

REFUGEE WEEK SCOTLAND, 14 -20 JUNE 2010

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Cranhill Arts

I started working at the Scottish Refugee Council based in Glasgow in December 2009, as Arts and Cultural Development Officer. Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity dedicated to providing advice, information and assistance to asylum seekers and refugees living in Scotland. We also provide specialist services in areas such as housing and welfare, women's issues, community development, the media and the arts. We play a leading role in policy development and campaign on refugee issues to ensure that Scotland plays a full role in meeting the UK's legal and humanitarian obligations under the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees.

In my role at the Scottish Refugee Council I help initiate and develop arts projects across Scotland most of which have an output during Refugee Week Scotland. Refugee Week is a festival that takes place across the UK in June and includes World Refugee Day which is on June 20. From film festivals to football tournaments, comedy nights to carnivals, exhibitions, workshops, parties and much, more, Refugee Week Scotland is an exciting programme of events happening across the country to celebrate diversity and raise awareness of refugee issues. It has a dual purpose, firstly to celebrate the contribution refugees and people seeking asylum make to Scotland and secondly to raise awareness of the issues and challenges they face. The art projects act as a means of furthering integration between people seeking asylum, refugees and members of the host community.

Refugee Week was first held in 1998, and was created in response to the increasingly negative perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers held by the general public in Britain. It remains the only UK-wide event that promotes the importance of *sanctuary* and the benefits it can bring to both refugees and host communities. Refugee Week Scotland plays a crucial role in Refugee Week nationally. In 2010, over 500 events took place across the UK during Refugee Week, with over 110 of them taking place in Scotland, primarily Glasgow.

The changes in the number of people seeking asylum living in Scotland dates back to 2000 when a new Dispersal Policy was implemented. In 1999 the government set out its proposals to disperse asylum seekers across the UK and away from London and the south east where the majority of those seeking asylum arrived. Glasgow City Council was the first local authority in the UK to sign up to dispersal and with little or no preparation or planning time, thousands of asylum seekers began arriving in Scotland. Since 2001, at any one time there have been between 5,000—6,000 people seeking asylum living in Scotland.¹ From the public's perception there was little planning or preparation for the arrival of people seeking asylum in Glasgow, the public perceiving asylum seekers to have been dropped onto the city.²

Prior to working at Scottish Refugee Council my knowledge of issues facing people seeking asylum or refugees was limited. My background working in the arts was as a Marketing Manager at a multi art-form arts centre in England an hour or so from London. I had moved to Glasgow with my husband and children, as my husband was Scottish and had a strong desire to go home. I hadn't wanted to move as it would take me away from my friends and family, but ultimately I had chosen to move and I had the luxury of working in Glasgow. The lack of choice or control in your life and not being allowed to work are two key factors shaping the lives of people seeking asylum. But even with these elements present in my life I found adjusting to life in Scotland hard.

1 It is very difficult to ascertain precisely how many refugees have been granted refugee status and remain in Scotland. Scottish Refugee Council estimates there are currently approximately 10,000 asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland.

2 From research commissioned by Scottish refugee Council in 2006 into public attitudes towards asylum seekers in Scotland, "Warm Welcome?: Understanding public attitudes to asylum seekers in Scotland", Lewis ippr, June 2006 <http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/pub/WarmWelcome>

On arriving in Glasgow I started working with a dance theatre company called Gilmore Productions as Company Manager. I knew no-one when I first arrived except my new boss Natasha Gilmore, so to fill my time and meet people I participated in a dance class that she taught on a Monday and Wednesday evening. The reason I could attend was because there was also a children's dance class that ran simultaneously accompanied by a crèche. This meant I didn't need family to look after my two children or pay for a babysitter. I thought this was a very unusual but fantastic arrangement, as it enabled me to attend dance class and still ensure my children were cared for. What I didn't realise was that I had stumbled upon Maryhill Integration Network's Music and Dance Project, specifically set up for people seeking asylum and refugees to attend alongside people from Glasgow, the host community.

Maryhill Integration Network (MIN) is one of eight Integration Networks which were set up across Glasgow in response to the dispersal policy in 2000. The Integration Networks have developed services around the needs of Glasgow's new communities; this includes Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrant Workers. Not purely for the benefit of refugees but also for the benefit of local people in the communities they live in. Helping refugees to integrate helps vulnerable people create new lives and contribute to their new communities. The Scottish Government differs from the UK Government in a key way with regard to integration. The Scottish Government sees integration as a process that should begin when asylum seekers first arrive in Scotland, not just when they are granted refugee status, a different interpretation from the UK Government's National Refugee Integration Strategy.

Since 2001, MIN has been developing these services of which the Music and Dance project is a core component. The dance class became a focal point for me, somewhere to go twice a week, meet new people and learn a new skill. This class meant a lot to me, creating something for me to focus on

and look forward to within my week. Unlike people seeking asylum I had a degree of control and choice in my life, for those without, the dance class becomes an oasis and a respite. This dance class is an example of the many arts projects that have developed across Glasgow and play an integral role in Refugee Week Scotland. It is projects like this that go so far in integrating communities. People's attitudes are formed by a complex mix of personal circumstances, values and the external environment. Challenging them requires action at every level from the very local such as the MIN dance class to the national with Refugee Week Scotland.³

The dance class would work together to create a new dance piece every year, under the guidance of professional choreographer Natasha Gilmore which would premiere at Refugee Week Scotland. In 2009 when I attended the dance class we were working on a piece of dance for Refugee Week Scotland which had the theme of Home. The teacher asked every one in class what reminded them or made them think of home. Almost all of the women who were seeking asylum or refugees said that the dance class made them feel at home because they felt accepted and at peace. A realisation that you are not alone in your situation can bring a sense of relief and calmness.

Refugee Week Scotland aims to deliver positive messages that counter fear, ignorance and negative stereotypes of refugees, through arts, cultural and educational events whilst celebrating the contribution of refugees to the UK and promoting understanding about the reasons why people seek sanctuary. Refugee Week Scotland is a unique tool for engaging with the public as it works in so many mediums, creating stories the public can identify with. The media coverage for Refugee Week Scotland humanises the labels of asylum seeker and refugee

3 From research commissioned by Scottish refugee Council in 2006 into public attitudes towards asylum seekers in Scotland, "Warm Welcome?: Understanding public attitudes to asylum seekers in Scotland, Lewis ippr, June 2006 <http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/pub/WarmWelcome>

that are so often bandied around in the press. There were a total of 619 press, broadcast, online and social media items which referred to Refugee Week Scotland 2010 or referenced one of the key messages. Together, these generated 43,310,019 opportunities for members of the public to see the coverage.

The significance of Refugee Week Scotland for the large number of participants involved is immeasurable. Confidence, new skills, friendships and a sense of purpose are all part of becoming involved in Refugee Week Scotland. Without Refugee Week Scotland some people would not get the chance to be involved in arts projects, perform in front of a public audience or in a professional theatre. Refugees and people seeking asylum are involved in culturally dynamic performances, they celebrate where they have made their homes and rebuilt their lives. It gives us an opportunity to remind audiences, without lecturing or badgering, what those seeking asylum have potentially faced and risked to build their new lives in Scotland.

Refugee Week Scotland has been growing year on year and with over 110 events 2010 was the largest festival to date and reached an audience in excess of 15,000. This would not be possible for Scottish Refugee Council to do alone, in order to develop and grow we need to work in partnership with arts and cultural organisations. This is my first year organising this festival and I have been amazed and pleased at how much willingness and energy there is from organisations across Glasgow to be involved in Refugee Week Scotland. From small, independent arts organisations such as Confab and Gilmore Productions to organisations of national and international significance like the Tron Theatre, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, and National Museum of Scotland. Working in partnership we can increase public understanding as we reach people that would not directly come into contact with the work of Scottish Refugee Council.

One of the greatest aspects of Refugee Week Scotland is the professionalism to which all the

projects are treated. These are not viewed as community events but are given the respect and acknowledgement they deserve. An example of this is the hiring of the professional venue the Tron Theatre for the festival, where a number of performances are then held. The comment below from an audience member reflects how the Tron is viewed,

To me the Tron is a true miniature of Glasgow and it stands for everything Glasgow stands for: vibrancy, culture and friendliness.

—Tron Audience Member 2008

By setting a large part of Refugee Week Scotland at the Tron it is incorporating the festival into the heart of Glasgow. The miniature of Glasgow that the audience member defines, the vibrancy, culture and friendliness is part of why I feel the festival has built such momentum in Glasgow. For most of the participants in the festival this will be the only time they get to perform in a professional venue where award winning productions have taken place.

Participation in the arts can help build confidence and develop key skills. Amongst new arrivals to Scotland this is paramount to ensuring that their voices are heard. A lack of confidence and fear can inhibit a person's ability to speak out about how they are being treated. The arts can provide the confidence to express yourself and in some cases supply the means to find a voice. This is illustrated effectively by a project that Cranhill Arts ran as part of Refugee Week Scotland 2010. On a community grant of £400 provided by Scottish Refugee Council, Cranhill Arts ran a series of digital photography training days and day trips specifically aimed at local refugees and people seeking asylum within the Cranhill area in the East End of Glasgow. Twelve people, a combination of people from the host community, refugees and people seeking asylum participated in the project. They spent a day receiving photographic training and the rest of the week making a visual record of events happening across Glasgow during refugee week. They sent

their photographs and reactions to events into the Refugee Week Scotland blog. This project only lasted a few days but the effect of being part of the project was immense for those involved. The responses from the participants involved show how empowering arts projects can be.

The day has been great I loved using the cameras taking photos was good, I asked the Police to take one of them I have never spoken to the Police before. I laugh at the babies dancing to the drums, since I've been to Scotland I afraid to go out as I feel so sad when people tell me to go back to my own country, so me and my children stay in the house as we feel safe there, but this day was great I felt important using the Cameras.

—Precious Ndlovu

I had a great time, I can now see myself working for the Media, a news paper may be (she laughs out loud with amazement that she even said that) taking photos of people was a fun thing to do —Awa Goudiaby

In the case of Precious the project placed her in a completely different role, from being someone other people commented on and shouted at to giving her the control to comment on others through the medium of a camera. She felt safe, comfortable and brave, brave enough to speak to a policeman which, in the context of Precious's experiences may require more strength than we realise. It also gave the participants a sense of belonging, they were involved in a project with a sense of purpose, they were united in an objective of taking photos for use on the Refugee Week Scotland blog.⁴ This sense of purpose meant they were united in a common goal, through their contribution to the blog they were part of the bigger picture that is Refugee Week Scotland. From such a minimal financial contribution and small scope a project was carried out that changed

⁴ The Refugee Week Scotland blog is still alive, although it is no longer being updated it can be found at <http://refugeeweekscotland.posterous.com/>

how someone felt about themselves and their life.

There is a depth of work with refugees and people seeking asylum that has been occurring since the dispersal began in Glasgow in 2000. One of the long term projects that has been running is the Maryhill Integration Network and Gilmore Productions music and dance project which I referenced at the start of the piece. Utilising arts based processes provides a means of communication that overcomes the language barriers present when working with people seeking asylum and refugees, whilst at the same time helping to build participant's communication and language skills. Dance, art, photography are universal languages; there is no necessity to be able to speak English therefore it allows participation from everyone. Maryhill Integration Network and Gilmore Productions use dance as the medium. They regularly perform a dance piece at Refugee Week Scotland. It was at this dance class that I first encountered Refugee Week Scotland, as a participant and performer in a final piece for the show at the Tron Theatre 2009.

Attending the dance classes not only gives participants skills and confidence but also respite from the difficulties in their lives and the chance to develop social networks. Having been a regular visitor to the dance class back in 2009 I was very excited to see the work that they would produce for the festival in 2010. It amazed me when I went to visit the rehearsal how much had changed, there were a number of women dancing who had been in the class when I attended a year ago. The difference in their performance was vast, the confidence with which they moved and the openness of their faces in looking at audiences was so much greater. Their confidence had grown hugely and it was lovely to see. There were a number of new dancers who had newly arrived in the country one of which was a woman called Maboubeh, I spoke to Maboubeh over a number of classes to find out how important the music and dance project was to her.

Mahboubeh is 24 from Iran, she has lived in Glasgow for 10 months with her young son Arad

who is 3 years old. Mahboubeh is quiet and shy but has a warm smile. She talks about her experiences of arriving in Scotland:

When I first arrived in Scotland I wanted to go home because I am alone here, no family, and no friends. Before the last two months were bad, but for two months for me it has been a little better, a little better because I'm going to the Maryhill dance class. The dance classes are really good, I am happy here, I have friends, I can speak with other people a little, not really good English but it's better for me, for me and for my son. My son is in the crèche happy with other children. Just in Maryhill I have met people.

I did not dance before in Iran, in Iran I only watched dance, I thought I can't dance. I like to dance now, it is better for me, maybe next week my dancing is even better.

Mahboubeh performed at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow in the dance performance Back and Forth with Maryhill Integration Network to an audience of over 100 people. Her English and her confidence have increased significantly.

Another example of an effective dance project was run by Ydance, the National Youth Dance Agency for Scotland, which is a leading provider of quality dance education and encourages all young people to get active and develop their creativity through dance. Ydance for the last three years has been running a project called, Under The Same Sky which began in January 2008 when YDance invited asylum seekers, refugees and their friends from across Glasgow to come together and explore their hopes, dreams and experiences through dance.

For the past three years the young people involved in the project have attended weekly dance classes and then come together for a performance at The Tron Theatre as part of Refugee Week Scotland. This year the young people come from classes at All Saint's Academy, Shawlands Academy and Spring Academy and performed on stage alongside the

out of school groups based in Knightswood and at the Red Road Flats. Both Knightswood and the Red Road Flats are areas within Glasgow where a high number of people seeking asylum are placed in accommodation.

This performance involved over 60 young people from across Glasgow coming together in a dance extravaganza and opened up the city to the young people involved. The dance classes are held in their school or in a community hall within their local area. Just getting to the Tron Theatre in the town centre is an adventure for them. Some young people have never heard of this acclaimed theatre, let alone understand where it might be. Through the event the city can be seen opening up to them. They meet dance groups from areas in Glasgow they have never been to, even though they may only live 15 minutes apart. For some families when they arrive seeking asylum the need for safety is paramount, this can mean building your world around what you know. For young people this can limit their world to a journey between home and school, with projects such as Ydance their world is opened up literally and figuratively.

At the end of organising my first Refugee Week Scotland I felt overwhelmed and impressed by the depth of work that is running in Glasgow and the effect that the projects have had on the participants involved, how the very seemingly small involvement offered has such a meaningful result. The involvement in arts projects, opening doors in people's lives, offering them a future they previously could not have conceived of, a respite and time to think. A cherished moment for me was listening to a participant in Ignite theatre group, a youth theatre which had been started by young asylum seekers, being interviewed by a journalist. In response to the question regarding what career she would like to pursue after college she responded with "I would like to work in the media but if that doesn't work out then I'll be an actress." as back up career that has to be special.