

1st August 2020

Dear Corrymeela Supporter

My name is Olive Walls and I have been part of the group supported by Corrymeela set up to work with refugees and asylum seekers located in and around Magherafelt. Myself and my sister Veronica Wilson have been involved with our local church for years and as soon as I heard about this project with these women I wanted to get involved but I wasn't sure what I could do to help them.

I tried to get as many people from my community to engage in this project but they just didn't feel brave enough to go into a room with vulnerable individuals who have been displaced through war and conflict. I must admit it is a hard thing to do even though we have lived through conflict for many years ourselves.

Initially, I was very apprehensive, wondering what I had to offer these women, would I say or do the right thing? But it was easy, they made it easy, they just needed me to sit and listen, to hear them, to be present with love and compassion. There was a lot of sadness. The women in the group didn't know each other but as they relaxed they started engaging with each other which was brilliant to see.

Behind the sadness, these women were traumatised. Their whole world, their families, everything they knew had been torn apart by conflict, coupled with the fact that they were trying to adapt to this new and very different life in mid Ulster.

But they showed up and they came back every week, they wanted our help and support. Communication was difficult but with Denise's and the interpreter's help they kept talking.

The difference over the 70 weeks was amazing, their confidence grew, they shared stories and their culture, demonstrating their skills and expertise for crafting and cooking.

The trip to Corrymeela was challenging for many in the group, even the simple act of getting on a bus, caused concern and anxiety. One lady who was very quiet, very traumatised, came out of her shell in Corrymeela but unfortunately with the COVID19 pandemic, she has become quite withdrawn again.

We kept in contact during lockdown. Like a lot of us, they too have found it very difficult. They are missing interaction, the physical connection they built up, they are sad and some are experiencing higher levels of depression which is concerning. Many of them have become more withdrawn and in some cases, the little bit of English they had learned has been lost as they are not using it as much at home.

Veronica and I are still doing what we can to support this extraordinary group of women. We asked them what they wanted, how could we help them? They are very much into their music, dance and movement so they have asked for zumba or exercise classes and they are also doing some relaxation work, including Yoga, over Zoom. They also want to continue the cooking, arts and crafts classes and demonstrations and of course they want English lessons.

When Denise told me that they were sending out an appeal to Corrymeela supporters, I wanted to help in any way I could. I hope that you too will find it in your heart to help by making a donation, whatever you can afford, to ensure Corrymeela's continued support for more groups like these.

Kind Regards  
Olive