

Some Thoughts and Memories

It has been wonderful reading and re-reading my fellow volunteers accounts of their memories and experiences of our Calais trip. Re-kindling shock and anger, pain, despair and frustration. Yet amongst all of that, there was delight in simple things, re-assurance, smiles, hope and determination, laughter. And utter awe of human resilience.

The detail of each day is there in these accounts. So rather than repeat these, I have decided to share a few memories, thoughts.

1.

Opportunities come in life which are gifts. They do not happen often. They can come when you are not looking, sneaking in from left-field so to speak! You can be tootling through life being busy and stressed and determined to count your blessings but letting the small things bug you and shaking your head at the state of the world. And continuing to be busy. And coveting things that are irrelevant. And then an opportunity comes along. A wonderful opportunity to bear witness to the lives off refugees in a very raw context. And the wonder that is MOOL offered this.

2.

I had only met once, and very briefly, three of the other five MOOL volunteers who were going to Calais. But, as with the volunteers we met and worked with for just four days in the Care for Calais Depot, there is an unspoken and deep understanding of shared values immediately. Shared purpose, no material or financial gain, but a very real sense of wanting to, needing to, help. All of which by-passes layers of the unimportant 'stuff' and gets us working as a purposeful and determined team within minutes of arriving at the Care4Calais depot, sharing our names and being designated tasks. Working sometimes noisily, sometimes in silence, sometimes with lots of laughter. But always with energy and focus. Instantly a team. Team building exercises? Null and void.

3.

I cut my finger, quite badly, after five minutes of starting my task of organising hygiene packs to be distributed that afternoon. I cut it on a razor which had lost its wee protective shield as I rummaged in one of the huge boxes in the storeroom. We were tasked with putting together 150 bags each with a razor, shaving cream, toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, deodorant, socks and pants. One of the volunteers was a medical student. One an ex nurse. I was pampered and sterilised and bandaged and plastered with such care. And my healing progress checked each day.

A medical student, an ex-nurse. A teacher. A retired, very successful, business woman. A musician. A student, working out what direction his life might go in. His father, a photographer. A married couple in their 50's. An event manager, 23. A social worker. And us.

England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Australia, Wales, Sudan, Spain – and so it goes on. 12 to 15 in the team when we were there. From far corners of the globe. In this one place, for this one purpose.

4.

Each day of the week, distribution takes place at the same place and the same time but with

different goods to be given out. The goods were different but the process was the same. Different volunteers from all parts of the globe and some of the same volunteers, same faces, from the previous week. The same distribution of hot drinks and biscuits. Same hair grooming and shaving equipment. Same generators. Same phone chargers. Reliable familiarity. Re-assurance for the refugees in knowing that today some basic needs would be addressed. Our group were involved in three of just a small handful organisation, Salam, the Refugee Kitchen, Care for Calais. Without these organisations, without these volunteers, nothing would happen. And then – what would happen...

For us, four days, four destinations. Calais Lake, Brussels, Calais motorway clearing, St Omar. Once a month, Paris. And the same pattern. Gather, chat, brief, work, lunch, role play distribution, travel to destination. Spend a few hours there. Working, talking, caring. Home. Debrief. Same the next day. Each day the same. Each day completely different.

5.

The manager of Care4Calais, 25, a teacher, told me when she arrived, she wanted to give everything out to the refugees. She couldn't bear to see them without warm clothes or decent shoes or decent shelter. The huge warehouse is full of stuff that they need. She said she wanted to give it all away. But you can't. Because you don't know when the greatest needs will be. It is not simply a case of give out the jacket or the tent or the shoes and tick, that's it sorted. Things get stolen. Clothes are worn so much they wear out quickly. Tents get destroyed, confiscated, burned. Often, by the police. And because Care4Calais relies on charitable donations, you don't always know if there will be enough jackets again next month. Or if the tents are destroyed, when it comes to the snow and plummeting temperatures, will there be enough then to give out again. Everything has to be considered, planned, strategically organised, to maximise effective management of the goods for the greatest time of need.

6.

On the first drizzly afternoon of distribution in Calais at a piece of wasteland near a lake, I complemented one man on his cosy jacket. One of my colleagues quietly whispered to me to look at his shoes. He was wearing shiny, clean brogues. Not a refugee, but most likely a trafficker, drumming up business, passing on information, collecting money.

7.

A 15-year-old girl had arrived on her own from Eritrea. She started her journey months ago. She had walked, for days and weeks and smuggled herself on to buses and trains. And walked more. She told me she had been so very frightened. She had lost both parents in the war. There was little room in her world for any show of the emotion these words conjured up. Loss and Fear. Her face was like a mask. She was very tired. But she wanted to speak. To tell her story. Often, when they arrive in Calais and brought to the centre for unaccompanied minors, where she was, the young people sleep for days and eat only a little and as their systems cannot cope with large amounts of food.

This girl was hoping to meet up with an uncle in London. She was going to try to make contact. There was concern over the uncle contact, if it was legitimate.

8.

I met a man who was waiting for his phone to charge. One man amongst hundreds waiting for the chance to charge their phones. Phones are lifelines. Lifelines to family and friends who don't know if their loved ones are alive or dead. Lifelines to authorities and lengthy, interminable procedures to get papers, apply for asylum, find a way forward. Lifelines to traffickers for information about the time, and departure of a promised place on a boat to go across the Channel.

He told me he was waiting for a call for a place on such a boat - an opportunity he had paid 3,000 euros for. I just found out that he had managed to get a place on a boat – one of two boats, each holding 32 people. The boats set out. One had started to sink. They were discovered by the police on the French side of the Channel and taken back to Calais. Now he had no money. No hope. Nothing.

9.

The gratitude, resilience, gentle smiles, willingness to share a joke and engagement with those refugees we met was bewildering and wonderful. And utterly humbling. As one of our team was a photographer, we have a visual record of our days and those we met to kindle the detail of those times, the precision of the faces, the memories. A precious gift.

10.

One of our team was told by a refugee that the care, support and help the refugees receive in Calais is more than anything they have received on their journeys across Africa and Europe. All of this because of people who have a vision, who turn anger into action, who won't be stopped in bringing care to those who need it. And because of the volunteers who make it happen.

11.

The people you meet and work with in these circumstances never leave you. The shared experiences and time spent together are engrained and are part of the whole experience. It is a privilege to help others. And to have the opportunity gifted. Thank you, thank you MOOL.

Julie
November 2019