

A happy day in Wensleydale – by Judy Nicholls

I felt totally helpless and disempowered when looking at the many news items showing asylum seekers and refugees fleeing from horrendous circumstances in so many countries. I could not see what I/we in Wensleydale could do to help. I am too old and not suited to go to refugee camps to offer my services. Once they have reached this country the sensible place to house them is in towns. What could we offer?

Then developed the dream that we, who have so much here in Wensleydale, could share and give respite to asylum seekers and refugees by inviting them to come here for short stays, and show a warm welcome and befriend them. What happened exceeded all my dreams. Thank you to the Bainbridge Local Quaker Meeting for joining with me and making it a concern for all of us.

We contacted Darlington Assistance for Refugees (DAR) and I went over to meet some of them at their drop-in centre. There I met a young girl, K, who was so very excited at the prospect of seeing a dog and some fields that I could see how it could give them a bit of relief from their circumstances. DAR identified a group of families of just over 20 individuals, and a few single men and women, who as asylum seekers are living temporarily in Darlington until their applications for sanctuary are processed.

It wasn't long before friends from the local community became interested and also offered to help. The vicar asked to be put on my group email list. Soon we had a team of helpers for the day, and cake makers. We asked The Cornmill Tea Room in Bainbridge to provide lunch, rented the Askrigg sports centre, and checked with the school about using the playing fields. DAR arranged for a coach and we paid for it. We at Bainbridge Quaker Meeting decided that we could afford to pay for the whole day out of our funds.

The Yorkshire Dales National Park got wind of it and offered activities for the children through their education and young people's officers. The Upper Wensleydale Sunday school got in touch with me the week before about identifying wild flowers in the meadow we were to take the asylum seeker families to see, and responded to my invitation to join us.

K was almost the first off the coach when they arrived and ran straight over to me for a hug. We gave them refreshments, the children got engaged in the YDNP activities – animal masks and badge making, collages from grasses and daisies - and it wasn't long before everyone felt relaxed and at ease. Lunch was vegetarian and well received. We ate and talked together both

inside and under the dappled shade of the trees in the grounds. The local children shared their bikes and toys and quickly made special friends.

Everyone joined us for a walk to a local farm, except for the few stalwart washers up, and James Hodgson of Lowlands Farm demonstrated sheep shearing by hand. The children fed the hens and could pick them up and stroke them. Then down across fields through the SSSI meadow to the river where we stopped and played on the stepping stones and watched one of the young men beat Dave Clark our vicar at pebble skimming!

It was too hot to stay long so we walked back for more cold drinks and cake, more activities and comfortable conversation. A spontaneous game of dodge ball was enjoyed by young and old, tiny and tall, before Gill Harrison of the Wensleydale Ice Cream in Thornton Rust arrived with pots of ice cream. They all thanked us in their own languages and walked down the drive, hugging and waving as they climbed back on the bus after a happy, relaxed, amazing day...

A big THANK YOU to the wider community for so unhesitatingly working with us to make the day a reality. It was such a wonderful joint effort and the teamwork and friendship from start to finish is what we in Wensleydale are so very good at. To see the asylum seeker children playing so happily with our local youngsters was a joy. My smile muscles were aching by the end of the day! Already many of you are using the words 'next time' . . .