

ISSUE

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Visas needed for exiled journalists

EXODUS

Produced by refugees and people seeking asylum for the community

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Exodus is a non-profit magazine produced by a small group of volunteers to give a voice to refugees seeking a new life in the UK. Exodus team: Jean-Marc Hall, Souran Soleimani, Efram Hassona, Helen Ball, Martin Trepte
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Stand firm against hate and division

THE aim of Exodus is to tell the real stories of those seeking sanctuary in the UK to the wider community and also amplify the work of those seeking to help them. This includes refugees, migrants, humanitarian groups and all who collaborate with the same focus and aspirations that we commonly share.

At a time when hate and division appears to have won at the ballot box, it is important that Exodus continues to connect with the marginalised and vulnerable.

When ex-Tory MP and now Reform Mayor of Lincolnshire Andrea Jenkyns made the comment that people seeking asylum in the UK should be forced to live in tents, suggesting: “if tents are good enough for them in France, then they are good enough for them in the UK”, surely elected representatives have lost their moral compass. Why, as a society, would we want to prolong people’s suffering?

More recently, Prime Minister Keir Starmer triggered a backlash over his xenophobic comment that the UK risked becoming an “island of strangers”, echoing the language of Enoch Powell and drawing accusations of appeasing the populist right to gain support, adding that we need

to “take back control of our borders”.

Like so many right-wing politicians on the questions of asylum and migration, Jenkyns has demonstrated she doesn’t have the most basic knowledge or understanding of the issue.

Those claiming asylum in France and who are destitute are provided with accommodation by the French authorities. Those who don’t claim asylum in France are not, and there is a multitude of reasons for those who take the risk to come to the UK.

Last year, France received 162,000 asylum claims compared to 84,000 in the UK. Figures that the right-wing press fail to print fearing a backlash from people with a moral conscience.

By reading the stories in all our issues of Exodus, you will hopefully become more informed, and we will continue to collaborate with the great work being done by humanitarian groups around the country.

Right wing lies and misinformation are a disgrace to our intelligence.

Stand firm in your belief for a fair and safe world free from dangerous populism.

Jean-Marc Hall
Exodus project co-ordinator

Refugee lullabies highlight pain of separation

Picture: Tyler Nix, Unsplash

A ‘LULLABY Concert’ showcasing eight original lullabies with the words of refugees set to music, was held recently in Reading.

The compositions were by Nick Hayes of The Irene Taylor Trust, and performed by musicians from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

The Lullaby Project invites participants to work with professional musicians to write a personal lullaby for their separated child or loved one.

The aim is to strengthen the bond between parent and child through a creative arts activity. The lyrics derive from a conversation between artistic directors and the participants, describing thoughts about their loved ones, the pain of separation, difficult journeys and hopes for a safer future.

This peek through a window into the closest of family ties, once set to music, proved a powerful combination.

One of the lullaby lyricists, K, is a dentist, originally from Yemen. His

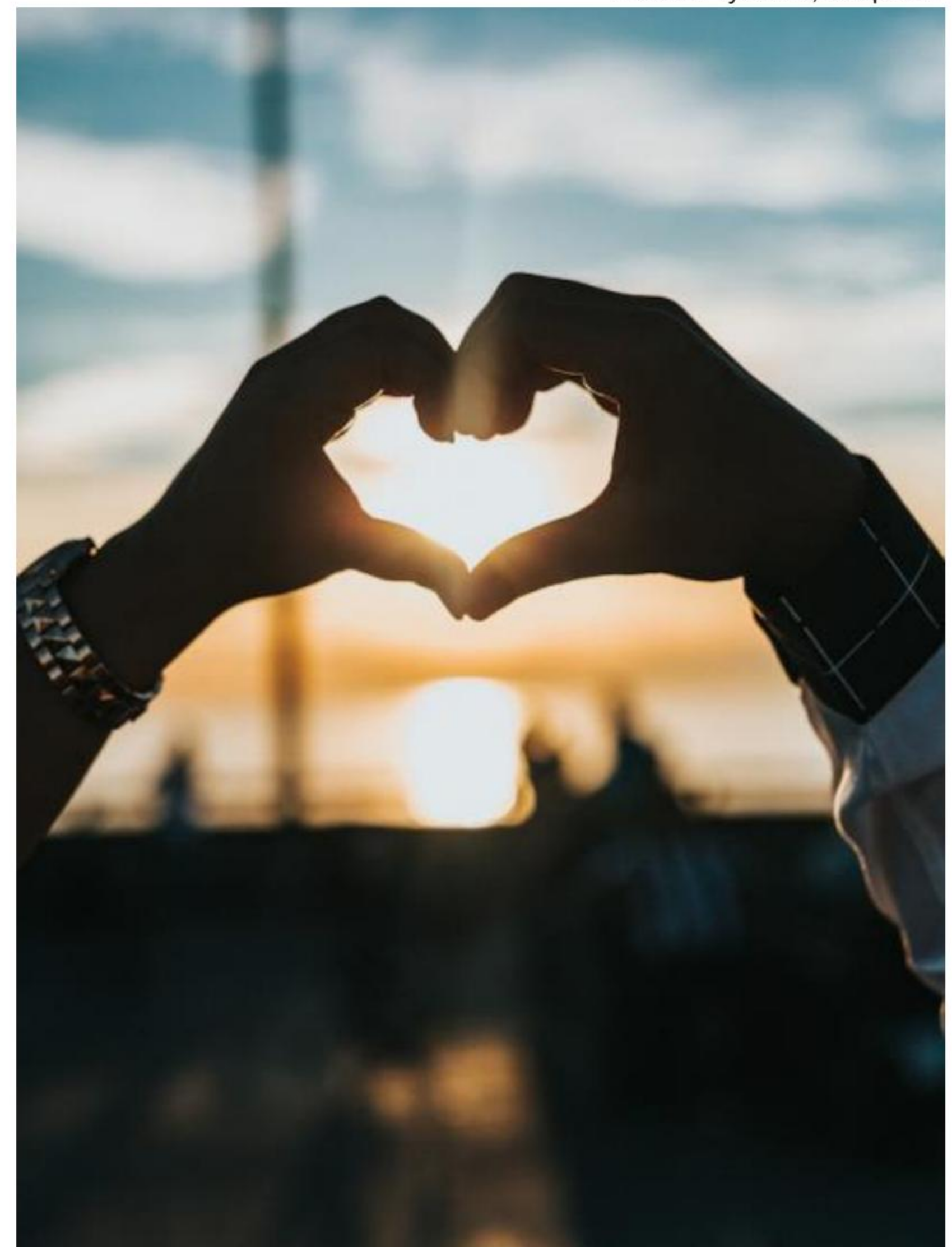
lullaby describes his two sons, one vivacious, one shy and retiring, the music reflecting their personalities.

K’s pride in his sons shines through, as he describes how he regrets missing them growing up, misses hugging and playing with them, and asks them for forgiveness, explaining he is doing it all to bring them to safety.

The Mayor of Earley, Cllr Mike Smith, said a few words of welcome to the refugees and people seeking asylum attending.

He was visibly emotional, saying that he had not fully appreciated the experiences and sacrifices made by displaced fathers until he heard these lullabies.

He said: “Thank you for that opportunity. Thank you to all who collaborated on this incredible project, especially Sara Lee and Nick Hayes of the Irene Taylor Trust, Hannah Foakes of RPO, Resettlement CIC and Care4Calais coordinators Jennifer Bryce and Mairead Panetta.”



Migration conference asks: 'how do we get out of this mess?'



Attendees at the Migrant Voice conference (photo: Migrant Voice)

THE 15th anniversary of the founding of Migrant Voice was celebrated with a two-day conference in London at the National Education Union office in February.

With a packed house of delegates and visitors, the conference included presentations, discussion and workshops ranging from Immigration Policy to the Art of Campaigning.

The opening discussion set the context, exploring the state of the migration debate and how we got here and asking how do we get out of this mess?

Migration continues to be weaponised for political gain and toxic rhetoric, and scapegoating of migrants fuels dangerous violence and riots.

Far right movements are strengthening, while mainstream political parties are moving towards more restrictive policies, undermining rights and demoralising the lives of migrants and people seeking sanctuary. Speaker, Professor Nando Sigona, Director of the Institute for Research into International Migration and Superdiversity spoke passionately about how migrant

voices are heard and seen in the coverage of migration issues in media and political narratives today.

A panel discussion looked at how political decisions can create injustices leading to individuals ending up in limbo outside the justice system and how campaigners

'Migration continues to be weaponised for political gain, and toxic scapegoating of migrants fuels violence and riots'

can overcome the challenges to achieve justice.

The 'Meet the Press' workshop focused on how to engage with the media, hearing from journalists from the Guardian, the Times and openDemocracy, while a

panel discussion looked at the global fight for the rights of migrant workers and the government's current visa systems and costs obstructing the ability to work.

Sofi Taylor, the TUC General Council lead on Migration, chaired the discussion delving into how current visa systems and costs can create exploitation and uncertainty.

Perhaps the most engaging discussion was 'Anti-racism through education', with delegates from 'Show racism the Red Card', 'Action for race Equality', and the 'Runnymede Trust'.

The panel discussed the need for including anti-racist and migration content in the school curriculum and in community and public spaces as one of the ways of addressing and preventing the kinds of rhetoric and violence seen last summer.

The clear, overall message of this 15th anniversary celebratory conference was that of reflection, solidarity and the need to stand up and to speak out when we witness injustice.

Jean-Marc Hall



Children from a local hostel for asylum seekers had the chance to try out rowing thanks to the initiative from Reading School.

A warm welcome at Reading's very first School of Sanctuary

I WONDER if you have heard of the Schools of Sanctuary scheme? Sitting within the City of Sanctuary scheme, it celebrates schools' commitment to creating a culture of welcome, understanding and belonging to those forced to flee.

Currently more than 600 schools have gained the School of Sanctuary Award, with another 600 actively involved in this work.

Reading School has become the first school in the Reading area to achieve this prestigious award. I met with Assistant Headteacher Tom Evans, who described their journey towards becoming a Sanctuary School. Reading School is an all-boys grammar school in the heart of Reading – it is celebrating its 900th anniversary this year with a number of special events. The school has an ethos of supporting others within the community, with strong outreach programmes supporting children from local

primary schools. Its motto 'Learn, Lead, Serve' is at the heart of its work, characterised by sharing resources and giving time to serve others.

For many years, it has allowed pupils beyond the school to benefit from enrichment activities, such as rowing and football, as well as improving academic achievement, for example in a maths and English mentoring programme.

Tom explained the school community had been deeply touched by the war in Ukraine – they soon began gathering essential resources, which included 3.5 tonnes of fish, 2.5 tonnes of meat, two tonnes of baby food, 25 boxes of sanitary products, 300 sleeping bags, 300 can openers and 1,250 bags for life. Headteacher Chris Evans drove a van packed with donations to Ukraine himself. There is a super video to watch showing

their [Ukrainian Appeal](#). They then decided to explore what more could be done to support the education of Ukrainian children, many of whom arrived in the local area on their own, with all the trauma that leaving their war-torn homeland entailed.

The school was able to offer support in a number of practical ways; it created an exchange scheme which allowed children to receive an education and gain qualifications in the UK while also logging on to learn in their native Ukrainian to maintain those relationships and also work towards Ukrainian qualifications.

They have even accepted a couple of female students, which is unusual in an all-boys school. They continue to support the local Ukrainian community including ceremonies to mark significant dates.

Inspired by the success of this work, the school has also begun working in local hostels and hotels that accommodate asylum seekers, offering enrichment experiences such as rowing and other sports.

This has its challenges, as that community is obviously quite transient; however, they are committed to offering opportunities to inspire and educate those beyond their school walls.

Tom is keen to maintain and develop the school's work – we wish them well as they live out their values and enable education and opportunity to benefit the wider community, which actively welcomes and includes those who are seeking sanctuary in the UK.



An art exhibition by one of the female Ukrainian students was inspirational to the whole school community.

‘We sat in tearful silence, just holding hands across the table’

I FIRST met Aisha at an English conversation class at an asylum hotel in Berkshire.

A middle-aged woman from Sudan, it was her first time in the drop-in class, organised by a Care4Calais volunteer group.

Aisha had been in the hotel for two weeks with her 16-year-old son after fleeing her home on the outskirts of Khartoum and crossing the border into Ethiopia and on to Kenya.

We sat at a table, together with a group men of various ages, all wanting to practise their English. It was decided to split the class into smaller groups, and I found myself sitting facing Aisha.

Her English was good, but I realised quickly that she was not here just for the class. I asked if she was happy to be here in England and where she was from, and I felt awkward with my clumsy questions.

This was not an occasional, spontaneous conversation you usually have with a stranger. This woman and mother sitting facing me had escaped horrific violence and had endured a perilous journey to find sanctuary here in the UK.

She began to tell me her story. The escape from her village with other friends and neighbours, packed tightly in a mini-bus, the long journey to the Ethiopian border and the fear of being stopped by the armed men that had already attacked their village.

It was then that she hesitated, stumbled. Her voice dropped to a whisper, and I leaned across the table to listen.

“My parents were killed last year, and my two elder sons were shot by the soldiers who came into the village.”

“When?” I asked.



“Two weeks before we left Sudan,” she replied.

It was then that I realised why she had come to the conversation class. Not just to practise her English, but to unburden her story. She needed to release her emotions

and share her grief. We sat holding hands across the table, both depleted of conversation and tearful.

Aisha sat in silence, and I asked her if she would come back next week.

Jean-Marc Hall

Monologues expose the truth of hidden and cruel inequality

“ASYLUM Monologues” is a short film (about 15 minutes) from human rights theatre company Ice & Fire with first-hand testimonies (performed by actors), exploring some reasons people seek refuge and the challenges they face going through the UK’s asylum system.

It is a hard watch, particularly at times, so take care when viewing. At the original performance, the audience gave this feed-

back: ‘It really brought home just how easy it is to demonise asylum seekers and just how ignorant a lot of people are about the issues, including myself’.

‘Even those of us who volunteer with refugees will rarely, likely never, hear a large portion of someone’s story. In Ice & Fire’s performance, the chilling truth of the hidden and cruel inequality affecting asylum seekers in British society is laid bare,

in front of you; in a safe comfortable space, I heard the truth of people’s lived experience, the mental trauma, the physical trauma, the heart-tearing decisions and the scars this leaves behind. The only thing you want to do having heard their narratives is stand up and change the system’.

To watch Asylum Monologues go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00kpcwCChsQ>

Are unscrupulous and corrupt lawyers exploiting the vulnerable?



Photo: Christopher Bill, Unsplash

THE experience of asylum seekers navigating the legal system raises serious concerns about how easily they can be exploited by unscrupulous legal ‘professionals’.

Just one example has been highlighted by Stephen, a volunteer who supported a family of asylum seekers – now thankfully granted refugee status. He believes they spent two unnecessary years in an asylum hotel thanks to the ‘incompetence’ of their lawyer.

“With a competent lawyer their case could have been decided within six months, probably much less. So they have wasted two years – and the taxpayer has spent a fortune hosting them,” said Stephen.

“I became involved with the case last year after their asylum was refused. Finally, at the end of January, their lawyer submitted an appeal document which I had personally written - because I knew it was his incompetence that had got them re-

fused. Within three weeks, the Home Office had decided to withdraw its refusal.”

Stephen explained the lawyer the family used had been recommended by a

‘How many other asylum seekers are being gouged by immigration ‘lawyers’ who are already being paid to undertake legal aid work by the taxpayer’

friend. His card described him as a ‘barrister’ but his name did not appear on the Barrister’s Register.

He was listed by the Law Society along with his Solicitor’s Regulation Authority (SRA) identification, but there was no rec-

ord of him when searched for on the SRA website.

Stephen continued: “So his legal status seems unclear. He must, presumably, have some basic legal competence to be able to be granted access to the asylum system as a legal representative. But the really worrying thing here is not his competence but the possibility of corruption.

He explained that when the father first met the lawyer, much of the discussion was about his financial position.

“After the meeting, he was escorted out of the building by the interpreter into the anonymity of an underground car park, away from CCTV cameras, where he was told that things could be ‘speeded up’ if he could provide £500 in cash. He was shocked, and declined,” said Stephen.

“When he told us, later on, we wondered if the lawyer was party to this request for cash, or whether it was scam

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operated solely by the interpreter. But the interpreter and the lawyer have been working together for more than a decade, and, after his refusal to pay, his case progressed very slowly. It was almost ten months after his arrival in the UK that the documents relating to his asylum claim were uploaded to the Home Office.”

Stephen said those documents were ridiculously poor and riddled with errors.

“They should never have been submitted. Unsurprisingly, that led the Home Office to delay while it interviewed the father twice about the errors and inconsistencies. He did not realise how shoddy the documents had been so he didn’t understand why the Home Office was asking many of the questions it did – and so could not answer properly. In June, he received his refusal letter.

“The appeal statement I wrote – and I am not a lawyer – led to the Home Office withdrawing its refusal within three weeks. So it’s difficult to avoid the conclusion that the ‘lawyer’ representing the family was incompetent, or, worse, corrupt.

“I do wonder if his lawyer’s negligence in filing the initial claim was calculated to create a refusal and therefore a chance to earn additional legal aid from the appeal.

“One wonders how many other asylum seekers are being gouged by immigration ‘lawyers’ who are already being paid to undertake legal aid work by the taxpayer.

“There must be a way of ensuring that asylum seekers have access to competent and honest legal professionals.”

Advice to help you avoid the sharks when choosing a lawyer



Picture: Efe Yagiz Soysal, Unsplash

CHOOSING a good and trustworthy solicitor to navigate the minefield of UK immigration law, where a spelling mistake can lead to a rejected application, is essential. The best advice is, if possible, to do your research.

Accreditations, qualifications and expertise
Accreditations include being registered with the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) and, where possible, with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner. They should also have Immigration and Asylum Law Accreditation with The Law Society.

Check the firm’s website and read about the firm’s experience. How long have they been practising? Do they have immigration specialists in their team? Are there any case studies or testimonials?

Reputation and reviews

Past clients are always the best advocates for law firms and solicitors. Read through the testimonials on the website but also check out review platforms that the firm appears on. The best, unfiltered review platform is Google. Everyone’s experience is unique but reviews provide an overview of the type and level of service you would receive.

Cost and fees

The average fee for Home Office applications is around £1,100. The price range for immigration solicitors or immigration firms can vary. Clients are often charged by the hour, and the total cost can vary from £1,000 to £10,000.

Costs depend on the complexity of the case and/or the legal professional or firm you instruct. Law firms regulated by the SRA are required to be transparent with their pricing structure, meaning costs should be found on firm websites.

Communication and languages spoken
Check a firm’s website to see if it states if any additional languages are spoken. Immigration law can be complicated to explain, so it’s important to have the opportunity for documents and processes to be translated in a way that both you and your immigration solicitor can understand. When choosing an immigration solicitor, it’s important that they are able to understand what you need and can explain it to you in a reassuring way.

Experience and success rate

As part of your research into choosing the right immigration solicitor or immigration law firm, it’s important to find out what their success rate is. If this information cannot be found on their website or by reading their client reviews, then ask them. You need to choose an immigration firm where you have a high chance of being successful.

The charity Migrant Help also runs a free 24-hour helpline accessible to all asylum seekers in the UK. Call 0808 8010 503. While it is able to give advice on rights and entitlements it cannot to provide legal advice or legal representation. But the charity can provide you with a list of qualified legal representatives.

Charity calls for emergency visa scheme for journalists in exile

THE last 12 months have been the deadliest year ever for journalists: 128 killed - a third of them freelancers. A near-record number were jailed - and the world is more unstable than at any time since 1945.

Charity the Rory Peck Trust (RPT), which supports freelance journalists across the world, is calling for the UK to introduce emergency visas for journalists who are at risk.

RPT Executive Director Jon Williams said: “Journalists are the canaries in the coal mine of democracy. When a country’s journalists are silenced, its people are too. When they are silenced, so too are the people they serve.

“Independent journalism gives us the facts we need to make key decisions – the foundation on which our freedoms rest. At the Rory Peck Trust, our mission is simple: to safeguard that flow of information To ensure that freelance journalists can gath-

‘Freedom depends on those brave enough to tell the truth and on all of us being brave enough to stand with them. All they ask is that we make it possible for them to continue’

er the facts and establish the truth, safely and without fear.”

He continued: “Last year, two thirds of those who came to us for help were journalists in exile, men and women forced to flee their homes simply for doing their jobs.

“And it’s not just us sounding the alarm. Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists all see the same stark trend.

“That is why, for the past year, we have led a coalition calling for the UK to act to introduce emergency visas for journalists at risk, as Germany, Canada, and Spain already have.”

Five years ago, the United Kingdom helped launch the Media Freedom Coali-



John Williams, executive director of the Rory Peck Trust, which is calling on the Government to introduce emergency visas for journalist at risk. (Photo: Rory Peck Trust)

tion. Its high level panel of legal experts urged the UK to create an emergency pathway for threatened journalists, declaring it would transform the global climate for press freedom. Five years on, the UK has failed to do so. And the world has grown darker.”

On World Press Freedom Day in May, the RPT launched a new campaign to fund a programme specifically for journalists in exile.

“One built around community, partnership, and opportunity to help them find their feet, rebuild their careers, and continue their essential work,” said John.

“These journalists are seeking a safe place from which to continue reporting, to

continue shining a light where darkness grows.

“And it is in our security national interest that they do so. Their sources, their investigations, their work often form the early warnings that keep us safe.

“The numbers are small. But the message we send by welcoming them that Britain remains a defender of press freedom is huge.

“Their journalism makes our world safer. All they ask is that we make it possible for them to continue.

“Freedom depends on those brave enough to tell the truth and on all of us being brave enough to stand with them.”

Martin Trepte

Refugees left vulnerable to impacts of Government's new eVisas

BIOMETRIC resident permits (BRPs), the accepted way for non-EU migrants to prove their right to enter and live in the UK, are being replaced with a digital visa scheme.

Campaigners have voiced concern and warned that the transition from biometric to eVisas could cause problems for older residents and those not technically confident.

Refugees and those seeking asylum are especially at risk of exposing their status to hacking.

The Home Office has yet to publish a data protection impact assessment and said it was reviewing previous assessments with an updated report still to be published.

Adding to the anxiety of those seeking asylum in hotels and Home Office accommodation, is the increase of Notice of Intents (NOI) being issued to new arrivals.

An NOI is a letter from the Government's Third Country Unit to an asylum claimant that informs them their claim may be inadmissible (under the 2021 inadmissibility rules), mostly because the individual has travelled through a 'safe country'.

The Government has postponed the eVisa deadline to June this year and nearly four million people who need to switch to eVisas have yet to do so. The scheme includes all non-EU migrants who are not British citizens or passport holders.

BRPs will no longer work as proof of immigration status after the deadline and people could be prevented from re-entering the UK from abroad without an eVisa.

Jean-Marc Hall

Additional information:
Chaminda Jayanetti (The Observer)

Caught in limbo by 'good character' trap

ON FEBRUARY 10, 2025, the UK government implemented significant changes to its 'Good Character' citizenship guidance. This new rule states that individuals who entered the UK 'illegally' or arrived through dangerous routes will typically be denied British citizenship.

This policy affects anyone applying for citizenship, regardless of how long ago they arrived. As a result, many refugees who obtained status through asylum claims, as well as those currently in the asylum system, will be impacted.

Tevin (name changed), a 29-year-old man from Ashton, Greater Manchester, embarked on a perilous journey across the English Channel to reach the UK. With no other options available, he crossed the border by boat, seeking safety.

After a nine-month wait since his arrival in Dover, his asylum request was finally accepted last October, filling him with hope for a stable future.

Mamadou (name changed), 45, has the same story of crossing borders. He has lived in the UK for more than six years and settled in Denton, Greater Manchester, with his wife and two teenage sons in June 2023. They reunited as a family at the end of the same year. Mamadou works tirelessly in the delivery service to support his family, navigating the challenges of life in a new country.

Both men, willing to share their experiences anonymously, dream of applying for UK citizenship. They long for safety and a genuine sense of belonging in their community. However, the new 'Good Character' rule poses a major obstacle. Mamadou regrets not applying sooner, having prioritised his family's needs and underestimated the significance of the process.

Confusingly, he finds himself in a situation where he cannot apply, while his family can. Meanwhile, Tevin feels frustrated, despite his sense of security in the UK. The aspirations of both men hang in the balance, trapped in the complexities of immigration policy.

Their concerns are shared by many. A growing chorus of voices from human rights organisations, charities, and politicians has



Picture: Caspar Rae, Unsplash

emerged in opposition to the new citizenship rule. Petitions were submitted to the Home Office. A legal challenge has also been filed against the 'Good Character' rules, which prohibit applicants with a history of illegal entry, according to VisaVerge. Critics argue that this policy violates international refugee laws and unfairly targets those seeking refuge, creating lasting barriers without proper scrutiny.

According to the Refugee Council, nearly 150 charities and faith leaders have come together to oppose this citizenship ban, urging the Home Secretary to reconsider a decision that could prevent tens of thousands of refugees from becoming British citizens. They call on the Government to honour the UK's longstanding tradition of welcoming refugees and to nurture a sense of community for all.

In Greater Manchester, a coalition of individuals and organisations dedicated to supporting refugees and asylum seekers has submitted a letter to the Home Secretary, advocating for a reversal of this policy. They stress the importance of celebrating those who wish to belong in the UK as full citizens.

As the pressure on the Government mounts, there is hope for a positive outcome. Although the new changes do not affect asylum applications or requests for indefinite leave to remain, they still cast a shadow over the futures of many.

For now, the 'Good Character' guideline leaves Tevin and Mamadou in a precarious situation, uncertain about what lies ahead.

Tamirat Astatkie



The theatre company breaking borders on and off the stage

IN A world where migration is often reduced to statistics and headlines, LegalAliens brings human stories to the stage—raw, unfiltered, and deeply personal.

This migrant-led theatre company, founded in 2012 by Italian-born Lara Parmiani, challenges the mainstream narrative on migration by giving migrants and refugees the platform to tell their own stories—not just as subjects, but as creators, producers, and performers.

Based in Tottenham, one of London's most diverse areas, LegalAliens operates at the intersection of art, activism, and community. With executive producer Amy Sze and lead facilitators Angela Poulima and Nada Sabet, the company crafts work that is as politically urgent as it is artistically ambitious.

Whether through bold productions, grassroots theatre workshops, or advocacy, LegalAliens is not just making theatre—it's changing who gets to make theatre.

LegalAliens' productions are more than

performances; they are acts of defiance against the silencing of migrant voices.

From 'Closed Lands'—a hard-hitting critique of border politics staged at VAULT Festival—to 'Ali in Wonderengland', which

'In an era where migration is often framed in fear and suspicion, LegalAliens offers something radical: humanity'

re-imagines Alice in Wonderland through the eyes of a young migrant, the company constantly pushes artistic boundaries.

Their latest project, 'Tugging at the Sea', brings together 20 refugees and migrants to explore society's obsession with

boats—an image that, for many, carries life-altering weight. With each production, LegalAliens dismantles stereotypes, moving beyond the oversimplified portrayals of migrants as either victims or threats. Instead, they create nuanced narratives that reflect the complexities, joys, and struggles of migration.

While their stage productions make waves in the theatre world, LegalAliens' Tottenham Project is making an impact on the ground. Since 2018, the company has offered free weekly theatre workshops for migrants and refugees, providing a space for self-expression, healing, and community-building.

"For many, our workshops are more than theatre classes—they're a vital support network," says Parmiani.

Participants range from asylum seekers and refugees to long-term migrants struggling with the isolation of displacement.

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LegalAliens is not just making theatre but changing who gets to make theatre

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The project has more than 40 regular attendees, with many referred by GPs, ESOL teachers, and caseworkers who recognise the classes' mental health benefits.

A, an Albanian asylum seeker, recalls: "I was scared at first. I was living in a hotel, very lonely. But I gave it a go — and loved it. Theatre now makes me feel happy. I look forward to my Mondays."

The impact extends far beyond confidence-building. LegalAliens' trauma-informed approach, which prioritises care, consent, and emotional safety, ensures that workshops become a space of belonging rather than interrogation.

Participants aren't asked to recount their traumas. Instead, they rediscover their voices through storytelling, movement, and collaboration.

K, a transgender asylum seeker from Singapore, shares: "They put me in a hotel with men. It was awful. At the theatre classes, everyone accepted me immediately — even people from countries where trans people are persecuted. It made me

feel safe." While the Monday sessions aren't professional training, some long-term participants have developed a passion for the craft. In response, LegalAliens launched advanced classes for those who have been part of the programme for at least 18 months.

Already, five participants have transitioned into facilitators, mentoring others in the same way they were once mentored.

For some, theatre has be-

come a lifeline — literally. Syrian refugee M recalls: "I was in a dark place when I joined the class. I came close to ending it... I used to play classical guitar but couldn't even hold it without shaking. Theatre saved my life. Literally."

What makes LegalAliens unique is its inter-culturality. It's not just a theatre space for refugees but a meeting ground for migrants from all walks of life — from recent asylum seekers to long-term EU residents.

In their workshops, an Italian grandfather might perform alongside a young Kurdish refugee, a Hong Kong migrant might collaborate with a Syrian artist. These moments shatter divisions and build genuine solidarity.

The company's commitment to inclusion extends to its structure: many of its facilitators and associate artists first came to LegalAliens as workshop participants.

By offering paid opportunities, training, and mentoring, the company ensures that those with lived experience of migration are at the forefront — not just as subjects, but as leaders shaping the future of theatre.

LegalAliens isn't just making theatre about migrants — it's changing who gets to make theatre. Their work is a testament to the power of representation, to the idea that those who have been spoken about for too long deserve the mic, the stage, and the spotlight.

In an era where migration is often framed in fear and suspicion, LegalAliens offers something radical: humanity.



Amnesty Central England Network

Refugee/Asylum Seeker Campaign Group

Webinar

Immigration Detention in the UK: What's going on?



Join us to be updated on this key current human rights issue; to hear first-hand from experts in the sector and those with lived experience; and to explore action that can be taken.

This webinar is open to everyone; you don't have to be an AI member to attend.

Thursday, 5 June 2025, 7.00 – 8.30 pm (online)

To attend please register at <https://tinyurl.com/bdd785sc>



Panel Chair
Steve Valdez-Symonds
Refugee and Migrant Rights
Programme Director,
Amnesty International UK



Jonathan Ellis
Project Director, Detention Forum



Emma Jones
Communication Coordinator,
Asylum Welcome, Keep Campsfield
Closed Coalition

Additional Panelist

An additional panelist will be talking about their lived experience of the immigration detention system



Webinar Chair
Tony Samuel
Co-Chair, Asylum Welcome

‘A perpetual life of uncertainty’

“DETENTION is the worst thing you can do to a human being, especially one who’s trying to survive. It is cruel.”

That’s Stella Shyanguya speaking. One experience of cruelty is bad enough; it’s twice as bad when you are detained after your life has already been disrupted and you move to what you thought was a safe haven.

It’s triple cruelty if, like Stella, you are detained because of a Home Office mistake.

The France-born, Kenya-raised and legally naturalised British citizen was wrongfully imprisoned in Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre.

If you are unclear about the difference between prison and detention, she will explain: “It feels the same — except that in prison you have a date for release. In a prison you are counting down the days, in a detention centre you are counting up.”

Personal restriction, discomfort, constant surveillance, lack of decision-making opportunity, the failure of the centre to provide the special diet needed for her health: it’s all distressing, and as she describes it, the suffering replays in her mind.

But perhaps worst of all is not knowing when you will be released, how long the horror will continue: “Fear of not knowing what is going to happen. You can’t even answer that basic question.”

It started when, in a deliberately-used policy (“I don’t know if it’s designed purposely to break you”), she was taken to the Centre at 2am: “Your mind is confused. You’re bewildered. You’re terrified. You feel somebody locking the door behind you: it’s a terrifying concept. You feel captured.”

After the capture, “You wake up every morning, waiting for a word.”

You are supposed to be given a monthly report that reveals whether you will continue to be detained or whether you will be released: “For four months I didn’t get that report.”

Your anxiety mounts. It starts to play with your mind.

The custody officers were intimidating, unsympathetic: “They’d make remarks like ‘Where are we deporting you to?’”

In more than nine months of detention, she says she attempted suicide four times and ended up in hospital.

‘Hopeless’ is the word she uses to describe what it is to be locked up. “It’s daunting. There were times when I thought, surely this is not how my life was meant to be.” Other detainees tried to help, “telling



Stella Shyanguya
(Photo: Migrant Voice)

me ‘It’s not the end. One day we’ll be out of here’. But you can’t imagine the ‘one day’. It’s a perpetual life of uncertainty. You can’t even plan for a week ahead, let alone a month or a year. All you can do is make a little plan for the next hour.

“It’s cruel.”

But this is Stella Shyanguya. Despite the hardships, the hopelessness, the cruelty of the system, she emerged as a fierce advocate, helping others fight their cases even while detained. Her story has been described as ‘a David-and-Goliath tale of survival, solidarity, and the human dignity at stake in the government’s new immigration strategy’.

How did she do it?

First, “You adopt a thick skin. Then I

made the library my friend. I read every legal book on detention, immigration law and every book geared to education.”

She quickly earned the trust of the other detainees: “The sense of other ladies depending on me gave me purpose. I aligned myself with helping people get out of detention.”

Organisations monitoring detention reckon she helped at least 60 women with their cases.

Finally, she herself went to court and won her appeal. But even when the court ordered her release “they left me for another five days. and then I was given bail conditions. I couldn’t leave my home. I lived in Huddersfield but had to report in Leeds; I was not offered any transport and had to rely on a friend.”

She lost a lot of friends, because as she says, “It’s hard for people to distinguish prison from detention. When people see you’ve been in prison, regardless of what for, you become a pariah.”

Detention left other marks, too.

“It still affects me day to day. I have missed so many milestones in my life [not only from detention but because of years of battling the Home Office]. I have got grandchildren I’ve not seen.” She was unable to fly to Kenya for the funerals of a brother and her mother.

“I’m allowed to study and work but I have not been given any travel documents so haven’t been able to leave the country for 20 years.”

Last year the Home Office accepted she had been wrongly detained and compensated her, “but no amount of money can replace all the things you’ve missed in life. You cannot put a price on taking away a chunk of somebody’s life.”

By Daniel Nelson

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Detention: the facts

IMMIGRATION detention is the practice of locking foreign nationals in detention centres while their immigration status is being resolved.

It is an administrative process, not a criminal justice procedure.

The UK is the only country in Europe where there is no limit on how long people can be detained.

Nearly 20,000 people entered immigration detention in the UK in the year ending September 2024.

More than 50 people died in Home Office accommodation, including detention centres, in 2024, up from 11 in 2023.

Immigration detention is a proven cause of significant mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Most people detained in immigration are, eventually, released, demonstrating the levels of unwarranted detentions taking place.

Picture: Ricardo Gomez Angel, Unsplash



‘I just want to be in a place I can feel safe’

HER eyes filled with tears as we sat on opposite sides of the table.

We’d agreed to leave the hotel where she had been a resident since her arrival in the UK 12 months earlier, to find a quiet café to conduct the interview.

Maria (name changed) was worried about being overheard and didn’t feel safe.

She had arrived in the UK from Morocco, escaping a life that had a tormented past. Maria had been working as a personnel banker in Casablanca and was familiar with working as an international trader. Her childhood was spent in a town on the outskirts of Casablanca with her parents and her younger brother and sister.

But there was a dark side to her life. At the age of seven, she was raped by her uncle and this continued repeatedly until she was 15. She told no one about these attacks in fear of her safety.

“I couldn’t tell my family. They would just say I was lying and kill me,” she said.

As she grew older, she found herself having little trust in the company of men. The trauma she experienced made her angry and depressed.

She felt safer in the company of women and describes herself as being gay.

“If my family found out I was gay they would disown me. My family are from a conservative class, like the Government. The Government would put me in prison if they knew I was gay.”

When Maria’s grandfather died, she moved to Casablanca, escaping the threatening environment of her home.

“I had to run away from my home, and I realised I was living in a destructive and deceptive society, and it didn’t feel safe.”

Maria used education to mask the trauma she went through, finding a career in

banking, and international trade, although she became dependant on drug use and alcohol to escape the memories of the past and conceal her anger.

“My society is hypocritical, with divisions of faith. In this environment, I don’t feel safe.”

She is sceptical about making plans for the future. She is sensitive and charitable but feels very depressed inside. She has tried to take her life three times and has little trust with the world.

She is undergoing counselling and wants to keep herself safe and sane.

“I feel lucky to be in the UK. English people are so nice and human. I want to give something back and it is important we look after young children and that they are protected. I have a box of memories that I want to move from the left to the right, take them out, clean them and put them back.”

Jean-Marc Hall

Church charity trying to help displaced people in South Sudan

SOUTH Sudan is the world’s youngest nation – obtaining independence from Sudan in 2011 after years of brutal civil war. However, the violence has continued and since December 2013, internal conflict has claimed thousands of lives. Millions of people, mostly women and children, have been driven from their homes, making the South Sudanese the largest refugee population in the Horn of Africa.

Many refugees have fled to neighbouring countries but a recent United Nations report estimates more than 1.7 million South Sudanese are currently displaced within their own country, facing challenges that threaten their very existence.

Since April 2023, large numbers fleeing the conflict in Sudan have further increased the number of in-country refugees.

Across South Sudan there are regular failures in the rule of law and constant outbreaks of violence. Conditions, especially for those in temporary accommodation, are compounded by the increasing problem of chronic food insecurity and the devastating impact of recurrent floods.

South Sudan relies heavily on agriculture, has some of the poorest health outcomes in the world and among the lowest literacy rates.

For the people living in Internally Displaced Persons camps (IDPs) life is even more of a challenge – the camps, are crammed with families who lack basic necessities such as clean water, food, and medical care.

The fear of violence is lingering, with armed groups occasionally raiding the periphery. Work is hard to find and children are often forced to scavenge rather than attend school.

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SVP) is an international voluntary organisation in the Catholic Church, which seeks to address poverty in all its forms. SVP England and Wales fundraise to support a number of humanitarian and development projects run by SVP South Sudan.

To support their work visit <https://svp.org.uk/twinning/can-you-help-bring-peace>

Film-maker's work nominated

ESLAM Hassona is an Egyptian director, co-writer and editor of a multi-nominated short film called Goldfish.

Made in Malaysia, the film follows two young siblings from Kuala Lumpur embarking on a desperate adventure and a race against time to feed their new pet goldfish and keep it hidden from their mother.

The film was awarded a grant from the Krishen Jot fund and was shot in Malaysia between 2022 and 2023.

Now based in the UK, Eslam edited the film in an asylum hotel while waiting for his refugee status to be confirmed. He is now promoting the film through various independent agencies.

Goldfish was screened in Malaysia and the UK and is now being shown at multiple festivals around Europe and Asia, hoping to be selected for new festivals.

It was also shown at the Fisheye Film Festival in High Wycombe, an independently run film festival showcasing the latest creative exploits of local, UK and international filmmakers, their films ranging from

30 seconds to feature length, and spanning a variety of genres. (fisheyefilmfest.uk) and more recently at a secondary school in Malaysia.

Amid a global crisis of displacement, due to war, persecution or human rights abuses, an initiative led by the Oscar-winning actor Cate Blanchett will offer up to £84,000 each to five people to create short works focusing on their experiences of displaced people. The Displacement Film Fund, backed by the International Film Festival Rotterdam with the UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) as a strategic partner, will support displaced filmmakers or those with experience in refugee storytelling.

The UNHCR mandate is to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve the refugee problems worldwide. Its main purpose is to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of refugees.

Jean-Marc Hall



Refugee runner Hagos finishes 148th in London Marathon

WHEN the Eritrean government tried to conscript Hagos Kidana Abraha, he ran for two days to the border with Sudan to escape.

As a teenager, he used to run up the mountains with his friends teaching himself running techniques by watching YouTube videos, but when the time came for enforced military conscription, there was no choice but to run and escape a life in the army.

“We ran for two days until we reached the border with Sudan. I was able to run fast and escape, although my friend was captured. Being able to run saved my life.”

Hagos made the difficult and dangerous journey to the UK, a country he had heard was safe for refugees. Crossing the Sahara to Libya, he was held for three months by traffickers demanding money for freedom. Eventually, he was set free and able to continue his journey across the Mediterranean to Italy. He later travelled to Calais and survived the dangerous journey across the Channel to reach the UK.

The Home Office placed him in different hotels used to accommodate asylum seekers and it was during this time that



Hagos in training. (Photo Care4Calais)

his running helped overcome the trauma and mental issues he suffered.

Preparing to run the London Marathon became a life changing challenge and ambition. While Hagos was a resident at the Wethersfield camp in Essex, he was

offered a place as a runner in the London Marathon by the humanitarian organisation, Care4Calais.

He used the hills around the camp to unload the stress and anxiety that the camp inflicts on its residents, but preparation for the marathon didn't get any easier.

When he was asked to leave his Home Office accommodation, after being granted refugee status, he became homeless. At the same time, he was spending almost every penny of his limited income on nutrition to support his training.

Despite these challenges during his preparation and the earlier uncertainties his life had faced, he ran an incredible time of a sub 2-hours 30 minutes, finishing a remarkable 148th out of 56,000 runners and raising thousands of pounds for Care4Calais.

Hagos said that the support shown to him leading up to the marathon inspired him, but the journey Hagos has made during his lifetime is surely an inspiration to everyone that reads and shares his story of bravery and spirit.

Jean-Marc Hall

Additional information Care4Calais and the Guardian

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