

Our visit to Care4Calais (C4C) in Calais in France has been one of the highlights of my life. An unforgettable experience, and made possible with the generous assistance of MOOL itself. This gave a disparate group of volunteers an opportunity to witness first hand, the situation that refugees from many countries find themselves in.

Since the Calais police launched a major crackdown on the Grande-Synthe and the Dunkirk areas, their situation has become even more dire. Tents, sleeping bags and all attempts at daily living using donated equipment, have been confiscated. The refugees are living rough wherever they can find shelter. Charities such as C4C and the Refugee Community Kitchen (RCK) are trying to meet their needs by providing daily runs of RCK daily freshly cooked food. Also, a really important aspect of the help given, is in trying to further their dignity and self-respect is in offering hair cutting and beard trimming opportunities. The young men appear to really appreciate this. But in particular the opportunity to be able to recharge their phones and/or get them mended is an absolute lifeline for them. They can keep in touch with families, but not least keep abreast of when the latest police crackdowns are likely to happen!

Our journey started in Dumfries where we gathered at the railway station. The actual journey from Dumfries to Calais, via London, Dover and then the ferry to Calais was painless and great fun, but with some trepidation evident. The actual organising was courtesy of our fellow traveller Sue Downie, and John Crosby, it all ran like clockwork and we were greatly impressed and very thankful.

On arrival in Calais we found our lodgings to be excellent, in that our host Marie-France, not only offered a very comfortable home but it turned out that she and her two sons were very sympathetic to the refugee situation. The local political climate regarding this appears to be hardening, as of course it is internationally.

This can feel really uncomfortable, but on the whole, in Calais they were well tolerated and mostly viewed with compassion.

Our first day at C4C felt very familiar. It was much like our own MOOL depot, but quite huge. The layout and the protocols re packing were much the same as ours. It must be said though, I felt quite proud of the way our MOOL depot is organised, we appear to have much more of a structured environment.

At C4C we were given daily briefings, the morning jobs discussed and allocated. For example – day one was tasked with sorting and packing 150 hygiene bags, containing toothpaste, tooth brush, deodorant, wipes, and underwear, for distribution in the afternoon. We sorted and cleaned the hairdressing and shaving, and equipment, and counted and packed clothes. A really lovely German volunteer, Lucas, organised the mended phones. Each morning was a variation of these tasks with lunch being taken care of by whoever volunteered to cook it! They were very generous in sustaining their volunteers.

The afternoons were given over to distribution, with each day's outings being reinforced by strict procedures in managing crowd control and risk assessments. These were clearly explained and practised each day by role play before we were allowed to set off. Our destinations were different each day and all the volunteers took part, with none of us losing out on experiencing anything. We went to the

Dunkirk Lake area the first day, with subsequent trips to the ex-Calais jungle, Brussels and Picardy.

I actually found the briefings really very helpful in managing the lines of young men eager to get what we had on offer for them. Plenty of 'joshing and joking' but the procedures we took on board really helped to keep any frustration in check. My heart went out to these lads, the majority aged between 16 and 30 years. They were mostly great fun to be with, and given the circumstances, it was a blessing to be able to help them. In fact, the best experiences of my week were the daily 'barber shops' where one or two of the refugees took it on themselves to shave or clip the hair of their comrades. Very trendy some of the styles were too. Intricate patterns achieved by just a blade in the hand! The camaraderie was uplifting and moving. The resilience of these young men astounded me daily. They were from many countries, Iraqis, Iranians, Kurds, Afghans, Sudanese, Eritrean, Senegalese and a few from Syria. It made me so proud that MOOL has played a big part in settling refugee families from Syria. But sad also that these young men had such a long way to go, and such a lot to face before they could even be considered for asylum and even refugee status.

Our colleague John Crosby was such a help and support to us all. His was the voice of calm, explaining the nuances of the interactions within the different situations. His knowledge of the politics surrounding the refugees was outstanding, and it must be said, his knowledge of the French language a life saver for us!

I would like to end this account of such memorable experiences by relating a little about the trip to St. Omer in Picardy. This is a centre which houses unaccompanied minors who have been identified as being at risk. Here they receive help with their applications for residency, and allocated to foster care. The young people can stay up to a month being helped with their writing and school work. Playing games and interacting with others from different countries and making friends. And of course, receiving good food, warm beds and nice clothes.

The afternoon we spent there was so blessed. Those boys were joyful, talkative and bright eyed. Eager to share their customs and culture with us by using pictures and photos on their phones. A few of the boys gave me examples of their writing practice, and did some with me. Their names were painstakingly spelled for me, and some wrote heart breaking messages to their parents. Some of them who had perished in bomb attacks.

I will treasure those little scraps of paper. And I treasure the opportunity that MOOL has given in enabling me to bear witness to the myriad of experiences the trip has given me.

One last thought .... a line from a song that Jay Rubinstein used to illustrate a point when discussing our feedback has stayed with me. 'Remember the Geese' we are each other's wind resistance and we are not going to make it on our own. We ALL need support and help at some point in our lives. That perfectly sums up the refugee situation to me.

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