

We're helping Syrian refugee families



Refugees are often left with few possessions

Date I left Syria is embedded on my mind

THE date that Evana left Syria is imprinted on her mind – 27 March 2011.

She was living in the city of Homs, which was one of the largest cities in Syria, but was under siege by the Syrian Army and security forces. Much of the city is now devastated.

Evana moved to Lebanon in 2011, hoping for a better life, but her suffering didn't end there. For five years, she and her family found themselves living in a refugee camp without any work, unable to study and without any medication.

She and her family were selected to come to the UK and found accommodation thanks to the Rural Refugee Network.

"It was very hard for me and for my family in Lebanon," she said. "I had a cousin who was 12 years old, and had a problem with his liver. But they knew we were refugees and couldn't help us. My sisters and I never imagined that we would be able to study again, and my dad had no work.

"I was the lucky one, because I was able to come to the UK. But every time I eat, I remember those other people who can't study, who are not going to school or working.

"I've found the English language the hardest thing, but I was lucky that I went to a local college and my friends were able to help me. But I want to do anything I can for my country, and one day I would like to go back there."

WHEN Lariss flew into Gatwick, she had no idea where she would be living.

She and her parents, her two sisters and her brother were refugees who had swapped the war-torn cities of Syria for the leafy lanes of rural Hampshire.

Her parents spoke so little English that she was trying to teach them to say 'hello' on the plane. The family had no idea of the culture or even the weather they would encounter in the UK.

It was thanks to the kindness of churchgoers and the community in and around Petersfield that they found a house to live in, fully furnished right down to a pair of slippers, and some English lessons. They are hugely grateful for the welcome they received from the Rural Refugee Network.

Eighteen months later, she is studying A-levels at a local school in Petersfield and hopes to go to university to study medicine so that she can become a doctor.

She is just one of 30 desperate refugees helped by the Rural Refugee Network. It was created in 2015 to help the government's scheme to resettle Syrian refugees in the UK, by providing accommodation, furniture, befriending, clothing and English lessons.

"Because of the war in Syria, we had already moved to Jordan," said Larisa, who is now 18. "So we flew from Jordan to Gatwick, but we had no idea what was going to happen to us. My parents' English was really poor, and we didn't know where we would live, where we would go to school, or anything about the people.

"Red Cross volunteers were waiting for us at the airport with minibuses, to drive us to our new life. I was very sleepy, but I didn't want to close my eyes on the journey, as I had never seen a landscape that was so green.

"We were taken to a really nice house with a small garden. We couldn't believe it, as only 12 hours beforehand we had been in Jordan.

"It wasn't easy to adapt, but we tried to manage it. Someone came to our house to help teach English to my mother, which was really helpful.

"I was 17, but I had no proof of taking GCSEs, so I was told I had to do my GCSEs again. It upset me and I couldn't stop crying. I went to Havant College and found it hard. I was shy and felt I couldn't express my personality, but I did make friends. I was able to get a bursary to study A-levels in biology, chemistry and maths at a prestigious school.

"I don't know the future, but I will manage. What has happened so far wouldn't



The initial meeting at Petersfield Community Centre

Founders wanted to help those they saw suffering

IT was two ordinary mums who had the initial idea to create the Rural Refugee Network.

Watching the suffering of thousands of refugees each day on the TV, Julia Thistleton-Smith and Kaaren Wallace decided they need to do something to help.

They and some other concerned people set up a public meeting in a community centre in Petersfield in 2015, expecting that just a handful of people would turn up. They were amazed to discover how many others felt the same way.

The Rural Refugee Network (RRN) was set up as a charity with trustees, one of whom was Michael Oakley, from St Mary's Church, Liss. Others who are involved are worshippers from churches in the Petersfield area.

It had to convince the government and local authorities that it was able to resettle Syrian refugees in rural areas, as the existing government scheme covered only urban areas.

It gathered together offers of private homes which could be used by Syrian refugee families, and then set about furnishing them. It recruited a network of 20 people who could teach the English language to those being resettled. And it decided to offer flowers, meals, clothing, TV, internet and a guide to the local area to each of the new arrivals.

To help families to settle, various befriending groups were created, including a sewing group.

Special packs were created for local schools, so they could help refugee children to integrate. And various social events helped them to fundraise more than £30,000 to help pay for these resources.

The network also co-ordinates the recruitment of foster carers and those with lodgings for unaccompanied minors – refugees who are under 18 and who have arrived without their parents.

The ultimate aim is to help families resettle effectively and to work towards their independence within 18 months.

Many of the volunteers have now worked with the families for some time. The current RRN chair Rosie Lennon said: "It is a great privilege to be able to offer our

help, no matter how small, as the smiles on the families faces and the gratitude and hospitality they show is immense. I feel very fortunate to have been able to be involved with RRN."

The Rural Refugee Network also shares what it has learnt with teams across the UK to help Syrian refugees elsewhere to resettle more easily.

The RRN are always looking for additional housing to support those who have been caught up in the conflict of Syria. If you are a landlord or feel able to provide a house to the charity, you will receive the full market rate of rent.

Please do get in touch via hello@ruralrefugeenetwork.org or head to their website for more information on www.ruralrefugeenetwork.org.



Above: Women and children among the Syrian refugees at Budapest train station



Above: two of the refugees housed by the Rural Refugee Network have made a quilt as part of the sewing group that was created to help befriend them; right: Julia Thistleton-Smith (left) and Kaaren Wallace with Amaf Yousef



HOMES NEEDED

DO you have a property that is becoming available over the next six to 12 months? Would you be interested in a guaranteed rent for two years, and the chance to give safe haven to those fleeing from conflict?

The Rural Refugee Network is looking for properties throughout Hampshire Contact them on hello@ruralrefugeenetwork.org for details.

believing in me and helping me to complete my education."

The humanitarian crisis in Syria is the largest currently in the world, with 11.5 per cent of the population injured or killed since the conflict started in 2011.

Whole cities have been devastated by bombs, and more than 65 million Syrian people – more than the entire population of the UK – are already living as refugees, mostly in neighbouring countries.

Despite the outcry over migration, Europe has so far taken only six per cent of those who are Syrian refugees.

The UK government pledged to provide a safe haven for 20,000 vulnerable Syrians by 2020 as part of their Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. Accommodation is offered to those identified by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees as being in urgent need of resettlement.

However, these refugees cannot be housed in council or local authority housing. The government have therefore appealed for private landlords to help house such vulnerable families.

The Rural Refugee Network was created by a group of friends who were horrified

by the relentless suffering of these refugees.

They worked to persuade the local authorities that they could find private accommodation, and provide a welcome for refugees.

The network now boasts around 80 volunteers, who share their expertise in health and social care, business, education, construction, media and planning.

For more information about what they do, see www.ruralrefugeenetwork.org