

Nicci's journey: A story of humanity in Calais

In this issue of W4W you'll read about how we've been celebrating compassion this week as part of Refugee Week, so we are humbled to be able to share this account of how a group of 14 teachers/educators from Warwickshire embarked on a life-changing journey to Calais volunteering for Care 4 Calais organisation.

Nicci Burton (Executive Head Teacher of Federation: Bedworth Heath Nursery School and Atherstone Nursery School) was one of the volunteers and shares her experience which demonstrates the spirit of empathy, unity, and the transformative impact that volunteering can have on both volunteers and refugees alike.

The volunteer experience

Sharing why she decided to volunteer Nicci said: "I wanted to do this for a long time, but my own children were at an age where I wasn't quite ready to leave them for a weekend. They're now 12 and 10 years old, and I sat them down one day and asked what they thought about me heading to Calais to volunteer. They responded with an encouraging 'Yeah, go for it! You've got to do this Mum and make a difference.' Their words touched my heart. It made me realise that we have a responsibility to show our younger generations how to be kind and how to show compassion to those who most need it. A little bit of our time can make such a significant difference."

Accompanied by a diverse group of volunteers, including teachers, local authority workers, and a photographer, Nicci set off for Calais. Their first task was to roll up their sleeves and started sorting donated items, packing food parcels, and making sure the van was ready for distribution. "The atmosphere was something else, with volunteers from Germany, the Netherlands, and students from across the world working in perfect harmony." said Nicci. At lunchtime, they all sat down together, sharing a meal prepared by some of the volunteers. It became a special moment, building a sense of community among this diverse group.



Connecting with refugees

"In the afternoon on the Saturday, we went out to a bit of a pop-up camp. As soon as we arrived, the refugees knew where to come. We set up a football pitch, chess games, hairdressing station, bike mending station, music area, charging points and a drinks biscuit station. And then once they could see we were set up, about 150 refugees came over from different directions. They knew that this was a safe place to be."

"I felt an instant connection with the refugees," Nicci recalled "Despite our language barriers, we communicated through gestures, smiles and basic words in different languages. It was a reminder that compassion and empathy transcend words."

Nicci discovered that the refugees encompassed a wide range of ages, from 17 to 50. They were real people with stories, dreams, and an unrelenting yearning for a life free from the horrors of war and conflict. "Meeting the refugees face to face shattered the stereotypes that is portrayed in the media," Nicci explained. "They were not just statistics; they were human beings with stories, dreams, and hopes for a better future."

"One refugee shared his dream of coming to the UK, saying, "I believe in the unity and compassion of the British people. I hope to find safety and a chance to rebuild my life there. I want to work and I want to be safe".

A glimpse into the lives of refugees

"One of the most profound moments for me was during the clothing distribution," Nicci shared. "Handing out something as simple as trousers, I realised how even the smallest choices meant the world to them. It reminded me of the daily struggles they face and the resilience they possess." Charging their phones, fixing their bicycles, and enjoying a brief respite from their harsh realities brought them joy. At the end of the day, they would go their separate ways to their respective camps. The majority of them lived in the woods or on the industrial site.



Dunkirk Camp: A different experience

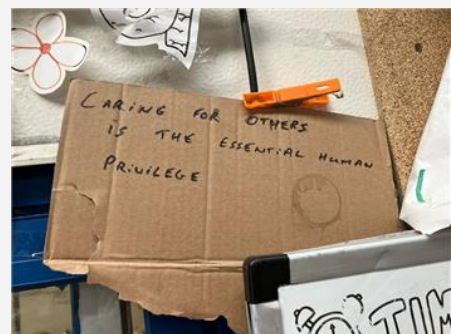
On the second day, Nicci and her group visited the Dunkirk camp, where they encountered a slightly tense atmosphere. "It was more challenging for me, especially because I saw children there. Working in Early Years seeing children in the camps

that should be playing with their peers in a nursery, broke my heart. Witnessing families having to make difficult choices was hard. Families were forced to make decisions, but it wasn't really a choice because they were escaping terrible conditions. They were doing their best to protect their families from harm. We set up there, but since there were so many different cultures in that one camp, and everyone was hoping for a chance to get on a boat (to reach a safe place), there was tension. It was a more difficult environment to be in.”

“One interaction stands out in my memory. I sat with a little girl whose father didn't speak English. They had fled from Afghanistan, and her mother's English was limited. However, this five-year-old girl had learned English from YouTube and Disney films. They had left their home due to the ongoing fighting and the fear that their daughter might be taken or harmed. They were worried about her education and future. The little girl was so lively and full of enthusiasm. She should have been in school, not sitting in a camp with no clear future pathway. It was clear why they had gone through such a long and difficult journey. When I told her mother this, she said they would do everything they could to keep their daughter safe.”

“The little girl drew a picture of Rapunzel from the film Tangled, and we talked about it and we shared laughter. She wanted me to add on to her drawing too. She just wanted to practise speaking English. For her, having a moment in the camp where she could play and have fun was truly amazing. I told her I worked in two nursery schools and she said I could take a photo of her drawing back to my nursery schools to share with the children. It was harder to walk away from the camp at the end of the day, knowing the difference you can make in a few hours by creating a safe space”

“Refugees are humans, experiencing awful experiences in their lives and we must not forget that. If it was me in their shoes I would hope that people would show me kindness and warmth”



Sharing the story

“The experience in Calais had a profound impact on me, and as soon as I returned, I shared my story with my staff team, my family, and my friends. I also applied to join Care for Calais in my local area, to continue volunteering and supporting their work.

"I believe in instilling kindness, community, and empathy in our children from a young age. At my school, we already focus on these values through various initiatives like supporting homeless charities and food banks. Now we are exploring ways to support refugees as well. By impacting the lives of children at the age of 2, 3 and 4,

we hope to shape a future generation that is compassionate and advocates for justice. It's crucial for young people to have a voice and challenge the injustices.

“We must continue to challenge stereotypes, engage in conversations, and show compassion. These individuals have experienced horrific conditions, often resulting in mental health issues. We cannot dehumanize them; we need to provide them with love, care, kindness, and support.”

“In addition to volunteering abroad, there are ways to make a difference within our own communities. Simple acts of kindness, such as a smile or a warm welcome, can have a significant impact on someone who has faced hostility and adversity. Every little bit helps, and if more people dedicate their time and effort to these causes, it can bring about meaningful change. We need to show refugees that we care and that they are not alone. It's time to challenge the negative narratives and create a more compassionate and inclusive society.

"Refugee Day holds a special place in my heart now," Nicci expressed. "It's a day to celebrate the courage and resilience of refugees, to amplify their voices, and to advocate for a world that embraces compassion and inclusion"