



Refugee Encounters

Everyday positive relationships are formed between refugees and British born people - from friends to neighbours to work colleagues. The following interviews are examples of these relationships from around the UK.

Faduma and Michael - London

Faduma left Somalia in her late 20's as a refugee of the civil war. Her father worked for the government in Somalia and her mother was a university lecturer. As a result of the civil war, Faduma and her family were forced to leave their beautiful big house and wealthy, upper classed lifestyle to live in a refugee camp across the border in Kenya for four years in a cramped tent with no electricity and where their daily food consisted of basic snack rations.

Eventually she came to the UK in search of a better life. But she came here alone, her mother and father remained in Kenya and her two sisters fled to America. After one year she gained her status so she could stay in the UK and apply for work but even after hundreds of applications Faduma was constantly declined because of lack of experience and because she "wasn't right for the job".

Through an advocacy course that she took with Action International, Faduma heard about the Time Together project, a scheme run by the charity TimeBank that matches refugees with a mentor to help them to adapt to UK life.

She signed up, began her training and was soon matched with Michael Stevens, the general secretary for the Cooperative Party, from London, who supported and worked with her to achieve her personal goals – for Faduma, ultimately it was to find a job.

After some initial meetings and lots of talking, Michael and Faduma decided that her first step was to educate herself. Michael supported her by helping her to apply for education courses, helping her with assignments, how to write a CV and teaching her how to deal with government bureaucracy.

Michael says, "Through meeting and working with Faduma I learnt not only about the plight of refugees in Somalia but also about the difficulties they face here in London. It's extremely difficult for refugees to access the services that we as native Britons take for granted. Things like work and education are almost impossible for them to find. As a British citizen I knew I could help."

Eventually, Faduma got accepted to a Development Studies course at Birkbeck College, University of London, which she successfully completed after a year. She then got a job as a recruitment officer on the Time Together programme where her role was to recruit other refugees in need of support.



After this she worked part time as a researcher for the Employability Forum, an independent organisation that promotes the employment of refugees and the integration of migrant workers in the UK.

In 2007, Faduma won a fellowship from the Rayne Foundation which aims to build bridges between refugees and the UK mainstream. Through them, she became an intern with Karen Buck MP and got vital work experience working in her office and attending weekly surgeries with constituents. This gave her an extraordinary opportunity to become even more integrated into British society.

To further her work to support refugees, Faduma is now a Director of a local Somalian community organisation in West Kensington called the Minaret Centre. There, she supports other Somalian people in a similar way to the support she was offered by her Time Together mentor. The projects the centre delivers involve career advice, work shadowing placements with nurses and teachers, English classes, local government lobbying and general recreational activities.

TimeBank has helped Faduma with developing her charity too. Faduma found out about another of TimeBank's mentoring projects, Leaders Together, which matches professional people from the UK with leaders of refugee community organisations to share their own professional experience and support them with specific work-related goals. With 12 years fundraising experience, Gerry Mchugh, Faduma's mentor, whose previous roles include Head of Fundraising at the British Lung Foundation and Director at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Trust, has supported Faduma to register The Minaret Centre as a charity. Next steps are to work together to kick-start fundraising and income generation.

Faduma says,

"If it wasn't for Michael and his dedicated support for me through the Time Together project, I would not be where I am today. Not only did Michael educate me about the British way of life and help me develop the skills and confidence to succeed in a job here but he gave me a whole new life – thanks to him, I have a wonderful set of British friends, he's godfather to my little boy, a shoulder to lean on and he's become a lifelong friend.

I've been mentored in a professional way too with Gerry sharing her amazing expertise and knowledge of the charity sector so I can help other Somalian people adapt to British life also. Time Together and Leaders Together encourages bridge building between local British people and refugees so that they are able to fully understand each others cultures and ultimately so that refugees can adapt and integrate into the British mainstream. But I don't want to cross the bridge alone – with the help of Gerry to support me to develop and sustain the work we do at the Minaret Centre, I'm able to help lots of other Somalian people cross that bridge with me."

Jamie and Sam – Glasgow

Jamie is 18 years old and comes from Glasgow.

"When we heard that asylum seekers were coming to our school, everyone was curious about them. At first, many people were wary of each other and there was an obvious split in the playground, but this soon changed when everyone got to know each other. Because the asylum seekers did not live close to the school they got bus tokens, and then taxis. Many of my Scottish mates' parents would complain saying 'They get free transport, what about our kids?' This caused a lot of problems. I would see things on Comic Relief about refugees and I felt sorry for them but I never knew that they were going to become such a big part of my life here in Glasgow."

Sam is 20 years old and comes from Algeria.

"When I first came here it took a long time for me to be given a school place so I sat in the house everyday, waiting for 3.30pm, when I would actually wait for the school bus at the bus stop- it was a hard time. I had a few words of English but I couldn't hold a conversation, I just sat with my head down"

Jamie says "My first memory of Sam was that he was quiet. He hardly said a word at first- then I saw him on the football pitch. He is amazing, like Ronaldinho. I don't like football that much, so when we played I was always stuck being the referee. It is hard for Sam because two of the big Scottish football teams tried to sign him, but they can't because after six years he is still an asylum seeker and is not allowed to work."

Sam says "I met Jamie when I finally got a school place. I had seen him about; I thought he was the only Scottish boy in the whole world who cared about asylum seekers. We became friends, and I trusted him. If he sat next to me on the bus, I would feel okay. I knew he didn't want to fight. Jamie is a great person; he has a big heart, he doesn't care about where people are from- to him we all have the same blood."

Jamie says "It became difficult in school sometimes, because some of my Scottish mates saw that I was hanging about in Sam's area quite a lot and we sort of drifted apart. Sam's area was rough and some of the residents there would see me and at first they would be like, 'here's the paki-lover' and laugh, but after a while they changed and it became a lot easier. At first my parents were worried for me because my friends were staying in such a rough area and my parents didn't want me going alone. Once I was waiting at the bus-stop and the police picked me up. They said to my Mum 'A 14 year-old should not be hanging about in that area' but I thought 'What about all my friends who have to live there and have no choice?' If it is not fit for me then why is it fit for them?"

Sam says "Sometimes I wish I had grown up with the freedom that Jamie has had. I wish I had never seen the things I have seen, I wish I could feel 100% happy but I can't- some things never leave your mind. Jamie can do what he wants; he can go to university, I can't because I am an asylum seeker; he can travel anywhere he likes, I can't because I have no passport. Freedom is not just about 'not being killed', but having choices in your life."



Tabita and Nicole - Newcastle

Tabita is 9 years old and moved to the UK from Angola in Africa a couple of years ago. Along with her family, she settled into an area situated in the East End of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. She has been friends with Nicole, a British-born child, for 2 years now.

Tabita was enrolled into the local primary school, where she felt quite lonely and did not have many friends. 'Before I was friends with Nicole I only had one friend who came from England and he was a boy. Before I came to this country I thought British people would be nice but some of them were a bit nasty'.

Nicole, who attended the same school, noticed one day that Tabita looked lonely and that she had nobody else to play with, so she decided to introduce herself. 'When Tabita came into the class I really didn't know her. I asked what her name was and she asked me the same. Before Tabita came I was only friends with people who came from this country, she was my first friend from another country. I thought she was really nice'.

Tabita and Nicole soon became best friends and like to have fun together. 'Tabita is really nice and I like playing with her a lot. We really like playing football together and when we are at school we also help with each other's work.' Since arriving Tabita has made lots of new friends and Nicole thinks it is because, 'Tabita talks to more people now because I think she has got to know them better.'

Tabita adds, 'I think it's really great because we are even better friends now than when we first met. We have learnt how to help each other and if we get stuck with our school work we help each other out'.

Tesfai and Betty - London

Tesfai came to the UK in November 1980 as a political refugee from Eritrea and now manages a team of 20 youth workers for Lambeth Play Services. He met Betty, a councillor for Lambeth Council in October 1992 when she was his management lecturer at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Tesfai says "When I first arrived to Britain I was placed in a hostel for the blind, as it was at this time that I lost my sight. For 40 days I walked alone in the corridor of the hostel as I had no idea how phones worked so could not contact any of my friends. At that time there were no refugees from Eritrea so I was forced to link up with British ways of life very quickly. I brought with me, not preconceptions of the UK, but expectations, and I was aware that these would only be realised if I was to do something about it myself."

Betty says "As a lecturer, you soon learn how to address certain individuals from particular communities. Many of my students were strong individuals who had been military officers or academics in their own country. At first I sensed a lack of confidence from Tesfai. However, this soon changed as his ability to challenge me in the lectures grew through his frequent quoting of chapters and verses. Our relationship was cemented by social meetings where we would talk about the challenges to refugee communities and then go on to do something about this collectively."

Tesfai explains, "When I first met Betty I sensed she was very welcoming and determined, as she was able to drive what was at that time an immobile group. Through her, everyone was brought together. Her inspiration has led to my progression within my career and socially. I have moved on from managing a team of refugees to managing teams within the wider sector."

Betty adds, "Previously I had a rather warped mentality. I had visions of refugees as those who would drag a bag with hardly anything and in a very desperate state. The very fact that I was in a room full of doctors, generals, lawyers and academics who weren't just going to sit back and let their situation overtake them forced me to change my preconception. It wasn't just me that had to change my views and ideas, all of us in that particular department at Goldsmiths did something different to change our lives in a positive way. It was Tesfai that said 'You should be in politics,' and here I am today."

Betty continues, "I have many inspirations to encourage individuals like him out of the nucleus-community and into a whole community. My happiest moment was when I received a phone call from Tesfai saying "I've got this team and I am going to be managing a team of youth workers in Lambeth." Tesfai is making an impact on the whole community rather than thinking he is just a refugee and should therefore be dependent upon the refugee communities. If you are intelligent you work yourself out of the last episode you were in."

Tesfai says, "During the years, our relationship hasn't changed, but through our continuous support of each other we are able to pursue our political aspirations, contributing to the wider society."

Betty adds "We could all go around in a little box enjoying our own environments until we have something external kicking us to think about your wider environment. I have grown and changed as a result of meeting Tesfai. Until 1992 I was a completely selfish individual. Through meeting Tesfai I have got to know his wife and family and have learnt a lot about regards for women on Eritrea. I remember when I first ate with them I let out "Am I going to eat from that big old plate where you are all eating, with everybody putting their hands in? So where's the soap and water?" I was never easy-going and I am still not, but Tesfai has taught me to be more accepting. Until I die he will be my best friend. He is part of my family and is the first on my side."

Ikraam and Jo – Bristol

Ikraam is 32. He moved to Bristol with her children at the end of 2002, fleeing civil war in her native Somalia. Jo is 37 and was born in Buckinghamshire. She moved to Bristol three years ago.

Jo says, "I met Ikraam at our first training day as volunteer speakers for the Refugee Awareness Project. The project trains volunteers to go and give talks and workshops to people about asylum seekers and refugees. After the training, I offered her a lift home, as she lives near me, and we quickly got into deep conversations about issues we both really care about. She seemed very serious at first – she was having real problems with her neighbours. But I quickly got to see the naughty side of her too! It was clear from that point on that we had a huge amount in common even though we come from such different cultural backgrounds. After that, we started meeting more regularly - first to plan sessions for the Refugee Awareness Project and then socially too. It's funny as I thought I would be the one giving her emotional support when she heard other people's negative views about refugees during our workshops. But actually she was the one who gave me support the first time we had a difficult session with quite hostile people. Her strength of character amazes me. I didn't think it was possible to be that strong given what she's been through in Somalia and the UK."

Ikraam says "Our friendship is really growing day by day. Jo comes over and helps the children with their homework and her partner is helping me learn to drive. We have dinner together regularly and last year she invited us to spend Christmas with her family and friends. It was the first time I'd been part of a traditional British Christmas and we had such a lovely time with her family and friends. It was such a warm household and I felt so relaxed with them. Jo has become part of my family now. I can always tell her what I'm going through and share my experiences with her. Before I met Jo, I only knew a few British people just to say hello to on the street- mostly other mums from my kids' school. I didn't really have close contact with anyone. As an asylum seeker, you are always being moved from place to place so when we first arrived, I was always too exhausted and stressed to meet people properly."

Having spent time with people like Jo and her family, I know that British people are not all the same. There are lots of people who can understand who you are and where you come from. I've started to realise that whatever the media says, it's not a crime to be a refugee- you're just exerting your rights. Now I'm not scared to be who I am. I feel like I can trust people more and have more confidence."

Jo adds, "My friendship with Ikraam has really opened my eyes and those of the people around me to the challenges refugees face settling here. Everyone has been amazed by her resilience and determination to integrate and make the best for her kids' future. She's such an incredible person. It's opened my eyes too. Even though I thought I was already quite aware of these issues, I didn't fully appreciate how negative people's attitudes can be."

Ikraam adds, "Having Jo around makes me feel secure. She makes my life feel much more positive. I can call her anytime– whenever I get a letter I don't understand, or if I have to go somewhere for an appointment and need some support. With her around, I can do things without worrying all the time. She makes me feel that things are going to be ok no matter what difficulties we face. Thanks to Jo, I've learnt a lot more about how things work in the UK. I've also learnt a lot more about British culture, especially British hospitality. People are much more welcoming and hospitable than I thought. I've also learnt that you can say what you want in this culture– when you feel isolated or frustrated, you can express that. And it's ok to say if you can't do something or you can't afford something. I've learnt that it's not something to be ashamed of. In my culture, it's really different, so now I have the confidence to feel and talk about what I want. I've really learnt how to be independent through Jo. She makes me feel that if there is something I want to do, I can always do it. I want to be even more independent though! I want to go forwards, not backwards. I want to have more self respect and pride in myself. I've now got a job and I don't need government support and benefits and I'm really proud of this. But I want to do more- there is still so much to learn. I want to study, read, write, drive, swim!"

Jo adds, "It's really amazing to see Ikraam's confidence growing- her horizons just get bigger and bigger and she has a huge determination to achieve. She's really enjoying her independence. And even though I have 20 years' driving experience, she already knows the Highway Code better than me!

It's been wonderful seeing her dreams expand. There's no stopping her..."

DJ and Lucy - Birmingham

D.J is 20 years old and from Uganda. He met Lucy, 27 from Birmingham in 2004 through an organisation run by Save the Children, called BUMP – the Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project.

D.J says "I had had previous contact with British born individuals before I met Lucy. Those from the Social Services and the Home Office. I was also in regular contact with my solicitor and my Tutor at college. I did have some contact with British young people at college, but it was very hard because of language and cultural differences. A lot of them would smoke which I don't."

Lucy says "Through BUMP I would often socialise with young Refugees – play games, cook, talk etc but there wasn't much time to get to know them really. Before BUMP I had never (knowingly) met a refugee. I remember at first I thought I wouldn't be able to communicate with D.J or any of the young people. I thought that refugees would be traumatised, but they weren't like that at all. To be honest, I was amazed that they had all been through so much but still managed to stay happy and positive."

D.J adds "I thought that generally people in this country wouldn't care about me and I felt out of place. I thought people wouldn't be friendly but I was wrong. I had no idea about the people and what they would think about me. I was kind of emotional when I met Lucy because I was talking about back home. I thought maybe I had found someone to talk to, but at that time I wasn't sure if I could trust anyone. It was hard. We had to take it step by step because we didn't know the other person so it was hard what to know what to think of them at first."

Lucy adds "The first time I really met D.J and had a proper chat with him he was very low. His asylum case had been refused and he was very upset. I was worried about him and thought he needed a friend. I remember thinking he was a very serious young man. I guess I presumed that he wouldn't speak very good English and that we wouldn't have much to talk about. Our initial meeting also gave me the idea that he was very depressed, and that a friendship with him might be hard. To be honest I was worried that it would be too emotionally demanding. Although he was depressed, I discovered that his English was almost better than mine and that he was a lot of fun to hang out with. I didn't expect him to be so intelligent or interested in current affairs. More because of his age than anything else. Now our relationship is less befriender/befriendee. D.J is really into politics and we always have debates. He is a big fan of Blair and I

am not. My initial fears that we would have nothing to talk about were soon forgotten. He's got quite strong opinions and once you get him on to certain subjects he can talk for hours. Iraq for instance, that's another hotly debated subject. If he gets status he should run for councillor, he would do really well. Unfortunately, D.J's position is as bad as it was when I met him. Despite this, he seems to be a more confident, balanced and happy person. He's got a bit more of a stable life, which has really improved his outlook. I think he has come to terms with his situation, although I wish things could be different for him."

D.J adds "Our relationship is less professional, we are friends now. When we go out I like to share the cost. I'm not 17 anymore; it's over two years now that we've been friends. We have more grown up conversations now. I have learnt a lot through her, number one, my English has improved because we do a lot of talking. Lucy says I talk a lot. I have also learnt a lot about British culture."

Lucy adds "I learnt a lot about Uganda and about the experiences of Refugees in the UK. Knowing D.J has made me become very frustrated with the Asylum system. I have seen how he has suffered under it and the injustice that has been done to him. He told me a lot of the reasons why he fled Uganda and I can't believe that such a strong case could be refused. He's shown me how strong one person can be."

Paul and Othman – Cardiff

27 year old Paul is an artist, who is originally from Dorset but has lived in Cardiff for the last 5 years. Paul is also studying for a PhD and volunteering as Time Together mentor.

Paul is mentoring 37 year old Othman who came to Cardiff in February 2004. Othman was forced to leave Sudan, his home country, due to persecution. Back in Sudan, Othman was one of the country's top musicians and was something of a celebrity. Since coming to the UK, Othman has worked late night in a garage, as a cleaner and as a security guard in order to pay the bills and support his wife and seven year old daughter. Othman says:

"I am very proud that I have paid my way by doing this work, but it is my dream to make a living through my music again. I joined Time Together because I thought it might help me to achieve this dream."

"I first met Paul at the Time Together mentor matching event. The project coordinator had told me about his work as an artist and I had seen his photo, so I immediately searched him out as I knew I wanted to match with him! Paul had what I call the 'attitude of the artist' and we were both mutually appealing to each other."

Paul says:

"I decided to become a mentor as I wanted to make a difference to the wider socio-political landscape but also to an individual. Time Together offered me a flexible way to volunteer and the freedom from an organisation. I also liked the fact that it goes against popular, negative attitudes towards refugees."

"Othman was so enthusiastic and energetic when I first met him; he made a very big impression. He immediately appealed to me as he was playing a musical instrument. I hadn't met anyone who was a refugee before and I had a certain nervousness at our first meeting.

"I don't think anyone I know has any explicitly negative preconceptions of refugees but most people are unlikely to have a first hand experience, I think there's a definite gap between the UK as a host society and its refugees. I don't think most people realise how difficult the refugee experience is – once someone has been given refugee status they deserve help and a warm welcome, but this isn't always the case."

Othman says their mentoring relationship developed very quickly and they soon got to know each other. He says:

"I'd known several British people before but not had a friendship like my one with Paul. I've had positive and negative experiences, but it's all given me a better experience and outlook on life. Other people from my community don't have preconceptions of British people; they're too concerned about their own life and paying their bills!

"Paul has always been so patient with me and has shown me the professional way to do things as an artist in this country. From the very beginning he started to make things happen for me and my Sudanese dance group NABTA, which is named after the 7 thousand year old Sudanese civilisation which first built pyramids. He has advised us on setting up a proper constitution for the group and helped us to open a bank account, so we have been able to apply for funding from the Arts Council. He has shown me the importance of doing everything in a professional way and of being on time! He's very committed to doing anything he says he will and he is always honest with me.

"I sometimes have too much chat - I'm hyper like a bird! But he's not afraid to say anything to me. We both want to get something out of the relationship and there is a real sense of equality as we are both only investing our time.

Paul feels they have developed a very special friendship and it is unlikely they would have met outside of Time Together.

"We've created a unique relationship and environment to discuss things. Othman has become more confident about NABTA and his professional ambitions. I think this has made him happier. Achieving his balancing act of earning a living and realising the potential of his group is getting closer."

Being a mentor has given Paul the opportunity to learn about the Sudanese culture and a little bit about Islam:

"Othman has told me how Sudan is 'like a Doctor's surgery' – in the sense that everyone is always waiting around for everyone else – they have a different definition of punctuality! This is usually because everyone is so hospitable that if you pop into see anyone, they won't let you leave.

Othman still has physical and emotional scars from his experiences in Sudan:

"In Sudan I was targeted because of my political opinions and because I didn't agree with the regime trying to rule the country in the name of religion. My music teacher once told me that as a musician you can 'lead the nation'; I really believe that the power of words and music can overcome any obstacle.

"When I first came to the UK, I lost so much confidence, but Paul has helped me to get this back and to start realising my dream of being a performer again."

Paul says he would advise anyone thinking of becoming a mentor with Time Together to take the plunge and do it:

"It's a unique experience and will really enrich your sense of being a human being. It is very liberating to just do something for the sake of it and not for any material gain. Being Othman's mentor has been an inspiring and humbling experience. It has made me feel stronger."

Willy and Mike – Portsmouth

Willy is a 44 year old medical biologist from the Democratic Republic of Congo. "I met Mike in September 2004 at the Haslar Immigration Removal Centre after spending 10 months in various detention centres. I was facing imminent removal from the UK and had become very withdrawn after losing all confidence that there was someone to help me. My English was not very good so we spoke in French, Mike was very attentive. We both have children of similar ages so would share stories and photos."

Mike is 51 and lives in Hampshire. "As a member of Haslar Visitors' Group I was allocated as Willy's visitor mainly because I speak French. I had had no contact with refugees before this, other than briefly being the visitor for two other men detained at Haslar. Previously I did have a rather romantic notion of "political asylum" and believed that the British authorities would always give protection to those fleeing persecution in another country. My preconceptions were that refugees were treated with compassion. I was shocked to learn about the iniquities of the asylum system."

"Mike is an angel sent by God to bring me happiness in my life. Our relationship developed very well and now nothing can separate us. Through Mike, God has ensured that I got the help I needed. Mike is a man of God who has a heart for strangers who have to flee their country because of persecution. The UK has a big reputation abroad as a great nation, mother of democracy, and as a haven for the worlds oppressed. In the Congo everyone believes this, but when I arrived here, I found a very different country to that which I had imagined. I am overwhelmed about my best friend Mike and that I have become a part of his family in the UK. He is my father in the UK (in African terms he is "Papa Mike"). Since my release from detention, he has continued to support me constantly and managing a publicity campaign to stop my unlawful removal. He also supports my family in the Congo."

Mike says, "Willy has lived with me and my family ever since his release. I do my best to translate for him when he preaches at my church and I have had the privilege

to preach at African churches in the UK. He is a gifted preacher and is training for ordination. He also has a broad ministry to Francophone African Asylum seekers in the UK. Unfortunately many of the people around me took a position somewhere between scepticism and downright hatred towards asylum seekers, regarding them as, at best, opportunist spongers. Despite this and however badly he has been treated, Willy always prays for his persecutors and thanks God for bringing him to England."

Willy adds "I haven't really seen any changes in Mike but he has learned a great deal over the past three years and is therefore able to help many more people in a similar situation to mine. Through my ordeal and by meeting Mike I have learnt that there are two kinds of people: the wise and compassionate; and those who are racist and ungodly."

Mike adds "It would be no exaggeration to say that meeting Willy has changed my life. In order to better help Willy, I engaged deeply with the voluntary sector, legal professionals, the media and The Home Office, and later made the decision to train as an Immigration Lawyer. I am now Deputy Manager with Refugee Action, one of the leading national charities advising Asylum Seekers; Chairman of Haslar Visitors Group; and a volunteer with Bail for Immigration Detainees."

Paul and Stephen - London

Paul, a Councillor for East Ham arrived from Sri Lanka 21 May 1985 and first had contact with Rt Hon Stephen Timms, MP of East Ham and also Chief Secretary of the Treasury in 1986. "When I arrived from Sri Lanka, I had the idea of making Newham my home. At this time it was one of the most deprived areas in the UK. Although I had had contact with Stephen two years previously, it wasn't until 1988 when he came to one of our church meetings that I embarked on my relationship with him. Stephen played a key role in the redevelopment of the community, and I was heavily involved in his campaigns. I have had a lot of contact with politicians in the past, but what was most striking about Stephen, was his simplicity and ability to remain humble. I was able to develop my approach to politics greatly through Stephen, he has a very simple way of approaching things. He recognises and values everything. It is credit to Stephen that I won 3 times the election in Newham. I remember thinking I would like to see him as a Cabinet Minister and now he is. So now I would like to see him with the new leadership, become Secretary of the State."

Paul adds "I came with hardly anything and I soon discovered that a house is simply a building, where you have to create a home which I would not have been able to do without the recognition and welcoming of the local residents. This is my promised land which god has given me. Stephen and I have a special bond because we come from the same Christian faith. In my eyes there are two great leaders in our time, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. But on a local level Stephen is my biggest role model."

Stephen says "It struck me that Paul was an extremely loyal individual. Paul has always been very supportive and tremendously helpful not only for me in my career but also towards our community. He is the champion for Tamil businesses in the area. How many are there Paul? "112". He will give you a weekly update. This is not just a place for him to live, but his home and I try my hardest to allow him and others to feel that. Manor Park is regarded as home by the Tamil community throughout Europe. Prior to my encounter with Paul and the rest of the Tamil community, I was often in contact with asylum seekers at my weekly surgery. Working with this sector also makes up a very large part of my constituency."

Paul explains "I was initially very confused when I arrived. There was a big shock in culture. One example I always use to compare our cultures is my relationship with my elderly neighbour. He would stand outside and lean on the fence and every morning would say hello. After a few days of not seeing him I asked another friend who lived on the street if he knew what had happened "Don't you know, he died on Tuesday and was buried on Thursday." For me it was hard to understand that I had not seen or heard anything of his death. So I started to wonder if I was to die, who would look after me? In my country you are supported by your neighbours and surrounding community. As a Tamil community living in another community we were given many opportunities to carry on living with our lives. We were offered free English lessons at East Ham College. Our community was also looked out for by the wider community. I was the first person in Europe to look after the Tamil community, within the Refugee Council and funded by the Home Office. I would carry out outreach work to the members of the Tamil community scattered across the UK. Within Newham, we also worked to give something back to the Refugees, supported very much by Stephen."

Stephen suggests "Throughout our relationship, although it is a professional one made stronger by our close friendship, we have never had any rows, have we Paul?"

Paul adds "Stephens' friendship is very meaningful. He is very loyal and respectful of my wishes and needs. He has a general interest in the community. Last night I sent him a fax at 12pm, which demonstrates the accessibility of Stephens' team. I credit him to much of my achievements. I never thought I would be awarded an Honorary degree by the London School of Economics. These achievements are due to the people that supported me and looked after me when I needed help, one major supporter was Stephen. Sometimes politics divides people, but here it builds relationships."

Stephen adds "Paul has become progressively more confident which has allowed him to take on more responsibilities. For me it is great to see him developing in such a way. Paul stands out not only in the Tamil community but also within the wider community of Newham and also within the Political sector. I have learnt from him about his hardship and the pains of having to leave his home for his own safety. This I have learnt through Paul in a way that I wouldn't normally gain through other encounters. Paul is fun to be with and important to me. I look forward to seeing his contribution in the future."

Paul concludes "I think this interview is very positive on a different level. I am the victim of politics but am also sitting here with the Cabinet Minister and I myself am a Councillor, which demonstrates how refugees can re-invest their knowledge. We want to show to the country how we can contribute Economically,

Socially and Politically. I never thought I would be a politician here in London and it is the strength that has grown from my support from Stephen which has pushed me to go further. It is also the host community that has given me this opportunity.”

Lylla and Laura – London

26 year old Lylla is originally from Afghanistan. She was forced to flee the country because of the war and now lives in Leyton with her nephew and two sons. She attends college four days a week, where she is studying to improve her English.

Over the past year, Lylla has met every Friday with Laura, a Time Together volunteer mentor, who helps her with her English and offers support and encouragement as she settles into life in the UK.

Lylla says “When I met Laura at the Time Together party, I knew I wanted her to be my mentor as she was very sweet and well-spoken. Since I've got to know her, I have found that she is always so well-mannered and always so happy! Before I became friends with Laura, I'd never known any British citizens, but I had always thought that they would be good and welcoming people.”

Lylla's mentor Laura is 28 and lives in Northwest London, but spends much of her time in Yorkshire, where she works in a college as an ESOL teacher (English for Speakers of Other Languages.) Laura decided to become a mentor on the Time Together scheme because she was saddened by the negative media coverage of refugees, and wanted to take positive action rather than just talking about it.

Laura had met other refugees through her work but was only involved with them in a professional capacity, so she had never become friends with a refugee until she met Lylla. Laura says “I don't think I had any positive or negative preconceptions about refugees, but I probably thought of them as a category, rather than as individuals with very different stories and personalities. When Lylla and I first started to meet, we tended to focus on improving her English, but as time went by we got to know each other better and became real friends. Our meetings became fun and we looked forward to seeing each other. It has been fantastic to see her confidence grow over the last year.”

Laura has helped Lylla to get out and about in London, taking her to see London sights, museums, art galleries and even a carol concert. Lylla adds “Laura has showed me so many things. Before coming to England I had never been on an escalator before, so she has taken me to the underground and now I am able to go and get on the trains by myself. In the past, I was always very frightened to go to the park, in case some kids would say something to me. Not knowing the language can make it quite intimidating. But Laura has taken me and my youngest son on outings to the park and I've even been on my own a couple of times now.”

Laura has also gained and learnt much from her experience of mentoring Lylla; she adds “Spending time with Lylla has given me an idea of what it's like to care for three young boys on your own! Together we've explored museums and parts of London that I would never have got round to visiting otherwise. I've also been able to experience Afghan culture, from enjoying delicious spicy tea and traditional dopiaza (a kind of curry) and learning the odd new word. Actually the only word I seem to be able to remember is the word for 'pigeon'! This comes up a lot when we go to the park. Being a mentor with Time Together has gained me a really good friend. I've realised that people are pretty similar, no matter what country they come from. I would tell anyone thinking of becoming a refugee mentor, to definitely do it. It can really open your eyes to new cultures and means you become friends with someone you would never have met otherwise.”

Although their formal mentoring relationship has now come to an end, Laura and Lylla will continue to meet as friends. In the future Lylla plans to continue studying and improving her English skills.

Sahande and Sarah (pseudonyms) - Manchester

Sahande, 30 is an Iraqi Kurd who fled his home to escape ethnic cleansing and discrimination. He arrived in the UK in 2001.

Sahande says “At the beginning it was very difficult, I did not know anyone in the UK and I felt very isolated. When I arrived I was dropped at a house in Salford, Greater Manchester, in the middle of the night by the immigration service and didn't know where I was. Being an asylum seeker is like you are born again. You are a man, but you feel like a child who does not know anything. My health visitor was wonderful. I got to know her and she took me to college even though it was not her job to help me so much. I trusted her a lot and she introduced me to Sarah, 53 who volunteered to do an hour a week's English conversation and learning. We talked about politics, culture, our families, and about how British systems work, and soon it was three times a week that we met, not one.”

Sarah says: “The health worker and I were friends and she had been telling me for a while that someone she worked with wanted English conversation practice. I was not an English teacher but had always been interested in other cultures and travel. I also feel that having a home and belonging somewhere is so important. This seemed to be a good opportunity to help someone in need. I knew nothing about Kurdish people at all and nothing about asylum seekers or the asylum system. I was appalled and had no idea about how people are really left in a strange place to fend for themselves, and how difficult the system was to understand. We really got to know each other in the sessions. When someone is waiting for the outcome of an asylum claim and is going through such difficulties, an English conversation lesson can't end when you shut the door.”

When Sahande was granted refugee status he was evicted from his house and had a difficult time trying to find a home, but was eventually given a tiny flat and started work at two jobs. Before long he got a place in university studying English/Arabic Interpreting and Translation Studies. Soon he found that living in the flat was too expensive and moved in with Sarah, who had become his adopted 'mum'.

He adds “Sarah was one of my first British friends and she introduced me to her friends and family and they all accepted me. I feel she became the mum I had been forced to leave behind in Kurdistan. I feel now that she will be my mother and I will be her son forever.”

Sarah adds “I never had any children of my own but now I feel I have an adopted son. It is hard to describe how wonderful it has been to see Sahande develop his skills, gain confidence and find his place in the community. Five years ago he didn't know anything. Now he has a degree, he works in a job helping asylum seekers and runs a community group. I have learned so much about Kurdistan and have enjoyed the food, the dancing and the culture he has introduced to my life. We went for a picnic the other week and we English turned up with little picnic baskets, then all the Kurdish people spread out a huge plastic table cloth and put all their food into a communal picnic and it was wonderful. All of my family and friends have accepted him, and I feel his friendship has spread out to others who had also not known asylum seekers or refugees before.”

Sahande, who passed the test to become a British citizen last year, added: “I am now in contact with my biological mother. I visited her in Kurdistan two months ago after six years apart. There are still many problems there, which was sad for me. She is very happy that I have found someone who cares for me and when I talk to her on the telephone she asks: 'How is your mum', and is grateful for Sarah's role in my life. When I go back to Kurdistan next time, they have insisted Sarah comes with me.”

Finbarr and Gervais – Norwich

Finbarr Carter lives in Norwich is 30 years old and a father of three young girls. Gervais Koulongou Mambs comes from the Republic of Congo, also known as Congo Brazzaville and is 37 years old.

Finbarr says "I met Gervais at a local multi-agency partnership meeting that explores issues around asylum seekers and refugees living in Norwich. I was attending the meeting because of my involvement in Refugee Week. This was about 3 years ago when I was working for a local charity Norfolk Education and Action for Development (NEAD). The organisation relied heavily on volunteers, a few of which were Asylum Seekers who were not able to work but were looking for ways to both contribute to the community and get UK based work experience."

Gervais says "I have been in England since 2003 and loads of my work has been helping other asylum seekers and refugees settle here. I am currently working with newly arrived Congolese refugees that have come from camps in Zambia. In addition to this I have done lots of volunteer work, for example, working as an advisor for Citizens Advice Bureau, which involved me providing support and advice to many British-born people. I have also been a volunteer in the Norwich Prison visitor centre's crèche where I supported families and children. I am also involved in a local church as a lay minister and have been a co-opted member of the Norwich probation group. All these experiences have given me lots of contact with British people."

Finbarr comments "You hear a lot of negative stuff in the media [about refugees] but I tend to avoid those kinds of rightwing papers. As a descendent of a Jewish refugee who fled Nazi Germany I know the value of refuge – if England had not welcomed her she would have died as did most of her family and I would not have been born. I am also aware of many of the conflicts and human rights oppressions around the globe that have led to mass migrations of people. For me, I know it is essential that we can offer a safe haven until things have got better."

Gervais adds "I had no preconception of refugees but I knew they were vulnerable people who need support, but I don't see them as they are portrayed in the media; as people who have left their country for economic reasons such as claiming benefits. Refugees and asylum seekers are usually associated with a view that they are here to take what they can and I would like to change these misconceptions among the local community. In some areas refugees have been bullied and their children were affected. Before I came to England I had no preconceptions of British-born people and had only met a few briefly in my home country. However, I did think they were open-minded."

Finbarr adds "Living in Norwich, a very white city, there are many misunderstandings about ethnic minorities and particularly refugees. I love to talk to people but I have come up against a lot of hostility and misunderstanding when discussing the issue. All I try to do is share what I believe in and have learnt from others and challenge myths. Luckily most of my friends are better informed. From our initial contact I was impressed how active and involved Gervais was not just in areas around refugee support but also in the wider community in general. On a personal basis, I think we immediately warmed to each other – Gervais' positive attitude, despite all he has been through, is infectious"

Gervais adds "From when we first met it was excellent and it made it easy that Finbarr was a very open person. He encouraged me to do things, like helping set up NORFRESA - a community group for Francophone people like me. I didn't have any preconceptions and when I met Finbarr. Meeting him just confirmed my belief that British people are welcoming and that we can all live together."

Finbarr suggests "I don't think I had any preconceptions... I like to be open to all. I also have a tendency to be drawn to people with positive outlooks, energy and conviction to make a difference. Over the years we have worked lots together, particularly around refugee issues and educating the general public. I was particularly touched when we worked together to try and record his story of why he came here and what he had been through. We have also organised and taken a lead on a number of social activities which has allowed us to spend time together but also involve our families. I am also now jokingly his English mother!"

Gervais says "Since we have met in 2004 we have worked together on many different projects and activities, including Refugee Week. Last year we worked together with a local teacher and other NEAD volunteers to do a schools conference. I did a talk and afterwards the students asked me questions about my experience of being an asylum seeker and the difficulties faced by refugees. This was videoed and we produced a DVD that went out to all Norfolk schools. Until now we are still working together and it has helped us to know each other more deeply."

Finbarr concludes "Gervais continues to shine but has managed to increase his skills, knowledge and experience to continually further himself. When I met him he was just a volunteer but has since had employment running a refugee orientation project and now is a case worker on the Gateway project. Despite difficulties he has faced, like the ongoing asylum process, he continues to shine and share this positive outlook with all he meets. Gervais has taught me a lot – about his experience, overcoming challenges and being able to give and then give some more. He is always an inspiration to me and many others."

Gervais concludes "Finbarr has moved onto a new job but fortunately we still meet. I met him as a project coordinator at NEAD but he is now the Partnership Development Officer at MENTER. He also now has a mobile phone so I can contact him at any time – this is something he avoided before because of his 'green' attitudes. I have learnt a lot of things from Finbarr, including learning to say no and work out what is a priority. I think that this is the most important thing I have learnt since being in the UK. As one of the few asylum seekers actually involved in local activities I was continually being asked to do everything. I can now have more time for myself and my daughter. Also I have learned to work hard to make my contribution and build a life in Norwich. Finbarr is a very simple person and it's a quality that I have also taken from him."

Oli and Ed – Leeds

Olivier (Oli) Nkuzimana, 22, came to the UK from DR Congo in early 2006, and was soon moved to Leeds. Within weeks, he met Ed Carlisle, 28, on a project welcoming new people seeking asylum into the city. The two have since become very close friends, working and volunteering together on various community projects, regularly talking politics into the night.

Oli says "I hadn't been in UK for long when I met Ed, so hadn't had opportunities to develop meaningful contact or friendship with people here. I had (and still have) a double perception of British people: some as very conservative, closed, unfriendly, but others as open, friendly, and good humoured... Ed is definitely the second of these! We had so much in common, we just talked and talked from the beginning – and we're still talking! Politics, culture, society, faith, personal things, everything. And Ed helped me get involved in lots of really good social projects, to learn a lot about British culture, and meet so many people. We've now develop a really solid friendship, learning so much from each other. My friend Ed is one of the most passionate, intelligent and caring people I've ever met, someone with a deep and strong sense of what it means to be a citizen of the world."

Ed explains "Oli is an amazing, inspiring and generous guy: I'm so grateful we met! Right from day one, we really got' one another on so many levels, and we very quickly got past the stage of a 'client' and 'project worker' relationship. It's always seemed so natural sharing all of life with him: social life, working on projects and campaigns together, faith stuff, trips away, you name it. It's been such a privilege journeying with Oli over the past year, as he's developed a new life here in Leeds. I've been able to support him in various ways, like helping him get plugged into some great community projects (which he's totally given himself to), meet lots of people (who all love him), and simply encouraging him as he finds his feet here in the UK. And I've 'received' so much back from him: he's a funny, charming and fascinating guy with a lot of integrity and vision, someone who enriches life for all those around him. He recently moved into a challenging, predominantly white area of Leeds, intending – he says, very humbly – to act as an ambassador for multiculturalism... a cause to which I have no

doubt he'll win them all over!"

All photographs taken by Amaya Roman 2007, except 'Jamie and Sam' taken by Chris Watt 2007.

For further information on these interviews please contact the Refugee Week UK team on 020 7346 6752 or email us at info@refugeeweek.org.uk
