



**Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group**

**Working with asylum seekers and refugees**

## **Winter Newsletter 2025/6**



Charity Number: 1183558

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



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# Co-chairs' report to the SWVG AGM

**Catherine Hartley**  
**Hazel Inskip**

**We took over as Co-chairs in December 2024, following the sad death of Mark Courtice who had so energised SWVG. His was a very hard act to follow, so we're delighted that with Chris as Vice chair, there are three of us, and we're very grateful for the support that so many of you have given us.**

It has sometimes felt like a year of division and conflict, with anti-refugee rhetoric, protests outside the hotel, and marches through parts of Southampton — but every week we discover what a strong community SWVG is. We have tried to support our friends in the hotel, emailed councillors, MPs and police, and many SWVG members have joined the counter-demonstrations organised by Stand Up To Racism. On a positive note, this recent hostility towards immigrants has led to our largest influx of volunteers in recent years, which is great news. We welcome you all.

The main focus of our community remains the Avenue Multicultural Centre on Friday mornings, which attracts an average of 150 people each week, for language teaching, help desk support, food, refreshments, games, music and socialising. We are in the throes of reorganising things so as to avoid drawing adverse attention to the drop-in from outside, and are grateful for your flexibility as we work through initial glitches.



A triumph this year has been our new database. That may sound like hyperbole, but listen to Lea and David Rees, and you'll be a believer. It has transformed Friday mornings for the help desk volunteers trying to keep track of everything that anyone in SWVG has ever done. The database will be extended to cover teaching, visiting, all volunteers and training. Huge thanks to the people who have worked hard to get this in place, notably, of course, David.

Another big change for us is that more and more people seeking asylum are being placed in Winchester. This is a big expansion of our work. Lesley Sheldon-Browning in tandem with St Peter's Church at the Sanctuary Welcome Hub has been co-ordinating support for people there, joined by members of the congregation and by SWVG members who, as always, step into the breach. On that topic, we thank our Co-ordinator, Sue Jessup, who had to stand down earlier this year after a bad car accident in Spain — as well as all the people who leapt in within 24 hours to fill her roles. You'll be glad to hear that Sue, with customary tenacity, is making a determined recovery.

Our work in schools also grew considerably this year, and it's perhaps not a coincidence that this incredibly important and rewarding work was also led by Lesley. Thank you, Lesley. We engaged with 15 schools in the lead-up to Refugee Week in June, and more since then. In the light of the current hostile climate, the more we can do to speak up for kindness and solidarity, the better. However, with the growth of SWVG's involvement in the Hub in Winchester, Lesley now needs to hand over the co-ordination of the schools' work. If you could get involved in organising this, we're waiting to hear from you.

SWVG participated enthusiastically in Refugee Week again, thanks to William Brook-Hart and his team. SWVG doesn't co-ordinate all the events, but the team still found themselves taking on much of the responsibility. If this is a role for you, let us know.

Amanda Caspari also has a baton to hand on. She has organised our trips and activities for some years. Thank you Amanda! The activities are a lot of fun, and worth the effort they take, so again, if you could help out, please say so. Amanda will set you up with her well-honed model of operation.

We still face challenges in finding solicitors, though Amanda, again, has done a great job with this. At the other end of the asylum journey, the number of people being given Leave to Remain is increasing, and thanks to David Retter, Reefat Drabu, William



and others, we are learning more about housing, bank accounts, and Universal Credit, and are able to help guide people at this stage.

The system whereby many people seeking asylum have to report to Border Force officials has just been moved from Portswood to Totton Police Station. This has proved difficult for everyone, not least people who have to travel over five miles to report. Totton is also too far for many of the volunteers who've been supporting people reporting, so the team has drastically reduced. This is an uncomplicated job (if potentially chilly) – if you could cover a shift occasionally, please let us know.

The names we've mentioned risk making it sound as though a very few people do everything in SWVG. Yes, we do urgently need some help in important areas, but we depend on the energy of every current member. There are so many other groups and projects: Communications, Campaigning, Fundraising, kitchen helpers, interpreting, Cooking for Friends, the Bike Shed... Thank you to each volunteer and supporter. If you have other skills to offer or ideas to bring to fruition, don't hold back. That's how some of our best projects were born.

SWVG is a living refutation of the narrative that seeks to divide people into legal and illegal,

patriots and traitors, us and them. We're so proud of the way we work together, volunteers from so many different countries and backgrounds, including more and more with lived experience of the asylum process.

We heard in October that SWVG had been nominated (by Lizzie from SCRATCH) and selected as 'Community Champions' by the Refugee Council. We're waiting to hear more about what this means, but we're really delighted to have been recognised. This is all because of you, so thank you all, including the very many people we haven't mentioned by name, for your time, energy and solidarity.

## Volunteering in the community

### Ahmed Saleh

**My name is Ahmed, and I am from Sudan. I arrived in Britain four years ago, and I have been given Leave to Remain.**

#### WORKING AT SCRATCH

As well as working as an on-call Baggage Handler at Southampton Docks, I am a volunteer with SCRATCH – "Southampton City and Region Action To Combat Hardship", which is a charity that tries to help people who are facing poverty and hardship. It does this mainly by giving furniture and other useful things for the house to people who need it.

I am a volunteer driver's mate. I work with different drivers to collect furniture, and to deliver it to our clients. Our clients may live in houses, flats or rooms, and we often have to

carry large bits of furniture upstairs, when there is no lift. This can be hard work!

I work one or two days a week, from about 11:30 to 4:30pm or later. We work mainly in Southampton but can also deliver to other towns, such as Winchester and Portsmouth.

I like working with SCRATCH. I enjoy feeling part of a team, and I get on well with the drivers I work with. Helping others gives me a good feeling. It is rewarding and it

is important for me to have a sense of purpose in my life. Working with other volunteers also helps me to improve my English.

#### BUILDING A FUTURE HERE

I also feel I have many other skills I can offer to SCRATCH, for instance in repairing items of furniture that come in. In my home country I worked as a handyman, and have a wide range of useful experience that can be used in many different work places.

I hope that working at SCRATCH is a first small step on my way towards building a useful and successful future in Britain. I want to be able to make a contribution.

**If you have volunteering opportunities in your organisation or business please get in touch with [amanda.caspari@swvg-refugees.org.uk](mailto:amanda.caspari@swvg-refugees.org.uk)**



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# St Peter's Sanctuary Welcome Hub

**Lesley Sheldon-Browning  
Ginny Allain**

**S**t Peter's Sanctuary Welcome Hub opened its doors on 4 May 2022 in response to the Ukrainian crisis. Seven months later the Hub extended its welcome to around 50 men seeking asylum. Now the Hub regularly greets people seeking sanctuary through any route: resettlement or asylum.

## VOLUNTEERS

The Hub was set up by a small but committed group of volunteers, but the numbers spiralled, and today we have about 36 regular volunteers with frequent new enquiries. Within that total, 21 are SWVG-trained.

The main activities that volunteers participate in are teaching, befriending, providing asylum-related support to people seeking asylum, and being present in the Hub to support whatever needs arise. Because Winchester has not been a dispersal city until now, we have also created roles for volunteers to link with organisations such as the Council, Job Centre, Citizens Advice, University, Peter Symonds, Library, banks and so forth.

## ACTIVITIES

Volunteers also plan and organise activities outside Hub hours, such as an equine support programme, visits to market gardens and suggesting volunteer opportunities for guests. We are



considering running a small sister 'Cooking for Friends' programme. All activities that support guests seeking asylum take place under SWVG, whilst activities for guests seeking sanctuary through other routes are run under the Portsmouth Catholic Diocese, but from a guest perspective there is no difference.

A fortnightly briefing is sent to all volunteers and guests, detailing news, courses and activities that might be of interest to people seeking sanctuary.

## TEACHING

Although we began teaching last autumn with just two teachers

and two married couples as students, this has expanded recently. We now have 11 students under the SWVG umbrella and six seeking sanctuary through other routes. The students are supported by nine SWVG-trained teachers and two Hub volunteers. In February we will be putting on a short training programme for Hub volunteers who have not had SWVG training.

The learning process is based on the SWVG (Southampton) model, with the aim of meeting the needs of each student. Several of our learners also attend ESOL courses at Peter Symonds College. One of our previous students from Southampton who is now studying Law and International Relations at the University of Winchester, himself supports others at the Hub.

## VISITING

We are currently befriending six people or families seeking asylum. Two more volunteers work with a wider group of newly-arrived men (18 that I am aware of) who are living in dispersal houses and may be lonely.



In summary, the Hub is a thriving but calm environment where we offer compassionate ears, identify immediate needs, and connect people with the right services. We help to build an atmosphere of safety, dignity and inclusion for anyone seeking sanctuary.



# Demonstrations outside asylum accommodation

**William Brook-Hart**

**Since August, a group calling themselves Southampton Patriots (SP) have been holding weekly demonstrations outside the Home Office (HO) asylum accommodation in Portswood. Their events are usually on a Friday evening and they use Ceno's restaurant (which adjoins the accommodation) as a base to drink and socialise. They wave and wrap themselves in Union Jacks and St George's flags. Sometimes they unfurl an Israeli flag and one that says "Jesus is King".**

## **RACIST AGGRESSION**

In the initial weeks they were drinking alcohol outside the premises but have now stopped doing this, to avoid looking like "drunken far right thugs" (their words). Their key messages are against "undocumented migrants", "send them back" and "protect our women and girls". They hate and insult "lefties". They bring a loud PA system which they use to shout incoherent slogans and abuse at people, often threatening women by name in the pro-refugee demonstration. They like crusader imagery and their social media expresses a more basic anti-Muslim message.

Typically their numbers of an evening are 30 to 50 but they have held a couple of marches which attracted 200-500 people, many fewer than they hoped for. These included a neo-Nazi group, people calling for "a crusade" and

"mass deportation of migrants," Islamophobic chanting and racist aggression against local people in the street.

## **EFFECT ON HOTEL RESIDENTS**

The residents feel afraid that they cannot come and go safely during the demos. Either they stay locked down in their rooms or they have to go out for several hours until it is all over. Even worse, the continued focus on the accommodation by the SP and others is dangerous and there has already been an arson attack. The police have replied that they have to balance the right to protest with the rights of local residents; however, it seems that in practice the rights of residents have been totally ignored. If the SP want to gather and shout abuse, they should do it elsewhere in a public area such as Guildhall Square.

## **SHARED VALUES**

In response, local people, including members of Southampton Stand Up To Racism and the Southampton Trades Council, have organised pro-refugee demonstrations. Many members of SWVG have joined these. The numbers on our side have

always been larger - sometimes much larger - than the SP group, demonstrating our shared values as a community and that refugees are welcome here. We stand up for humanity and compassion for people who have come to this country to find sanctuary from war and persecution, and against the SP's messages of hate and fear.

## **LETTERS TO POLITICIANS AND POLICE**

SWVG has written to MPs and councillors, the Police and Crime Commissioner and the local police to say that it is intolerable for these anti-refugee demonstrations to be held directly outside the HO accommodation in a residential area. These protests intimidate and bully the residents, and seriously disrupt them from going about their daily lives, in breach of Section 16 of the Public Order Act.

## **ACTING AS A COMMUNITY**

We are very grateful to all our friends who organise the pro-refugee and pro-community demonstrations, some of whom have put their own safety at risk to do so. They are doing this in addition to their normal jobs and their many other commitments. We would all like this to end soon,

but until it does, we need to be there to keep an eye on what the SP get up to, and to support our friends. So please continue to come out and join us, do so as safely as possible, and chat with some lovely people on our side for an hour or two. Please also continue to write or speak to your politicians and the police about this.



Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes



# My family reunification

## Guesh Abrahaley

**When I left Eritrea my daughter was a baby. I arrived in Southampton in April 2021.**

I took English lessons and tried very hard to learn the language. It is difficult. I also volunteered at SCRATCH. I stayed in touch with my family by phone. It was so hard to be apart and watch my daughter grow up on video calls. I really missed them.

I got my Leave to Remain in December 2023. I felt so happy. I really missed my wife and daughter and thought that at last I would be able to see them again. I had help from CLEAR, SWVG

and a solicitor and applied for family reunification visas for them to travel to the UK. It took a long time. While I was waiting I moved house three times and worked to save money.

Finally, I found out they had their visas. They arrived in the UK in October this year. My friend drove me to Heathrow Airport to collect them. It was one of the happiest days of my life.

Now we are finally together in Southampton. I feel so excited that our lives can begin again.

My daughter has started school and she loves it. We are looking for jobs and a new home. We feel nervous but excited. My wife will learn English.

The British Government has changed the rules about families coming, which is sad. We were lucky to get their visas in time.

### SUSPENSION OF FAMILY REUNION

**In September, the Home Secretary announced a 'temporary' pause on new applications under the Refugee Family Reunion route while it designs new rules planned for Spring 2026. Since 3pm on 4 September, no new Refugee Family Reunion applications have been able to be made. Applications submitted before the deadline will still be processed.**

**Until new rules are introduced, refugee family members must meet stricter immigration rules, just like other people applying to join family in the UK. As Right to Remain says, removing safe and legal routes will push families toward unsafe routes. Free Movement points out that the Immigration Rules are not designed with refugees in mind, so the change to the rules creates serious barriers for families trying to reunite.**



# Waiting for Reunion

## Hope in the middle of uncertainty

### Anonymous

**A**fter two and a half years of waiting, the decision finally came — my daughter and I were accepted as refugees. Hooray!

In that dark and uncertain time, it felt like a light had finally appeared. We began to imagine how life would change once her father, my husband, could join us. During the grey and rainy days, we dreamed about a future filled with sunshine — better days, laughter, and family.

### BROKEN DREAMS

But all of those dreams were suddenly broken by a new rule — the suspension of refugee family reunion applications.

After so many months of hope and waiting, we found ourselves once again in uncertainty. The news felt like a door closing, leaving us outside.

### UNCERTAIN WAIT

Now, we just hold on to hope that one day, our family will be together again — even if it takes a long time. We don't know how long we have to wait. We don't know what will happen next. Maybe the next rule will be even stricter — who can say?

I sometimes wonder what will happen to our family centre, our small world built around waiting and love. How can I fill the space left by her father? How can I explain to my daughter why he

is not here yet, when we have already come so far?

### OUR SECOND FAMILY: SWVG

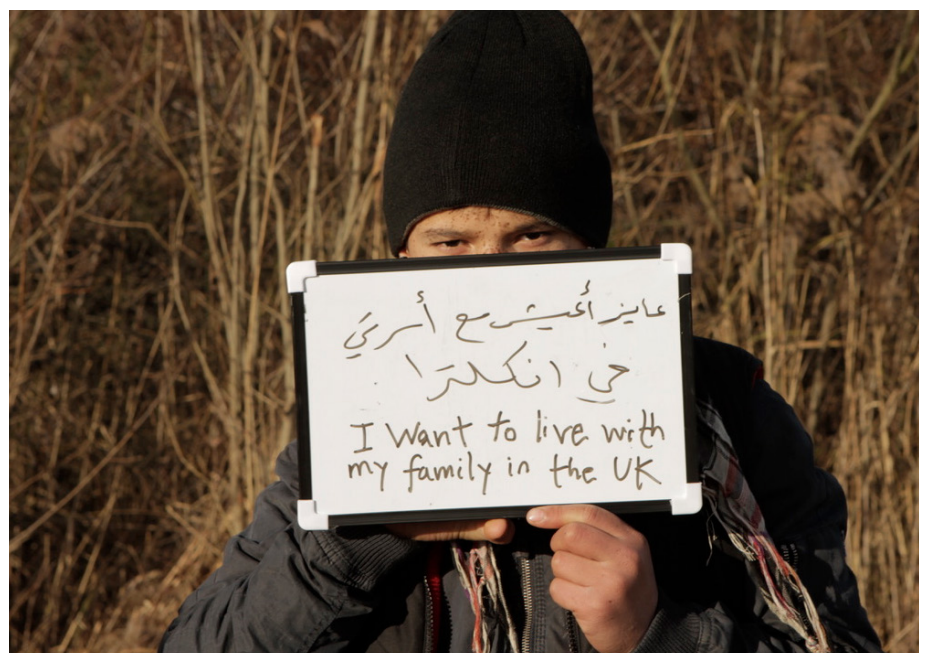
Even with all these worries, we are grateful. We are thankful every day for SWVG, our second family. They continue to care for us, to listen, to remind us that we are not alone. Their support gives us strength to keep going — to learn, to live, and to keep hope alive.

Our story is one of many. Behind every refugee family, there is the same wish — to be together again, to rebuild life in peace.

And no matter how many rules may change, that hope will never be suspended.

## Tell the government: families belong together

Safe Passage campaigns alongside young refugees for humane immigration policies, so children and people fleeing conflict and persecution can rebuild their lives in safety and with their loved ones. If you would like to support their campaign to save family reunion, you can go to [safepassage.org.uk](https://safepassage.org.uk) and email the Home Secretary, or if you're reading this online, click [here](#).





# Global Buffet

## Celebrating two years of Cooking for Friends

**Leila H**

**O**ur two-year anniversary fundraising event was a huge success, and for the first time ever we sold 100 tickets. The team worked tirelessly to organise everything, from arranging the hall and welcoming guests to designing decorations, and, of course, preparing the stars of the night: the chefs and their food.

By 8pm, all our guests had arrived. Evangela's gentle, joyful singing filled the room, and everyone was welcomed with warm cinnamon tea.

Meanwhile, the kitchen was in full hustle and bustle, and final touches were being added to the dishes. Then came the moment everyone was waiting for: the food began to arrive.

It felt like travelling around the world in one evening — Iranian, Eritrean, Bangladeshi and many other dishes, each prepared with love and pride. It was more than just festive food; it was a celebration of cultures, stories, and community. Many guests told us it was a completely new experience to taste such a range of homemade dishes in one place.

After a little while, the tables were transformed again — this time for desserts. And once again: amazing!

We want to express our deepest appreciation to everyone involved in the Cooking for Friends project: Mary, Charlie, Leila, Ada, Parisa, and all of our incredible chefs. Your dedication makes events like this possible.

We warmly invite you to our next fundraising event — come and taste flavours from around the world!

See you soon.



Photos of the Global Buffet by Mohammed Reza

Charity number: 1183558





Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes



# Vegetable biryani

**Mohosina Sumi**

I like this dish because it is easy to cook and it is healthy. I believe that everyone who cooks and eats it will enjoy it too. When my daughter was three years old, I cooked and gave vegetable biryani to her for the first time and she liked it very much. That's why I like sharing this dish with everyone. To be honest, it's so tasty and it is digested very easily!

## INGREDIENTS

Serves 4  
 400g basmati rice  
 2 diced carrots  
 200g peas  
 200g potatoes peeled and cut into 15mm cubes  
 200g cauliflower cut into small florets  
 200g green beans cut into 2cm lengths  
 2 tomatoes, each cut into 6 pieces  
 50g fresh chopped coriander  
 2 sliced onions  
 2 tbsp ghee  
 200g natural yogurt  
 3 tbsp oil  
 1 tsp ginger paste, 1 tsp garlic paste  
 Salt and sugar to taste  
 500ml water or stock and a little milk



Photo by Parisa Nazaripour

## METHOD

1. Rinse the rice in cold water until it runs clear, then soak in water for 20-25 minutes.
2. Rinse the vegetables before preparing them.
3. Heat half the oil in a cooking pot, add half the chopped onion and fry for 5 minutes. When golden, add garlic, ginger paste (reserving a little), salt and sugar. Add the vegetables, cook and stir for 5 minutes. Add the yogurt, cover the pot and cook at low heat for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
4. In a separate pan, heat half the oil, add half the chopped onion and stir. When golden, add more garlic and ginger paste and salt. Fry for 5 minutes. Add the rice and fry for 5-10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Then add boiling water or stock and a little milk. Cook at a low heat for 20 minutes or until most of the liquid has been absorbed and the rice is tender.
5. Stir the ghee into the rice. Mix the vegetables in carefully and rest for 10 minutes on very low heat.
6. Serve with a salad.

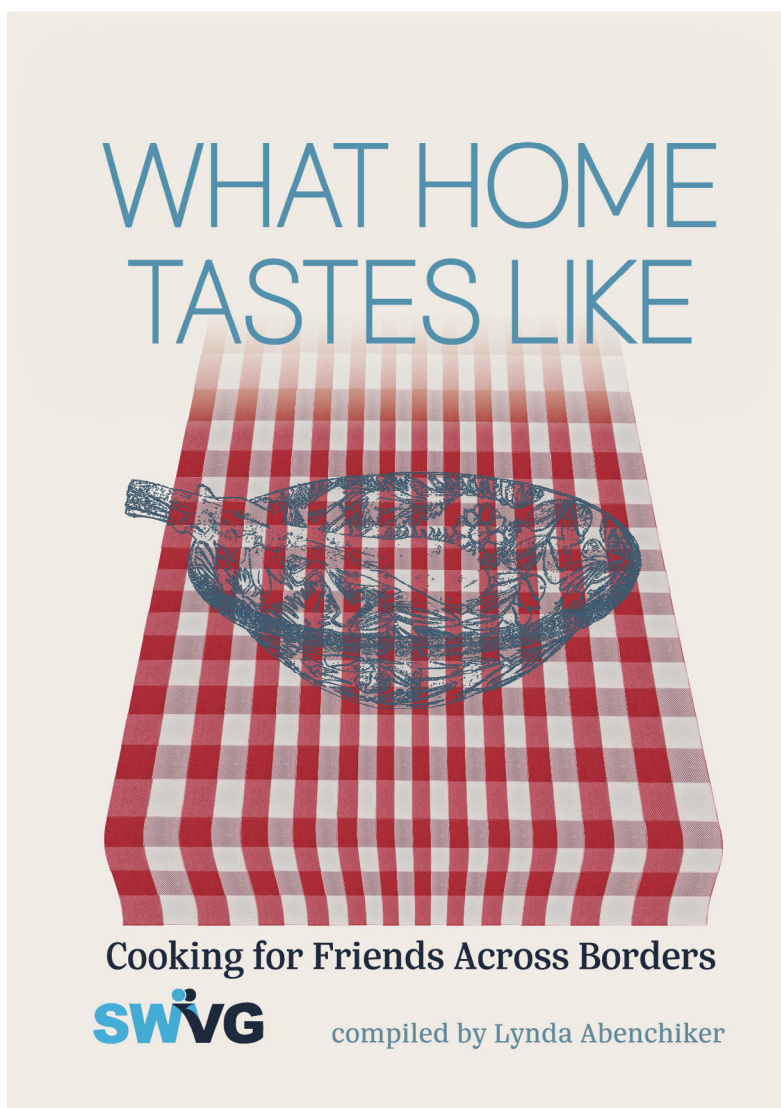


# Our new recipe book: *What home tastes like*

Lucky Cooking for Friends volunteers! Every week they kindly volunteer to share the amazing food from the range of countries our chefs came from. They saw that a recipe book would be a natural spin-off from this project, publicising its success, and raising a bit of money too.

Lynda Abenchiker offered to collate recipes from our chefs, and David Collier to edit the book. It may not have been as simple a project as Lynda first envisaged (in fact the words 'tortuous journey' may be among the least unrepeatable that have passed her lips) but our new recipe book is finally with the publishers, and we hope to receive copies before Christmas.

*What Home Tastes Like* costs £10 per copy. If you would like to place an order, please contact [hazel.inskip@swvg-refugees.org.uk](mailto:hazel.inskip@swvg-refugees.org.uk).



To pay by bank transfer, use the payment details:  
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# Outings and activities

**Amanda Caspari**

**A**utumn is a natural moment for us to look back on a full year of outdoor activities and outings. It's a good time to take stock and celebrate the support that makes it all possible.

Partnerships sit at the heart of our outings programme. They give people seeking asylum the chance to meet new people beyond SWVG and offer our partners a meaningful and rewarding way to connect with our community.

Throughout the year we work with the New Forest National Park Rangers (NFNPR) and the Winchester Ramblers, who generously lead walks for us. Their commitment means these events now have a permanent place in our calendars, giving our outdoor programme continuity.

With the NFNPR, we enjoyed walks in Ashurst, Brockenhurst and, for the first time, the Keyhaven nature reserve. Keyhaven combined the calm of the coast with the fun of a little birdwatching.



We'll be returning next year. Through NFNPR we also benefit from an association with PEDALL, the inclusive cycling charity, and we enjoy an annual ride through the New Forest starting from their Ashurst base.

Our Winchester walks with the Ramblers remain a yearly favourite. After exploring the City and

some of the countryside we usually visit the Cathedral for a guided tour, where both the architecture and history continue to inspire. This year we also visited the Hospital of St Cross, taking in its remarkable heritage, joining a lunchtime concert and receiving the

Wayfarer's Dole. We are grateful to everyone in Winchester who makes these visits so special, and to the Ramblers for organising the walks and donating clothing.

We also ventured into weekend outings, thanks to our volunteer Emma Preedy. Emma led a fascinating walk through Salisbury's River Park, on to Old Sarum, then back to the city. Her deep knowledge of local history, plants and wildlife enriched the day for everyone.

In May, students from the University of Southampton Hockey Club hosted a hockey taster session at their Wide Lane sports ground. Once the basics were learnt, the session quickly turned competitive and great fun. We also thank the students for their annual collection of toiletries, which we distribute through Southampton Action.

As in previous years, the Mayflower Theatre kindly offered us tickets for a wide





range of shows through their community programme, including performances aimed at children. We're deeply grateful for their ongoing support and look forward to returning in 2026.

Across the financial year 2025–26, around 85 people joined our

outings, many more than once. This is 30 more than last year. At the Mayflower and MAST Studios, we attended eight shows with a total of 215 attendees.

Next year we hope to add more indoor activities for the winter months and explore weekend

options after consulting with those who take part in our outings.

As ever, we are profoundly grateful to all the organisations and individuals who support us. Whether through regular programmes or one-off events, each interaction enriches lives.



Early in the year, the National Trust invited us to support their tree-planting project at Hinton Ampner. Over two visits, our volunteers planted around 500 trees, and we hope to continue working with them.

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes





# My visit to the New Forest National Park

**Waseem Hamdard**

**T**ravelling is an important way for a person to relax the mind, gain experience, and learn new things. Visiting nature and being close to the environment not only brings joy to the heart but also helps to broaden one's thinking. With this aim, we were given the opportunity by SWVG and the New Forest Rangers to visit the New Forest National Park.

This journey took place in Hampshire, where the New Forest National Park is located. The park is one of the most famous and beautiful natural parks in the

region. It is known for its green forests, charming landscapes, and pure, peaceful atmosphere.

Fortunately, with the help of the mentioned organisations, our trip was well arranged, and we had a wonderful experience. It became a memorable day for us.

As I graduated from the Faculty of Agriculture in my country, I have a special love for natural areas, forests, and plants. The beauty and environment of this park were truly inspiring to me. The organisation of the forest, the movement of the animals, and the awareness of people about environmental protection were all very impressive.

This trip was not only recreational but also educational. I learned many new things about the importance of nature conservation, the value of forests, and the positive role humans can play in protecting the environment.

In the end, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all those who helped organise this visit. This trip was one of the most memorable experiences of my life, and I will never forget it. Every journey is a lesson, and this one became a story in my heart. Whenever I get the chance, I would love to visit the peaceful and beautiful New Forest National Park again.



Photos by kind permission of the NFNPR

Charity number: 1183558



# A story of strength, survival, and new beginnings

## Abdirahim Ahmed

**My name is Abdirahim Ahmed, and I was born in Golweyn, Somalia, a place filled with memories. Life in my hometown was simple, but it was shadowed by conflict and injustice. As the situation grew worse, I realised that staying would cost me my life.**

My journey was long and filled with challenges. One of the hardest parts was crossing through Libya. The situation there was extremely tough. Fear and uncertainty followed me every single day. I witnessed things no human being should ever have to see. There were moments when hope felt weak. I endured hunger, exhaustion, and danger because I believed in a better future. Eventually, I reached the United Kingdom, where I finally found safety. Being here gave me a chance to breathe freely for the first time in a long while. Though life is still difficult and full of uncertainty, it is far better than the life I escaped.

Today I am focusing on rebuilding myself. I am studying English, improving my skills, and working

every day to become a better version of who I was yesterday. Living in Southampton has shown me both kindness and hardship. Protests outside the hotel remind me that not everyone understands what people like me have survived. Almost every Friday, or on unpredictable days, protesters gather outside chanting "Send them home" and "Deport them", reminding us that acceptance is still a distant dream. On one terrifying night, someone even threw a burning object toward one of the rooms. Thankfully, no one was hurt, but the fear lingers. But I remind myself that I came from a place where survival was a daily struggle and compared to that, today's challenges are small.

What keeps me moving forward is the belief that my story didn't end on the day I escaped Somalia. It continues every morning. I wake up determined to grow, learn, and build a life filled with dignity. I see progress in myself every day, even if it's slow. My life now is more peaceful than before, and I am working hard to make tomorrow better than today. On the days when I am not attending

my college, I try to use my time in a positive way. I enjoy doing physical exercise. Sometimes I go for long walks, which give me a sense of peace. Being in nature is something I truly enjoy. The trees, the fresh air, and the quiet moments remind me that life still has beauty. I also spend time reading books. I read to learn, to grow, and to improve myself. Every page I finish gives me new knowledge and helps me understand the world better. These small habits make my days meaningful and bring me closer to the future I want to build.

## CONCLUSION

My journey has shaped me into a stronger and more hopeful person. I have experienced darkness, but I carry with me the courage to walk toward the light. I don't know what the future holds, but I know this: I have survived what many people would never endure, and that alone gives me strength. This is not just a story of escape, it is a story of resilience, patience, and the belief that no matter how long the night is, the morning will always come.

# Donors

We are extremely grateful for the support we receive from funders, trusts and foundations, community groups and individuals. Amongst these we gratefully acknowledge: St Paul's Church in Winchester; the Parish of St Peter's and the Winchester Martyrs; the Girdlers Company Court, Jock French Charitable Fund, which continues to support Cooking for Friends; the Phoenix Film Club who took donations at a film screening; Avenue St Andrew's URC for their continued donations to the Avenue Multicultural Centre; Newlands Primary School for their Year 5 sale and raffle donations; Red Funnel; Everyman Winchester; and Cook. We would also like to thank all the individuals who contributed to SWVG, including in memory of Mark Courtice.

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

# The ironic loop

**Asgedom Atnafu**

## NATIONS, BORDERS AND IDENTITY

**The need to belong to a land defined by political boundaries is not a natural instinct. It is born out of the human desire for protection and identity. Today's world is carved into nations shaped and reshaped by the tides of military strength and economic power. The stronger the nation, the larger its territory. When that power wanes — borders shrink.**

Ethiopia, one of the world's ancient civilizations, has long been subject to territorial shifts driven by leadership ambitions and internal discord. Its most recent resizing occurred after the devastating civil war that ended in 1991, when the northern province (117,000 square kilometres in size, larger than Hungary but smaller than Greece) seceded to form the independent nation of Eritrea.

## FAMILY, HERITAGE AND IRONY

My grandfather, whose name I carry, never lived to witness the historic departure of his birthplace. He loved Ethiopia deeply, so much so that he named his five children in a way that, when spoken together, formed a sentence expressing his devotion to the country. He lived and died in Addis Ababa, unaware that one of his daughters — named Ethiopia — would one day take up arms against the very nation

she was named after. She joined the liberation movement, later changing her name to shed the irony, and rose to the rank of colonel by the time the war ended in 1991, after 34 years of bloodshed.

Though Eritrea gained independence, the promise of freedom quickly faded. The country's leadership became brutally oppressive, driving millions

did not grasp the full meaning of this shift. My father's stories filled me with pride and excitement for my new identity. I longed to see Asmara, Eritrea's capital. A dream that was fulfilled 20 years later.

## WAR, CONCEALMENT AND SURVIVAL

However, the joy of being Eritrean was short-lived. In 1998 war erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia. My father died around that time, never getting the chance to return to Asmara. The conflict led to mass deportations, tearing families apart and costing lives and livelihoods. I was spared — too young to be seen as a threat and already fatherless. From then on, being of Eritrean descent became a source of fear and persecution in Ethiopia. At 15 I was cut off from my family in Eritrea. To survive I concealed my heritage, blending in with the Tigrayan community whose culture, language, and religion closely resemble Eritrea's. It was a strategy that worked — for a time.

Years passed. I graduated from university and became a journalist for the Ethiopian government, though our work was

largely reduced to echoing the voices of the ruling elite. I kept my ancestry hidden, maintaining rare and cautious contact with my family in Eritrea. My name, however, was a constant risk — a silent giveaway.

Then came a regime change.



**The small me, my father and my uncle  
a long time ago in Ethiopia**

to flee in search of safety and dignity.

I was born in Addis Ababa as an Ethiopian. But when my father became Eritrean (by virtue of his sister's and thousands of others' sacrifices) I, too, became Eritrean by default. At eight years old, I



Ethiopia sought reconciliation with Eritrea, and suddenly, it was safe to be Eritrean again. Many of us who had hidden our roots stepped forward. I embraced my heritage publicly. I visited my family. They visited me. I kept my job. We believed peace had finally arrived. But it did not last.

### EXILE, ASYLUM AND HOPE

Relations soured once more. Borders closed. Flights were suspended. And being Eritrean in Ethiopia became dangerous again. My work came under scrutiny. I was censored. I became a liability. I had no more identities to hide behind. I had believed politicians could mend broken hearts and reunite families. I was wrong. So I fled.

Months later I found myself in the UK, seeking asylum. The warmongering rhetoric between Ethiopia and Eritrea made it impossible for people like me to live safely or pursue careers. Another round of bloodshed

seemed inevitable. I could not let my family suffer again. I crossed the English Channel on an overcrowded boat, facing deadly tides and the real possibility of drowning. Only the hope of sanctuary kept us going. We were rescued by the British maritime team. It's been three months since, and I've undergone interview

after interview, waiting for the Home Office to decide if my story warrants asylum.

For now, I live in a hotel provided for refugees. I'm grateful, but it's also a place of anxiety and mental strain. Homesickness grows heavier with each passing day. Recently, the hotel became a site

of protests. People shout, "Go back home!" the same words that drove many of us here in the first place. The irony is cruel: the place we fled to for protection echoes the trauma we escaped.

Now, we navigate another set of tides. Those of rejection and hostility. Some of us have no country to return to. Politics have shattered borders and families beyond repair. But in the kindness of British people who stand at protests and shout, "Refugees are welcome," we find solace. In their compassion we find hope.



**Long overdue family reunion in Asmara, Eritrea. Standing next to me on the left is my aunt, wearing a white shirt. None of us knew this would be the last time we could be in one frame.**



**My then sanctuary: EBC Radio 104.7 FM**

Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes



# How the Art Group was born

**Leila Karimi**

**I**t was one day in September 2022, after the Covid lockdowns, that Mark arranged a new meeting at the John Hansard Gallery. Someone had asked him to find a place where people could make and show their craftwork for sale — and he did just that.

Mark had a language class at the Central Library every week, and afterwards he would come to the gallery, encouraging everyone to do their best.



Mark always said, "If you need something, tell me and I will help."

Every Wednesday, we all waited for him to arrive. He brought all the

art lovers together. Twice a year, we prepared for an exhibition, and if someone didn't have the chance to sell their work, they would wait for Mark, because they knew he would always buy something to support them.

Every year there were also two car boot sales, and he even organised trips to the New Forest

twice a year for members to relax and enjoy nature together.

Everything Mark started continues today.

## Coming together through art

**Zelina**

**T**he SWVG Art Group gathers in the John Hansard Gallery every week. The Gallery facility has been a bright spot for many of us over the past year.



It's a place where refugees, asylum seekers, and volunteers come together, share stories, have a laugh, and try new creative activities, all while making something beautiful.

One of the highlights was our

wax carving workshop, led by the talented local metalsmith, Emily Smith. Emily showed us how to shape wax into small sculptures, patiently guiding everyone and offering us tips. Some of us tried abstract shapes, while others



recreated memories from home. Watching blocks of wax transform into unique pieces was exciting, and the pride everyone felt at the end was lovely to see. Emily's warmth and encouragement made the sessions extra special.

We also had lots of fun with glass painting. Painting jars and plates gave everyone a chance to play with colour and light, and the results were amazing — bright, cheerful, and full of personality.



The group really enjoyed experimenting with patterns, layering colours, and seeing how the light shone through the finished pieces. Each artwork was unique, reflecting the maker's mood and imagination. Creating these pieces brought the group real satisfaction,



especially knowing that the finished glass artworks would be sold to support future activities. It was lovely to see everyone so proud of what they had made and excited to share their work.

This summer we got busy with 3D "dream home" frames. We built three-layered frames with a background, a house in the middle, and a foreground — almost like tiny dioramas. Each layer was carefully decorated, turning simple materials into detailed little worlds. The project was a wonderful way for everyone to express their idea of home, dreams, and imagination. Each frame was really personal and full of hope, it was amazing to see all the different interpretations come together.



We also enjoyed flower making, using paper, fabric, and other materials to create flowers that never wilt.

We also tried colouring maps inspired by the gallery exhibition. Using layered outlines, we created artistic maps that combined colour, shape, and texture in interesting ways. It was a peaceful, reflective project that got everyone thinking



about places that matter to them, and how we're all connected across different parts of the world.

Last but not least was our *alebrije* (papier mâché) workshop, inspired by one of our Mexican classmates. Everyone made their own colourful animal sculptures, some with wings, some with extra tails or unusual patterns. With classmates from different countries and backgrounds, the workshop became a fun space to share culture and experiences while creating something imaginative together. Each *alebrije* reflected



not only the personality of its maker but also the richness of learning from each other's stories and traditions. These creatures are a work in progress and will be decorated soon.

Alongside the main workshops, there were also smaller self-led projects that brought out ideas from the teacher. Some of us experimented with sketching, embroidery, or even turning lines from a song into visual patterns, following the rhythm and mood of the music. These activities gave everyone a chance to try new techniques and follow their personal inspiration. People took small prompts and transformed them into something unique.

What makes our art group really special is that it's not just about the activities. It's about coming



together, trying something new, laughing at mistakes, sharing stories, and supporting each other.

We are tremendously grateful to Lynne Dick and her former and current staff, Bella, Katherine and Kawla for their past and continued support. Their provision of some top-class art specialists throughout 2025 has been amazing.



# Southampton Action

## founded by accident, continued by choice

### Nikki Walters

Speech on the 10th anniversary of Southampton Action (abridged)

**O**n 2nd September 2015, I, like many others, came home from work to the tragic news of a young child – Alan Kurdi – who had drowned crossing the Mediterranean Sea. I went online, entered into discussions on Facebook with people all wondering what they could do to help, and found several people saying they were from Southampton. I agreed to start a local group – strangers coming together to support those seeking safety in northern France.

That was the day Southampton Action was born.

Over the next few days, we came together to prepare for our first events. We started a collection at the local university, quickly filling rooms of donated items, and another at St Denys Church. We thought maybe 50 people would come. In the end hundreds came, causing traffic and parking chaos. Within days we had over 1000 people in our Facebook group and we had made the local TV news, radio and the front page of the *Daily Echo*.

The following week, this small group of strangers met at a pub in Portswood and divvied out responsibilities. We appointed people to deal with logistics, fundraising, storage and media. I took on media, something I had no experience with, but since then I have never stopped talking about



Southampton Action.

We were thankfully offered space at City Life Church in Burgess Road, where we sorted and packed endless amounts of donations before we committed to sending a whole lorry to Serbia to a charity in desperate need. We could not work out why no one else was supporting them, until it dawned on us that Serbia is outside the EU and we required export permits and all kinds of paperwork. Our logistics person – a woman who had never done anything like this before – suddenly had to work out how to make that happen: against all the odds, our donations made it to Serbia.

It was also during this time Southampton City of Sanctuary welcomed us in, inviting us to find out about what happened in Southampton and that there were people who really needed our brand of help in our very own city.

We came to our first event at AMC in December 2015, and fell in love with the drop-in. We

started coming monthly, always bringing a van or carload full of items and creating a buzz. We always had a queue of regular clients and clients keen to volunteer. We ran nine or 10 such events every year at AMC from 2016 through to February 2020, giving people dignity in being able to choose what they wanted and needed, and became part of the AMC family – always invited to the parties, bringing goody bags of toiletries and other treats.

We became a registered CIO in November 2018 and we are grateful to Stephen Press for helping us get there.

Over the next year or so, our core team expanded, with volunteers focusing on donations, admin, fundraising, social media, Calais collections. Some stayed for a short while, some for a long time and some are still with us today.

And then Covid hit. We instantly lost access to our clients, unable to see them at drop-ins, and we struggled to maintain any collections of clothing. We pivoted to fundraising, purchased supermarket vouchers, which we asked CLEAR to distribute, and delivered boxes of clothes to volunteers at home to sort – complete with masks, gloves and a lot of hand sanitiser. We held donation events in the car park at CLEAR, and tried to carry on.

In September 2020, the first asylum hotel opened in Southampton and we went from having very few male clients to over 70 in an instant. We introduced a WhatsApp number



immediately so the guys in the hotel could contact us to ask for supplies, and quickly learned the joy of Google Translate. We witnessed some incredibly challenging circumstances and fought hard to make sure those present were treated with the dignity and respect they deserved.

A second hotel opened, doubling the need for men's clothes.

We were successful in applying for funding from the Postcode Lottery so that we could start up our events again, with our first clothing event being in September 2023.

During this time we had some volunteers who committed to come to every session. One of those was Mark Courtice. Mark was the lead from SWWG, and had been a great friend of ours, but now he was giving up his weekends to help practically, and became king of the household goods, whipping our bedding and kitchen areas into shape. We sadly lost Mark last year, and we miss him deeply at all of our events.

We moved our events from the CLEAR office after it closed in summer 2024 to Avenue St Andrew's, building on the reputation of the Friday drop-in, and whilst our initial Postcode Lottery funding ran out in May 2025, we were able to get Lottery

Community Funding from July 2025 to June 2027 ensuring that this programme can continue.

In early 2025, we finally went back to the AMC drop-in on Fridays with a new Southampton Action desk. This enables clients to speak to us directly about what they need. And so we continue to build and to reinvent and to take feedback and develop.

We are grateful to every single person who has donated their items or collected things from families, friends, work, churches, mosques, and other places. And we are grateful to all those who donate money, or purchase from our wishlist to fill the gaps.

And more importantly than that, we are grateful to our clients. Grateful for their positivity, their feedback, and their never-ending messages of thanks for the things we have found for them. We are grateful to every single person who has needed our service for teaching us more than they will ever know about humanity and dignity, and how people can make a difference.

In an ideal world, Southampton Action would not need to exist. Those seeking sanctuary here would have access to the support they needed without us. This, sadly, is not an ideal world, and

we see the need for our services now more than ever.

This world right now feels like we are full of hate and anger. In truth, the reality of the situation is that the moment people started protesting, the number of people who wanted to donate to us – clothes, money, time – increased drastically. There are many more people who support those seeking refuge than against them. There are many more people showing up for us, for the clients we work with, time and time again. People who care.

And as hard as this summer has been, and last summer before it, I am reminded of that time in 2015 when a group of strangers put out a call for help and people came. People still come. They never stopped coming. They never stopped bringing things. That is the reality of our city.

Very selfishly I would like to say that Southampton Action has changed my life forever. I found my community, my passion and my friends within this space. It will forever be the thing in my life I am proudest of. A charity founded by accident, but continued out of the love we all have for what we have built. What we continue to build.

Thank you for your support. Always.

Photos by Charlie and Laura



Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes

# Review: Aamna Mohdin's *Scattered*

**Miriam Jones**

**When British Somali journalist Aamna Mohdin went to Calais in 2015, she was determined to humanise the people caught up in what the media had labelled 'Europe's refugee crisis'. The trip unexpectedly brought her face to face with her past.**

Among the people she interviewed in the 'Jungle' refugee camp was a young man who had fled the civil war in Somalia as a child in the 1990s. Mohdin's family had fled the same war. She, too, had been a child refugee. "I felt guilty," she writes. "I was allowed to go in and out of the camp as a British citizen while the undocumented Somali asylum seeker walking beside me was trapped there."

Mohdin arrived in the UK at the age of six. As a young adult, she had few memories of her experiences before that time and had never asked her parents about theirs.

## THE JOURNEY

In *Scattered*, Mohdin retraces her family's dangerous journey from Somalia to the UK. At the same time, she documents her efforts to piece together her identity. "This is a book about finding out where I belong," she tells her father.

Having interviewed her parents

repeatedly over several years, Mohdin sets out to tell their story. Her style is clear and direct. Despite her instinct to maintain journalistic detachment, her admiration for her parents' courage shines through as she learns about the impossible

in the warmth of her extended family. She talks to young Somali women and wonders about who she would have become had she grown up there.

In Kakuma camp, she meets young people who have been stuck in limbo for their entire lives.

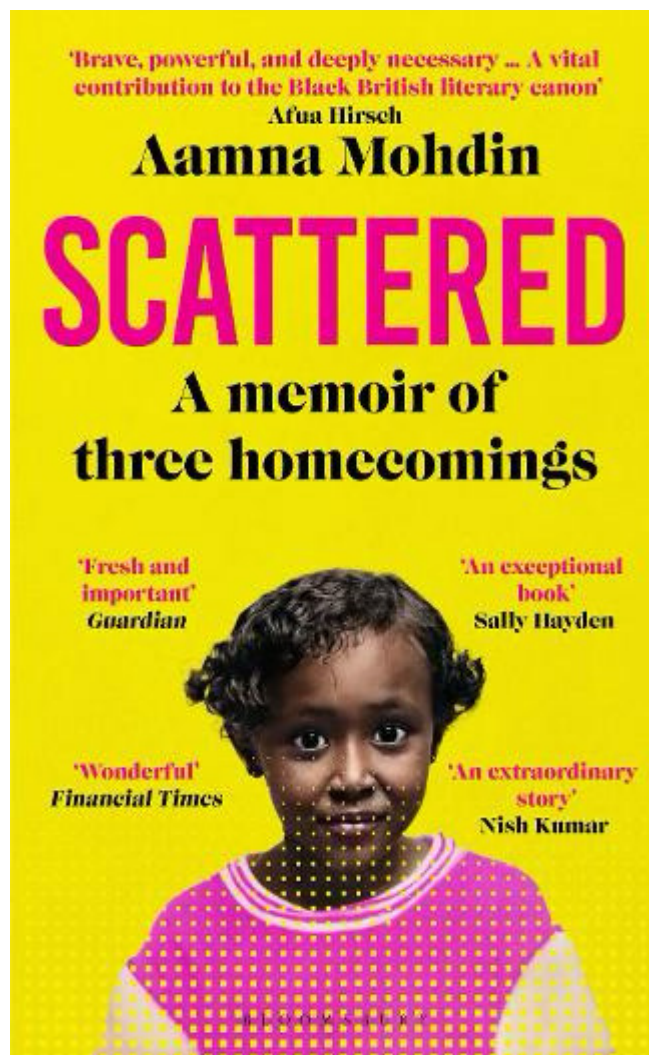
Echoing her thoughts in Calais, she is struck by the "extraordinary role of chance [...] in who gets resettled and who gets left behind."

## BLACK AND BRITISH

In her third "homecoming," Mohdin returns to her British childhood. As a teenager, she discovers Grime and starts exploring her identity as a young Black British woman. She encounters the far right in East London and writes about her mother's "hilariously antagonistic" approach to them. And, through therapy, she finally confronts the traumatic memories she had repressed.

*Scattered* is a thoughtful blend of reporting, personal testimony and self-discovery. At times painful and at times joyful, it offers a new perspective into what it was

like to grow up as a refugee in Britain.



choices they had to make.

## HOMECOMINGS

Two of the "homecomings" Mohdin describes in the book are her journeys to Somalia and Kakuma, the Kenyan refugee camp where she lived as a child. In Mogadishu, she is embraced

If you would like to join the SWVG book club, contact [marianne.gemmeke@swvg-refugees.org.uk](mailto:marianne.gemmeke@swvg-refugees.org.uk)



# I never chose this

**Abraham Machani**

I never chose this status in the first place,  
It was given to me through violence,  
It was given to me against my will.

YOU SEE things happened very fast; we were just young kids smiling and playing with  
dreams of being pilots flying planes all over the world,  
But wait before we knew it we were fleeing all our countries,  
But before we knew it  
We had fled our countries; we were seeking refuge all over the world,

Some of us made it alive; some of us didn't,  
And some of us are still trying to make it out,  
Out of a place they once called HOME,  
Out of the place they will never call home,  
Out of a place they still call Home. It's a dark story.

It's the story of a young boy who is the breadwinner but has no bread to eat,  
It's a story of a young girl that lost her family in a warzone  
And now has to face the world alone.

WHY did it happen?  
It happened because we chose hate over love,  
It happened because we chose separation over unity,  
It happened because we chose force over peace.

I MISS HOME,  
I miss being a citizen,  
I miss my siblings,  
I miss my freedom,  
I miss my rights,  
I miss my rice,  
I want to go home;  
But home isn't welcoming at the moment,  
So I'll wait.....

**Abraham wrote this poem after a young boy he was teaching  
told him his story.**



# Achievements and qualifications

**MICKEL** passed the driving theory test

**ADAM** gained UK citizenship

**PARISA** passed the driving theory test

**AMER** gained a volunteering certificate from SCRATCH

**IDRISS** passed IELTS Life Skills B1 Speaking and Listening

**AMBESAJR** passed the driving theory test

**ABRAHAM** passed Health and Social Care Level 2 and Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools and Colleges Level 2, and is studying Access to Nursing Level 3 obtained a

certificate in Health, Safety and Welfare for Workers, V4.4

**SHARIF** achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1

**AHMED** achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Level 1

**ABDULAZIZ** gained an SIA licence (security badge) and passed Level 1 Food Hygiene

**GUESH** passed the driving theory test

**MOHOSINA** passed ESOL Level 1 Speaking and Listening and Level 2 Reading; and gained an ICQ Level 3 Award in Hospitality Supervision and Leadership Principles

**THARSHAN** obtained a BSc in Biomedical Science with First Class Honours

**TOHAMI** obtained a certificate in Health, Safety and Welfare for Workers, V4.4

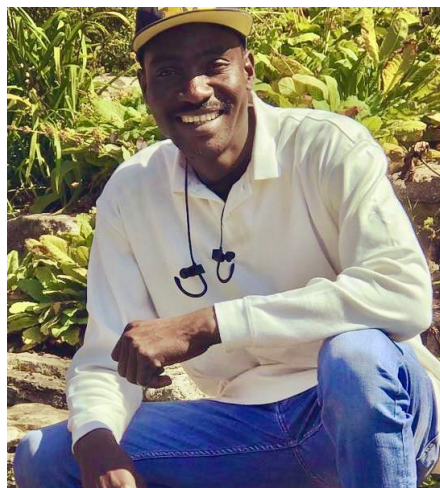
**ANNABEL** obtained a CELTA (L5 Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)

**MASTOOREH** passed Functional Skills in English Levels 1 and 2

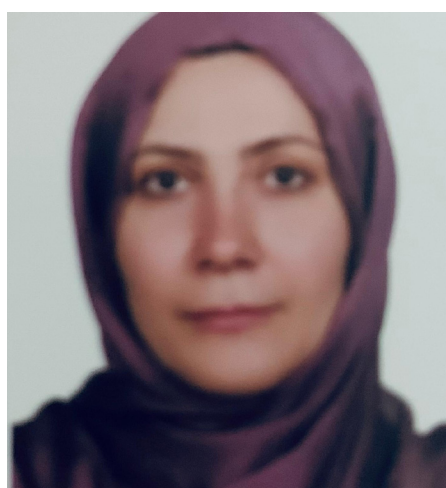
**IAN** obtained a CELTA

**KOORUSH** achieved Food Safety and Hygiene Levels 1 and 2, and he and **LEILA** have opened a pizza restaurant: Pizza Box, in Portswood.

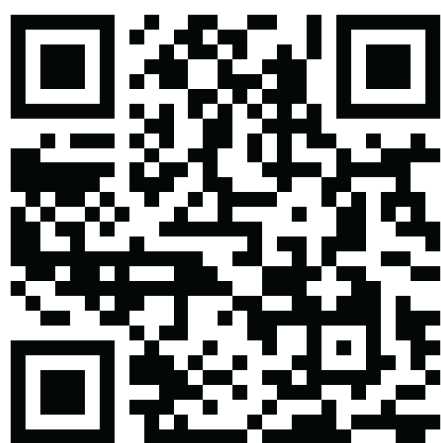
Pictured left to right: (top) Mickel, Adam, Parisa, (bottom) Amer, Idriss, Ambesajr, (facing page top) Abraham, Sharif, Ahmed (second) Abdulaziz, Guesh, Mohosina, (third) Tharshan, Tohami, Annabel, (bottom) Mastooreh, Ian, Leila and Koorush







Patrons: Dr Shirley Firth, John Pilkington, Miriam Margolyes



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[swvg-refugees.org.uk](http://swvg-refugees.org.uk)