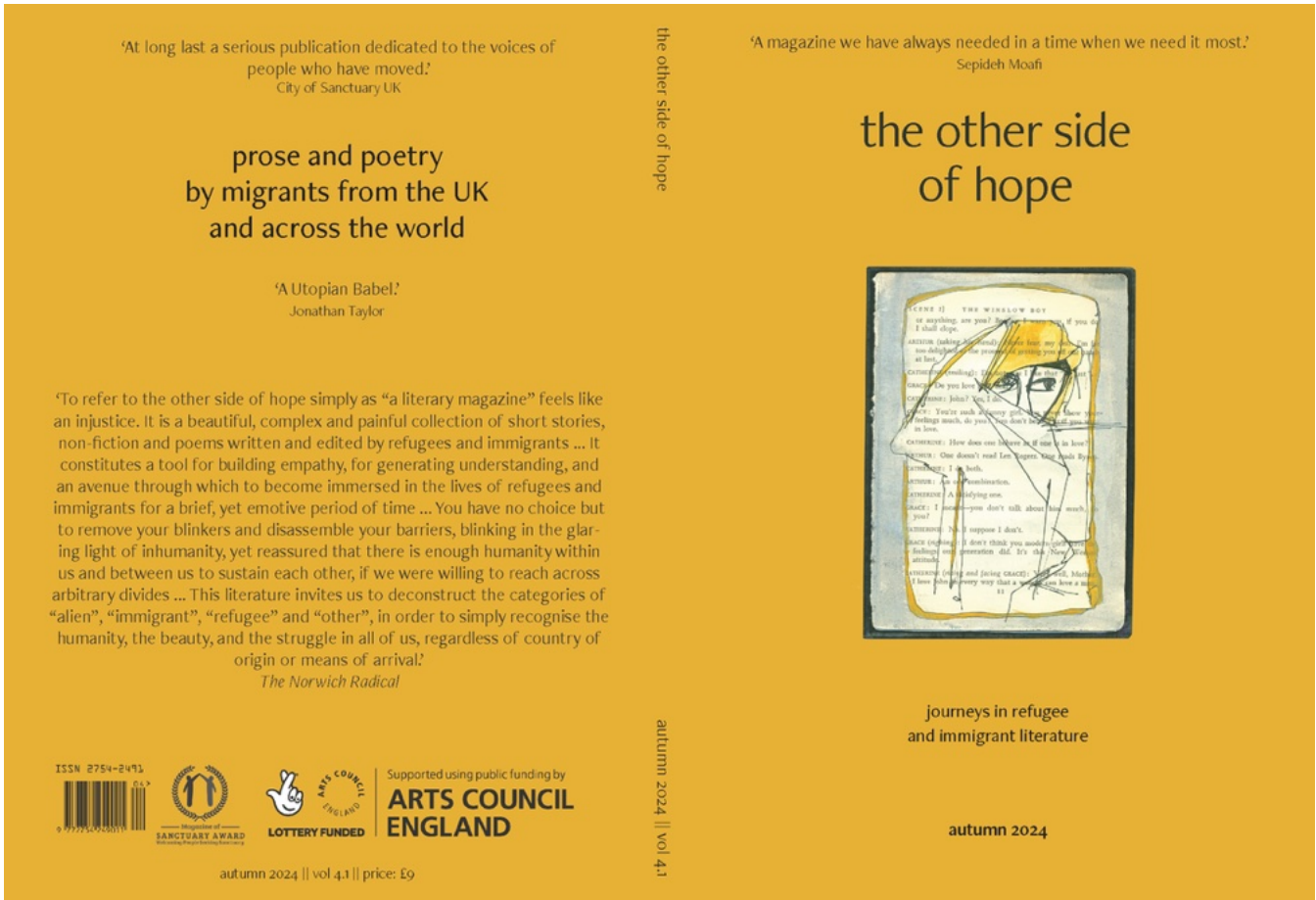
the other side of hope

Elly Kilroy

Here is a literary magazine that invites displaced people to tell their own stories in their own way, and to be a part of a larger literary and artistic conversation beyond migration politics

- Dina Nayeri, author of *The Ungrateful Refugee*

the other side of hope: journeys in refugee and immigrant literature is unique: it's a migrant-led, UK-based literary magazine, accredited by City of Sanctuary. So far they have donated 2,100 copies to refugee centres, hotels with new arrivals and public libraries of sanctuary. They publish biannually, one issue in English only, and one in other languages alongside English translations. The English issue is unthemed poetry and fiction by refugees and immigrants only, and non-fiction by anyone on the theme of migration. The Mother Tongue, Other Tongue issue is poetry in various languages, by refugees and immigrants, alongside English translations. They pay all their contributors. [Visit their submissions page](#) if you want to send in your own writing!



Walk the Test Way



On 29 September, SWVG volunteers Charlie, Miriam, Gopi, as well as their family and friends, raised nearly £700 for SWVG by joining Walk the Test Way.

The annual sponsored walk, organised by Romsey Rotary Club, follows the scenic Test Valley as it winds from Andover to Romsey. Over 500 walkers joined this year's event, raising money for dozens of different charities.

There were five distances to choose from, ranging from 5 to 25 miles, to suit every ability. The SWVG team chose the 16, 8 and 5 mile routes, with everyone completing their distance. The team raised £692 plus £172 in Gift Aid, with 20% going to Romsey Rotary charities and the rest to SWVG.

Miriam said: "The route took us through some beautiful countryside, and it was lovely to chat with other people involved with SWVG and make new friends. The 16 miles passed surprisingly quickly – it was a brilliant way to raise funds for a great cause. Thank you to Charlie for organising the SWVG team.

"The whole event was very well organised, with coaches to take us to the start point and marshals along the route offering motivation and a friendly smile. I'd definitely do it again next year!"

Patrons: Dr. Shirley Firth, Miriam Margolyes OBE, John Pilkington

John Hansard Gallery Art Group

Parisa

At the SWVG art group that we attend at John Hansard Gallery every Wednesday, we have been taught watercolour, drawing, lino print, macrame, knitting and collage.

We recently responded to Sarah Pierce's exhibition 'Scene of the Myth,' which explores themes such as the artistic process, community, communication, protest and education. Inspired by one of Sarah's works, the group painted a one metre square without talking, and with limited materials.

The group will be working with a ceramics artist in November, and another artist in December. They will also be working on their own projects in the run up to the next sale at AMC, to raise money for SWVG.

I have suggested that in the future Communities Curator Bella Gorman teaches jewellery, art, ceramics, and papier mache. We also want to make crafts with fabrics that have been generously donated.



Donations

We are extremely grateful for the support we receive from funders, trusts and foundations, community groups and individuals.

Amongst these over the last quarter we gratefully acknowledge: the **Hilden Charitable Fund**; the **One Percent Scheme**; the **French Huguenot Church of London Charitable Trust**; the **Rick Stein restaurant** in Winchester for hosting a fundraising coffee morning; **Winchester Cathedral**; the **Girdlers Company Trust** and **Glyn and Bobby Oliver**.

Roast lamb and rice Sudanese-style

Sherif

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

For the marinade

- Olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed or minced
- 1/2 teaspoon of Salt
- White and black pepper
- 1.5-2 kg shoulder or leg of lamb

For the sauce

- Olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves
- Tablespoon of tomato paste
- A tin of tomatoes
- Splash of vinegar
- Teaspoon of cumin
- 2 teaspoons of curry powder
- white and black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon of ground cloves

250g basmati rice

For the fried onion

- Oil
- 1 large or 2 small onions
- Splash of vinegar

For the salad

- A large lettuce
- Half a cucumber
- A green chilli
- Olive oil
- 4 fresh tomatoes

Garnish

- A lemon, sliced
- Pitted olives
- Hot chilli sauce (optional)



METHOD

1. Marinate the lamb with olive oil, garlic, salt, white and black pepper. Let it rest for 30-40 minutes.
2. Heat the oven to 220 degrees. Roast the rested lamb in the oven for two to three hours.
3. Soak and rinse the rice. Add the water and cook according to package instructions.
4. To make the tomato sauce, gently cook the garlic in olive oil, then add the tomato paste, tinned tomatoes, vinegar, white and black pepper, curry powder, ground cumin and cloves. Simmer on a low heat for 20 minutes.
5. Soften the onion by gently frying it in oil, spices and vinegar.
6. Take the lamb out of the oven when it is cooked to your preference. Let it rest for 10 minutes.
7. Make the salad of fresh tomatoes, cucumber, lettuce, chopped green chilli and olive oil.
8. Plate up: top a generous portion of cooked rice with the cooked onions; put a little of the oil you cooked the onion in over the slices of lamb, then pour the tomato sauce over the lamb; garnish the dish with the salad, pitted olives and a slice of lemon. Add chilli sauce if you dare!

Achievements and qualifications

Photos correspond to the order of the list, from left to right, top to bottom.

- MJ** passed GCSE Maths and a L2 Food Hygiene certificate
- Amir** passed Functional Skills L2 in Maths
- Guesh** passed E3 ESOL Skills for Life in speaking and listening
- Erfan** passed his driving test
- Sherif** achieved a L2 Food Hygiene certificate
- Iman** passed his driving test and achieved BTEC L2 for door supervisors
- Elyas** passed E2 ESOL Skills for Life in all four skills
- Ambesajr** obtained a T-20 truck licence
- Mickel** passed the driving theory test
- Atiqullah** passed E2 ESOL in all four skills
- TJ** achieved a L1 Food Hygiene certificate
- Khalid** gained UK citizenship
- Gowry** gained UK citizenship
- Safa** passed GCSE Maths
- Kennedy** was awarded a Sanctuary Scholarship at the University of Winchester to study for a BA (Hons) in Law
- Yasir** completed an online course in Cyber Security
- In **Tharshan's** latest exams in his Biomedical Science BSc he achieved: Advanced Blood Sciences: B2, Cellular Pathology: B2, Research Methods and Professional Practice: A3
- Tharshan** has also been learning to swim, and recently acheived an astonishing 25 metres
- Parisa** achieved a L2 Food Hygiene Certificate
- Wail (no photo)** graduated from Winchester University with first-class honours in I.T. and Computer Science



Cover photograph by Julian Benjamin