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'My family lived 18 years in an empty hospital. I don't want anyone to feel like this'

Domenica Pecoraro
Kent Refugee
Project Officer

Working for stigmatised minorities has always been my professional call. The drive. . . I can't explain it rationally, but I always felt guided towards the improvement of life for people who are regarded as hopeless, that no one wants to work for.

Working for the diocese is a great honour, and because my post is paid for by people in churches, this makes me feel an instrument for the Anglican Church.

My post has been largely funded by donations from churches within the diocese of Canterbury, and beyond. The Bishop of Dover's Advent Justice Appeal has so far raised more than £61,000. It's still possible to donate to the appeal via the Just Giving page [www.justgiving.com/bishopsadventappeal2015].

It's fantastic, working with really good people. It's a big commitment for me — a big opportunity to learn. I hope to be doing a great job.

I've extensive experience as a senior projects officer at an educational resource centre for Bangladeshi female migrants in London, and I'm currently completing a Master's degree in social-research methods at the University of Kent.

I've been working for Muslim organisations as well. It doesn't matter who I'm working for professionally, because what I'm looking for is the cause. The diocese of Canterbury wants to work tangibly for refugees, and I'm privileged to work with them in a lovely environment, to learn a great deal from them, and from the beneficiaries of the projects.

Maybe my drive to help comes from my upbringing. When I was growing up, we felt as a community a bit stigmatised.

In November 1980, my community in Salerno, in the Campania [Italy], was shattered by an earthquake. Lots of people lost their houses, and it took 20 years to rebuild the community; so there were lots of people in temporary accommodation, or occupying illegally some empty buildings. They were somehow regarded as something less than human.

I felt a lack of social engagement with this: children left without social workers, people without electricity in winter, rents going up because of a shortage of houses, and a spark came into me. My family ended up living 18 years in an empty hospital. I don't want anyone to feel like this.

I applied to this post driven by the opportunity to make a difference in the life of newly arrived asylum-seekers and refugees. I've been appointed, but my job is starting in

September. For now, I've written a blog for Refugees' Week, and I'm attending a conference on migration and refugees, looking at the legal support available.

My role will be to help maintain the relationships that have already been made by the diocese, with local and national organisations working with refugees, as well as seek out and develop new partnerships. I'll also help source and connect volunteers from within the parishes to refugee projects, and identify venues where partners can deliver hospitality and training to refugees.

I love networking, and bridging people together for a good cause. And I highly value grass-roots work, because it has the potential to enhance the quality of life of everyone involved in the process. This results in strengthened communities.

Every diocese is responding to the situation as best they can. As the Bishop of Dover, Trevor Willmott, has said, the Kent Refugee Project Officer post affords us with the opportunity to move beyond well-meaning short-term fixes, towards something more intentional and sustained. I am sure that, in future, more initiatives such as this will follow where the need arises.

As Kent is a main gateway into the UK, Kent's council services have been particularly stretched since the start of the migrant crisis last summer. This is due, in part, to the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who have entered the country here and remain in the care of Kent County Council. The Kent Refugee Action Network and Migrant Help UK are two leading organisations, among others, offering practical help locally. They've also been integral to developing this new post.

Refugees arrive in lorries illegally, and find themselves in assessment centres. Young refugees are put in foster care and wait for their application for refugee status to be processed. Then they have to go through the process again when they are adults. That makes their life unsettled, because they are not sure if they are going to stay. This also puts a toll on services, accommodation, foster families. Kent is looking after these people the best they can, but there's a need for more funding, and more help at local level.

The diocese is exploring how it can further support the migrants and volunteers based on the northern French coast through the churches there. Discussions are currently taking place with the diocese in Europe and the Roman Catholic diocese of Arras, with which Canterbury diocese has had a long friendship.

Christian communities have been very engaged in offering support to refugees, in both Kent and elsewhere. This has included providing donations when needed, working with local organisations to offer welcome and mentoring, and, of course, through their prayers.

The Communities and Partnerships Framework has compiled five ways in which Christians in the diocese of Canterbury can respond to the continuing crisis: act, serve, get informed, campaign and advocate, and pray. Everyone can contribute the best they can. Everything counts as important.

Refugees from poverty need different kinds of support, but not less support. Poverty is a mode through which violence is exercised. Being forced to leave everything



behind and to start a new life in a different country is painful and scarring. People who have experienced any manifestation of violence need targeted support to overcome what happened to them. Additionally, they need support in learning a new language and in adjusting to the fabric of our society.

We can all do better and do more. The Government's work with local authorities is crucial to ensure that they are properly resourced to offer asylum-seekers and refugees the accommodation and care they need.

My first experience of God was a feeling of being protected and guided, and I still have it now.

I grew up in a working-class family in Salerno, and I have two older brothers. We are all very close.

Much to my parents' and friends' surprise, I married a doctor. We moved to the UK in 2002, and we now have two beautiful daughters.

My husband graduated from the University of Naples, but wanted to train as a surgeon here. Italy is a beautiful place to live in — and Britain is a land of meritocracy: we believe that if we work hard, we will ultimately succeed. And there are good flights back. . .

There is this blaming game on migrants, but I believe that informed people know that Britain gains a lot from skilled and unskilled labour migration. When times are tough, it's always tempting to blame other people; but statistics show that migrants cost very little in comparison with the average British citizen.

There is anxiety, definitely. There is also the part played by the media, which can accentuate fear.

I believe Islam is a religion of peace, and that all extremism is harmful, in any shape. We have an opportunity to develop a global solidarity, because it's a problem that needs to be

seen as a global responsibility. We've seen the Pope recently meeting with Islamic leaders to promote inter-religious dialogue, saying that religion should unite us, not divide.

My daughters' laughter is definitively the best sound in the world.

My family's values of acceptance, and their acts of giving without expecting anything in return, have shaped the way I am today. My father-in-law has been to me an example of Christian spirituality embedded in everyday life.

I can't recall a single book that has not given me food for thought. Works by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and intellectuals such as Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, among others, have guided my understanding of society.

I try not to get angry: there is so much blessing in my life.

I'm happiest when I am surrounded by the love of my family and friends.

I pray to God for guidance on how to be a better person every day of my life.

If I was locked in a church for a few hours, I'd choose to be with Mary Magdalene. I always felt bonded with her because, on a personal level, she has been one of the women who has been closest to Jesus; and it would be a good occasion to share our life experience as women as well. She has also embodied the cause of us women in society, especially when you feel rejected by some parts of society, but welcomed by God in Jesus.

Domenica Pecoraro was talking to Terence Handley MacMath.

www.canterburydiocese.org/refugee-tool-kit

I NEVER quite get used to it, the static nature of today's countryside. Villagers such as John Clare were elaborately seasonal. Every month, every day almost, brought its special tasks, and he could describe them, as the seasons followed each other in their traditional order. But now they'll be sowing and reaping; certainly, one would have to be alert to catch them. Otherwise, there's no sound other than that of birds or traffic. Wonderfully, there's not ever this at Bottengoms Farm.

Today was a great event: the oil tanker found its way down the lane at seven in the morning, managing to turn on the mud equivalent of a ha'penny. The youthful driver was sanguine. I wasn't to worry. He could turn the vehicle on anything. I could smell the winter fuel in the summer air, and crushed wild flowers, and the enormous happiness of a full supply.

Not all that long ago, various walking women would call to me through the hedges: "Was I well? Wasn't it cold for June?" They expected I had heard of some drama. But, usually, I had not.

For hundreds of years, this outlying farm has heard very little of what went on a couple of miles away. I had put the postman himself quite a trek from the front door; to save him the tramp, I put the letters in the box. I was working in the orchard when we exchanged joyful good-mornings the other day, and he would say, "You have to sign for something." Long ago, there was a postman who, when holding on to a parcel would say, "Somebody loves you."

Even the Stansted planes seem to have changed route. But my neighbour's low-flying aircraft



word from Wormingford

Ronald Blythe muses on the joy of each and every sound

skims me, and the horses look up at me. All the roses are in flower, and they scent my small world.

A friend from Berlin is sprawled in a chair with the cats. I may look asleep, but I am wide awake inside my head; a chapter of a new book I should be writing is taking place. But, more importantly at this moment, I should be thinking of St Paul's voyage, for matins. It was Paul who took Christ's revolutionary teaching into the wide world, where they were soon suppressed. That world possessed a plethora of deities, but not one who was proclaimed the only god. It was why Caesar struck out.

I am often puzzled why people don't go to church. It is so beautiful — the music, the language. And, if I may say so, so caring. And, indeed, thinking of the bell-ringers, so skilful and so poetic. I'm thinking at

this moment of a Suffolk bell which is inscribed "Box of sweet honey, I am Michael's bell." Who was Michael? The man who left his bell to "talk" when he himself was silent.

Lately, the marsh nightingales have raised their voices, not in chorus, but in a kind of wild solo. Nightingales prefer thickets to woods, and quite enjoy a push lawnmower.

I hope that Jesus and his friends were able to sit in gardens, even Gethsemane before that immense tragedy, to listen to birdsongs and the wind in the fields. One listens more as one grows older and the sound of nature fills one's head.

My stream provides continuity. So everlasting is it that I have to remind myself to listen. It pursues the route through chalk and gravel, tree roots and London clay, until it finds the river and finally the sea. It is deep and solemn under our bridge where the Suffolk-Essex travellers splash through it and where we tied up our boats near the kingfishers.

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