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## BEYOND THE STEREOTYPE

29,860 granted asylum in 2002. The Home Office statistic is terse, to the point, but behind the figures, stereotypes, publicity and often controversy are real people with real lives. I attended a drop-in service, run by Allyson Smiga, in the Salvation Army building in Wrexham this February in order to find out exactly what it was like to seek asylum in the UK.

I spoke to Elizabeth\* (\*names have been changed to protect identities), originally from Zimbabwe, who has recently been granted refugee status. This means, because she is in danger of persecution in her home country, she is allowed to stay in the UK with the same rights as a UK citizen. As a high school teacher, Elizabeth was under threat from the oppressive regime in Zimbabwe because she was a professional with links to the opposition party. Leaving her family, she fled to South Africa late 2002 and there boarded a plane to Heathrow. I asked her why she chose to come to the UK, and she explained that many of Zimbabwe's problems could be traced back to the colonisation of the country by Britain, so she believed that British officials 'would understand better'.

After a tiring journey, she was taken to a detention centre, and then later relocated to a house in Rhostyllen. It was two months before Elizabeth was aware that there were other Zimbabweans in the Wrexham area. Although she denied that she had been the victim of any racial abuse, she found it hard to integrate into a community that she felt generally ignored her, and admitted to having experienced 'provoking behaviour' at the hands of teenage boys.

According to the Home Office, 'fast track processes mean that some claims (and subsequent appeals) are dealt with in about four weeks'. It was almost a year, however, before Elizabeth knew for certain that she would not be deported back to Zimbabwe. At one stage in her appeal, it was decided that she had been treated unfairly; this took about seven months to sort out, which she described as a very stressful time. Although gaining refugee status was a massive relief for her and she likes Wrexham, when asked if she would like to return to Zimbabwe if the situation improved, Elizabeth simply said 'Of course – I really miss home.' After hearing that she has lived in the same small room for over a year, without seeing the 16-year-old daughter or the 9-year-old son she left behind, I can't say I was surprised.

I also interviewed Ahmed\*, a Pashtun from Afghanistan. Tension between ethnic groups had made it impossible for him to stay; his mother and

father had been killed, and a cousin on his father's side had threatened his life. It seemed the presence of British and American troops had made no difference in the area where he lived, with civilians being killed in the fighting between the Coalition and the Taliban 'every day'.

Ahmed escaped across the border with Pakistan to a camp of around 17,000 people, but the Pakistani authorities made it clear that the Afghans were not welcome there. His uncle on his mother's side set up a meeting with an 'agent' in Thailand, so Ahmed travelled to Bangkok to see if the man could get him into Europe. There he stayed in a single room for 20 days, before being flown to Paris. From Paris, he travelled to the UK on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November last year, concealed in a lorry being driven by the Thai 'agent' along with four Iraqis. They were caught by the police on arriving in the UK, and Ahmed was taken to a detention centre in Cambridge. He is now seeking asylum, in other words his case is being reviewed to see if he is eligible for refugee status.

Ahmed, like Elizabeth, has left everything and everyone he knows behind, including his wife, daughter and son. He has not had any contact with them since he left Pakistan. He is now trying to settle as best he can, improving his English through lessons at Yale.

Although, intellectually, I knew there were people like Elizabeth and Ahmed who had been through traumas like these, I found the experience of talking to them extremely moving. To people who form their image of an asylum seeker or refugee from tabloid headlines, I would say: Look into the eyes of a man who no longer knows where his family are. Talk to a woman who has had to abandon her profession, children and homeland out of fear. Then try to tell me that our country should turn these people away.

If you would like to help asylum seekers and refugees in the Wrexham area, phone: Allyson Smiga on 01978 762829.

### WPJF BANNER COMPETITION

Unfortunately, the results of our competition to find a design for a new banner for the group were not ready at the time of going to press. They will be included in the next issue of WPJN with, we hope, a photo of the completed new banner.