



Together

NEWS FROM JRS UK AUTUMN 2023

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“Volunteering has taught me patience despite the obstacles we face... working with others, my suffering becomes nothing”

– Omer

Accompanying Syria amid 12 years of war and the aftermath of the earthquake

When the earthquakes occurred on the night of 6 February, conditions for people in north-eastern Syria became increasingly dramatic. JRS continues to intervene in multiple ways, combining food aid, health care and psychosocial support delivered by a committed multidisciplinary team of volunteers – many of whom have been affected by the earthquake themselves – to reach over 100,000 people in Aleppo.

JRS Syria's Country Director, Fr Tony O'Riordan SJ, explains, "Not only have thousands of concrete buildings collapsed or been damaged in the earthquake, leaving thousands of people homeless, the earthquake has also left millions with a sense of fear and new dread. They yearn for a sense of safety, for food and for shelter, and for hope in a better tomorrow.



Emergency food distribution following the earthquake by JRS team in Aleppo

"Listening to survivors, it is hard to take in the level of terror they have lived through during the earthquake, they are in deep shock and their sense of safety and security has collapsed along with many of the buildings."

JRS has restarted and extended its healthcare services, providing psychological and psychosocial support as an integrated part of the medical service to address both physical and psychological needs.

The symbol of hope for Syria was born after the earthquakes

Khawla* and her husband were expecting to be blessed with a new baby, when the catastrophic earthquake destroyed their home. Khawla's husband tragically lost his life in the earthquake.

Khawla fled Aleppo with her two other children, seeking refuge on the outskirts of Damascus. They only managed to find a place shared with four other families in very precarious living conditions and without any privacy.

The JRS Syria outreach team soon visited her in the small room they had rented. One of the volunteers noticed that Khawla was showing clear signs of malnutrition during the last stage of her pregnancy, and also observed that there was no food in the house. JRS provided Khawla with a food basket and supported her to access medical care. The doctors decided to hospitalise her immediately and, just three days later, the miracle happened: Ziad* finally came to life. His weight was barely over one kg, but he is a resilient child. JRS continued supporting Khawla and Ziad to cover the costs of the health care needed for the baby to gain strength and be able to come back to their temporary home.

Four months since the devastating disaster, Ziad is growing up healthy like any other child, as a result of continuous medical follow-up. In addition, the entire family managed to rent a small flat with the support of JRS, which represented a breakthrough in the family's physical and psychological wellbeing.

"Everything has changed for us during these few months. My baby is alive and healthy, and I feel relieved to live in an independent house. We have our own privacy now, so my children can grow in a better environment, and I feel strong and motivated to take proper care of them", she explains.

Despite all the difficulties that the family is still experiencing, Khawla stays positive and feels extremely grateful.

"I am thankful for all the support we received from JRS to make that possible, but I am even more thankful because we felt there was always someone beside us, listening to us and caring for us."

*names changed to protect identities.

Thank you for your continued donation and support for our Syrian brothers and sisters. Your generosity – be it direct to JRS or through DEC appeals – has helped JRS staff and volunteers to continue to support thousands of Syrians who have lost their homes and loved ones. Thank you!

Message from the Editor



Pope Francis recently urged a gathering of over 1 million young people in Lisbon to be “beacons of hope in dark times”. These words ring so true, and are so badly needed, right now, because these times can indeed feel dark. The Illegal Migration Act has become law, and will have a horrifying human impact, as discussed further into the newsletter; and the Government remains determined to push ahead with plans to contain people seeking sanctuary in horrendous conditions on the Bibby Stockholm Barge, despite being forced to evacuate the barge due to legionella days after it opened. This all happened as, horrifyingly, 6 people drowned trying to cross the Channel on 12th August. Each had hopes and dreams that will now never be realised, and loved ones who now mourn. We pray for them, and we are reminded of the lethal danger of slamming our doors shut on refugees. In times like these, we are called to mourn, and we are called to outrage. We are also called to hope.

Accompaniment in dark times is at the core of JRS’s mission, and we are given a shining example of this here in an update from JRS Syria, working in the aftermath of earthquake in a country still ravaged by war. And in JRS UK’s own context in East London, we have been creating encounter and community, and finding space for celebration. The launch of new schools’ resources for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees will help us to empower the next generation to stand in solidarity with refugees, and build a society of hope and hospitality. Approaching the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in the wake of the Illegal Migration Act, we will light beacons of hope wherever we can.

With gratitude and prayers,

Megan Knowles
Interim Deputy Director

What we are reading

Many of the JRS community are keen readers – we’ve now set up a book swap shelf at the Hurtado Centre and have a ‘recommendations’ list which is rapidly running out of space!

Want to read with us? Here are some of those recommendations

Threads: From the Refugee Crisis
by Kate Evans

“Kate Evans is a graphic novelist and volunteered at the Calais Jungle before it was demolished. She captures beautifully the humanity of the individual refugees she met at the camp and the joy and hope they carry. The book has helped me to better understand the experiences our refugee friends, and has supported my learning and practice of trauma-informed working.”

Mark, JRS Community Projects Coordinator

Dreamland

by Rosa Rankin-Gee

“Set in the slightly dystopian, not too distant future, Dreamland explores life at the margins of society as inequality and political extremism take hold. The book deals with some incredibly heavy and difficult topics – such as poverty, inequality, addiction and loss – yet still finds a way to show that community, hope and human connection can be present even in the hardest of times. I genuinely didn’t want this book to end.”

William, JRS Detention & Legal Caseworker

Let us know if you have any books you think we should read!

New school resources available



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Victoria leads an information session at Fordham University

“I learnt that there is a whole process for being recognised as a refugee, and that getting that title may take a lot of time. I would take all of this in and share with others so that they can learn this too.”

As we mark the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Victoria Firth, Community Engagement Officer at JRS UK, explains new school resources developed by JRS UK.

In my outreach & engagement work with JRS UK over the last year, school visits and working with young people have been a definite highlight. I've met many bright and deeply engaged students who want to know more. These visits are often inspirational and comforting – I'm reminded

of what Pope Francis wrote in *Christus Vivit*, his exhortation to young people: “social commitment is a specific feature of today's young people.” Knowing that young people care and want to do something – talk to others, write letters

to people held in detention, support local charities where they live – reassures me that there can and will be change when people are aware and passionate about what's going on in the world.

At the same time, some of the questions and comments that I hear are reminders that we live in a time where there is a lot of confusion and misinformation about refugees and the asylum

system, and that it's more important than ever to engage in a meaningful way on these topics.

For the 109th World Day of Migrants & Refugees on Sunday 24th September 2023, JRS UK have released resources for schools to introduce the topic of migrants & refugees to their classrooms and assemblies.

These resources have been designed to meet learning points in the new RE curriculum for Catholic schools, introducing how the Catholic

Church approaches refugees and migrants in its social teaching, lived experiences of people around the world and in the UK, and puts out calls to action, with suggestions for what schools can do if they'd like to get more involved.

The resources are available on our website, and include a mixture of classroom and assembly presentations, worksheets, and testimonies from refugee friends in multimedia formats.

These resources are new and will be continually developed. We welcome feedback on these resources so that we can keep improving.

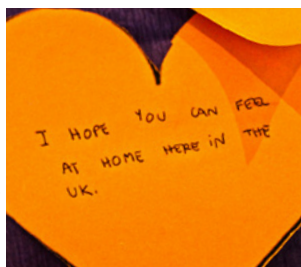
We'd also love to hear how your class or youth groups use these resources, and what next steps you are inspired to take! Refugees and asylum seekers experience a deeply hostile environment in the UK, and so it is important to offer a welcome and to advocate for a society which recognises the dignity of people who come here seeking safety. Doing so is transformative – Francis also writes, again in *Christus Vivit*: “social engagement and direct contact with the poor remain fundamental ways of finding or deepening one's faith and the discernment of one's vocation.”

I hope you find these resources useful, and I look forward to sharing with you some of the good work that comes from this.



© JRS UK/Victoria Firth

Students join in the *Together With Refugees* “Show your heart” campaign, writing messages of support for a more compassionate approach to refugees



© JRS UK/Victoria Firth

A message of support from a school student

Learn more Visit jrsuk.net/schools to download the resources and learn more

Volunteering with JRS: Acupuncture

Omer is one of the refugee friends who volunteers with our refugee activities. One part of his volunteer work is helping with our Acupuncture sessions every Wednesday, when volunteers come to offer Acupuncture and relaxation sessions for refugee friends. Omer is a friendly familiar face at our centre, and Victoria sat down with him to talk about his experience volunteering.

Hi Omer! Thanks for sitting down with us. When did you first start volunteering with JRS, and why?

I first started volunteering in September 2022. JRS gave me a lot at a time when I was looking for shelter and food, and so it feels nice to give back to the community. Volunteering also shows me the bright side of things and it makes me feel very grateful for the support we're able to give each other.

Have you learnt anything from volunteering?

Volunteering has taught me patience despite the obstacles we face. At JRS I meet people who have suffered a lot. Volunteering is an opportunity to help others and offer them a safe space; working with others, my suffering becomes nothing.

At college I'm taking an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class and as part of this I'm doing a presentation on my voluntary work at JRS. Most of my classmates are surprised by what they hear of the asylum system and have never heard of JRS or the work we do. They've all liked what I've shared about volunteering though and are interested in volunteering themselves. It's nice to represent JRS in this way.

What does your volunteering involve?

I try to get involved in pretty much anything which bears the JRS logo! Officially, I'm a volunteer with the activities department.

This involves setting up the spaces for our refugee activities, preparing and offering refreshments to visitors, and welcoming people as they arrive to the centre. I often find myself lending a listening ear to people who come in



© JRS UK/Dailya Alharri

A refugee friend taking part in acupuncture

for appointments who want to have a chat – they might be sharing good news or bad news and need someone to sit and listen to them as they talk about what they are going through.

I also take part in the activities themselves – activities such as Create & Make or Acupuncture.

Can you tell us more about the Acupuncture sessions? What do refugee friends think of it?

Acupuncture happens most weeks on a Wednesday. Twelve to fourteen friends take part every week, for 20-25 minutes at a time. If our acupuncturists see that the person is particularly relaxed they extend the acupuncture for five minutes, which improves the psychological benefits of the session.

When acupuncture first started at JRS, some refugee friends were anxious at the sight of the needles! The acupuncturists who come down to the centre are great though – they are very helpful and friendly, and really reassure you before the session, and explain to you what's going to happen.

Everyone who has braved the first session is really keen about acupuncture. You can see that psychologically people feel relaxed and can enter a different headspace. Usually, people who have had acupuncture have a broad smile that lasts for days.

I've tried acupuncture myself. It feels like a luxury treatment – after I've had it I always feel really relaxed and reassured. I think it's a great thing for JRS to offer as part of its activities programme.

Donate Today We are able to offer acupuncture to refugee friends thanks to the generosity of your donations. Please donate today to support activities, like acupuncture, to continue: jrsuk.net/donate

Eating together in friendship, accompaniment and resistance

The Community Kitchen is a much-loved activity at our centre in Wapping. Running for eight weeks at a time, Community Kitchen brings together refugee friends to share recipes, cook food and share a meal with one another. Mark Dunn, Community Projects Coordinator, and Dallya Alhorri, Refugee Activities Coordinator, share some reflections on the impact it's had on refugee friends and life at the centre.



© JRS UK/Zemima Tanner

Refugee friends and volunteers making baklava for a street party in Wapping

Every week of Community Kitchen, one of our refugee friends will teach other refugee friends, volunteers and staff how to make a meal. Friends usually choose old family recipes or favourite dishes from their childhood. We've had food inspired by many places – recipes from Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt and Eritrea. We even made baklava together once for a street party! The foods we're cooking together represent many of the places refugee friends are from, and everyone has really enjoyed learning about each other's foods and cultures.

The joy that cooking brings is really clear – sometimes you can really see people's faces change as they enter the kitchen. Everyone chips in, whether it's by chopping up vegetables or cleaning pots. At the same time there's music playing and singing and dancing. There's something about cooking together and having a task to do together. It's a great way of

forming community – especially when people are meeting for the first time and might be nervous about introducing themselves. We've seen many friendships blossom – old friendships rekindled after the pandemic, or people meeting for the first time who become fast friends.

Having the space of the kitchen available to friends, and refugee friends being able to invite others to eat, has been super important. In all of our work at JRS, where we can build and empower refugee friends, and give them choices, we strive to do so. Community Kitchen gives ownership of the space to refugee friends; in contrast to the asylum system which is purposely designed to take away ownership from those who come to the UK seeking sanctuary.

Joy as resistance

Friends lead the cooking and make decisions about what happens in the kitchen – the space is in their control. Unfortunately, we know that not everyone who comes to Community Kitchen has access to a kitchen – refugee friends may be homeless, or staying with friends but unable to cook because of the cost of utility bills, or be living in a hostel or night shelter with restricted times for cooking or no kitchen to use at all.

Therefore, there is real joy for our chefs knowing that there is a space where they can cook, that their food is being enjoyed by others, and that they can offer hospitality to others and invite them to participate in a meal together.

Joy as resistance is really important. In a system that is purposefully built to be hostile, being able to form community with others gives our friends the hope and power that the Home Office tries to take away from them.

We've also started up a regular Social Drop-In, which is a space for refugee friends to socialise and just 'be' without the need for structured activities. Friends can sit and chat, charge their phone, play games – and of course, eat a hot meal. Just as in Community Kitchen, this is a site for joy and forming community. Friends sit down and share news with one another – celebrating together when someone gets granted refugee status, shared anger when discussing the Home Office, joined laughter at a joke.



© JRS UK/Mark Dunn

JRS volunteers and staff serving food



© JRS UK/Victoria Firth

Community kitchen

Food forms community

The power of food to break down divides and spark conversation is something we've seen highlighted on many occasions, including cooking for external events, where food is a natural conversation starter, a talking point when meeting new people. We don't always have the opportunity to engage as much as we would like with the local community – either here in Wapping or in the other geographical areas where we work. Shared meals have always brought people together, though, so we're looking to do more food-based activities!

It's always so much fun opening up the kitchen and cooking alongside one another. Community Kitchen will always be a refugee activity staple here at JRS UK, and we're very excited to see how it grows and develops as more and more of our refugee friends take the lead in telling us how they'd like it to run, and as we invite more and more communities to join us in breaking bread together. Stay tuned for more – and in the meantime, check out all our great recipes on social media!



© JRS UK/Victoria Firth

Week 4: Injera, Shiro Wat and vegetables

Share your recipes We share the recipes from Community Kitchen on JRS' social media – search #JRSCommunityKitchen to follow along and feel welcome to add in your own recipes too!

The bleak reality of the Illegal Migration Act

This year we saw the Illegal Migration Bill speed – at unprecedented rate, and with minimal scrutiny – through Parliament, and on 20th July, after receiving Royal Assent, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 became law.

For the vast majority of people who seek asylum in the UK, there are no safe and accessible routes. Despite this, the Act puts an effective ban on claiming asylum in the UK, and instead of sanctuary puts the focus on removing those who come here seeking protection.

Expansion of the detention estate

Because of the complexities of removing and deporting people, we are instead likely to see people subjected to years of limbo, cycling between destitution, detention, and semi-incarceration in quasi-detention 'asylum accommodation'. This is concerning – new proposed disused military barracks and barges will not be safe accommodation for vulnerable people, and even the meagre safeguards and protections there once were for people held in immigration detention have disappeared.



For example, the Act removes limits on the detention of children. A 'concession' made to the Act during the parliamentary process allows some unaccompanied children in detention to apply for bail – but only after 8 days (until the Act, everyone could apply for bail immediately in most circumstances) and if they can find a lawyer. The concession also only applies to unaccompanied children detained for removal but not to children detained for other reasons, principally examination of status or processing, so its scope is very

limited indeed. This undoes lots of hard won and incremental progress made on this issue over the last decade.

There are serious problems with immigration detention: it's harmful, expensive, and ineffective. Our Detention Outreach team, in their work at the detention centres at Heathrow, see time and time again the detrimental impact detention has on mental and physical health. Detention already occurs with far fewer safeguards than deprivation of liberty in other contexts: it takes place via a purely administrative procedure, and is without time limit. Now, the Act gives the government new powers to detain people even if they cannot be removed, and even if it's not possible to examine their status. This means we'll see many people retraumatised and punished instead of receiving help, incarcerated in detention centres on a vast scale, for no obvious purpose.

Keep walking with us

This law seeks to divide us. It is costly, and it is cruel, destroying mechanisms designed to protect human life in the context of forced displacement. Victims of human trafficking will be made more vulnerable, and the requirement for widespread forced removal does not take into account the particular dangers faced by LGBT people.

We're conscious too that this law will put more pressure on an already overburdened sector, where many refugee friends have already been living for years in a cycle of detention and destitution. It's hard to imagine that this Act will do anything more than add to this number.

JRS UK will continue to oppose this despicable piece of legislation and call for it to be repealed. And we will continue to stand in solidarity with refugees. As they are pushed further to the margins, detained, rendered destitute, denied sanctuary, we will continue to accompany and serve them as companions.

We will be there.



You can see me, but I don't exist

Working with a camera obscura, Alan Gignoux intentionally blurred portraits of refugee friends who took part in the project, "You can see me, but I don't exist." The blurring has a practical purpose as many people seeking sanctuary live in fear of the authorities and prefer to remain unidentifiable. However, it is simultaneously intended to be a visual metaphor for the corrosive impact of the asylum-seeking process on people.

Refugees photographed, as well as other refugees who wanted to participate, were invited to write a creative response to the blurred portraits. JRS UK explored these themes through workshops with Laila Sumpton. Refugee friends shared their poems and portraits during a series of events in refugee week 2023.



Our Secret Power is Our Thoughts

we think that not existing
 is invisibility and not to exist.
 It's so boring being lost,
 we know a lot about stagnation,
 look forward to crossing limbo
 look forward to thinking about life -
 you want to do something
 but you are stuck, stuck, stuck.
 No one sees our stagnation
 we wait for what does not exist.
 Our secret power is our thoughts.

Running the London Marathon in support of Refugees



Each year in the iconic London Marathon, JRS UK is represented by a team of runners as they take on the 26.2-mile route to fundraise £2,000 each for refugees. Over and over again we are motivated and moved by their dedication and the solidarity they show for a warm welcome to refugees in the UK.

So, what can £2,000 buy?

Mobile phone top-ups

£2,000 can provide 200 mobile phone credit top-ups, which helps refugee friends stay connected with their loved ones and other essential services.

Omer's experience

“Some libraries offer free internet and computer access, but often only for one hour a day and the connection can be slow. When my asylum application was rejected by the Home Office, I went to the library to submit all my documents to appeal the decision. The Home Office said they didn't receive any of the documentation, but by this stage the library was closed. I missed the Home Office deadline.”

Home Office deadlines are strict, and as Omer was unable to submit his paperwork on time, he was no longer eligible for accommodation and financial support from the Home Office as an asylum seeker.

“Before I registered with JRS, I moved around different places in the UK – I have

experienced having no internet. I spent two months with no phone, and no access to the internet – two months of total isolation and disconnection from my family and friends.”

Without internet, Omer found himself disconnected from everything – from the Home Office, from family and friends, from English classes, from legal advice, from his GP. Everything needs the internet.

“The JRS mobile data top-ups are special for me – I don't receive money from the Home Office, so I couldn't buy any internet or any phone credit. It allows me to keep in touch with my family and my friends, and my solicitor. I use the JRS mobile top-up for internet data, mainly to access my college course, for doing my homework, for sending e-mails and booking essential appointments with the GP and the hospital.”

Mobile phone top-ups also help more than 100 refugee friends stay connected with JRS phone befrienders. Our dedicated team of volunteers support refugee friends' emotional and mental wellbeing by calling them regularly. Phone calls from befrienders can be about anything from the weather, to future hopes to current affairs or motherhood. Befrienders are a pillar of support for refugee friends throughout the year.

Essential Hardship grants

£2,000 can provide **133 bi-weekly hardship grants**, helping refugee friends have agency to meet their basic needs.

Every two weeks, refugee friends supported by JRS receive a £15 hardship grant, a small but essential grant to help meet basic needs. Refugee friends are able to use the hardship grants to pay for travel to essential appointments, to do laundry, and to buy food & basic medications. The money isn't a lot, but it does make some difference:



“Receiving the £15 bi-weekly payment has been extremely valuable. With the bi-weekly payments, I am able to use the money to do the laundry and travel to places and appointments without the need of asking others for funds. For some, receiving the

bi-weekly payments might not be sufficient, but for me, it is useful as I have no other financial recourse and it gives me a sense of financial empowerment.”

JRS refugee friend

We share funds by putting money on refugee friends' "Equals cards". This is a card that works like a bank or a debit card. Many asylum seekers are prohibited from accessing financial services such as bank accounts, so an Equals card is a way we can provide secure access to money without determining or limiting how it should be spent, which would be the case if we provided vouchers and coupons, for example. It's a small way of ensuring refugee friends' agency, and recognising that they can make the best decisions regarding what they need:

“Sometimes charities give vouchers for specific shops – which I do appreciate – but sometimes I need to travel to reach a branch of that shop, which costs money in itself. Sometimes the shop is expensive and I know I'd be able to get things cheaper elsewhere.”

JRS refugee friend

“...a card means that I can make my own choices – I can shop around. I can budget better.”

JRS refugee friend

The rise in the cost of living, and the increasingly hostile environment refugee friends live in, makes the support JRS offers more and more vital. The fantastic fundraising efforts of our supporters contribute greatly to this and make a big difference in the lives of refugee friends. Thank you to all our past and future London Marathon runners, and to everyone who has donated to their fundraising!



Anna celebrates completing the London Marathon

Could you take on the challenge on Sunday 21st April 2024? Are you feeling inspired?

Or know someone who might be interested in running the London Marathon? JRS UK has 40 places available for the London Marathon in 2024 – visit our website to find out more and apply: jrsuk.net/london-marathon/

Refugee Gifts



Beautifully illustrated gift cards for your loved ones that support refugees.



www.jrsuk.net/refugeegifts

The Jesuit Refugee Service works in more than 50 countries around the world.

JRS UK is made up of staff and many volunteers who work to accompany, serve and advocate for destitute and detained refugees in the UK, of all faiths and none.

If you can, please consider donating to JRS UK. With your support JRS UK can continue to accompany destitute and detained refugees in a spirit of hospitality, welcome and love.

Donate today

Visit www.jrsuk.net/donate

Email uk@jrs.net

Mail your cheque/postal order made payable to Jesuit Refugee Service to the address on the right.



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