



## Welcome to the April edition of the WERS newsletter!

### Funding news

As you are all aware, WERS has been facing a huge challenge to secure funding for the new financial year. The response from individual supporters and churches has been wonderful since January we have raised £7,500 for core costs through donations. We have also secured two significant 3 year grants: one of £30,000 from the Shears Foundation, the other, a £75,000 award from J Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Foundation. WERS is most grateful to both these foundations for their investment in its important work. We are awaiting the outcome of a number of other important bids, but this recent success has

and has given everyone a real boost.

### Nnenna George-Kalu

WERS was sad to say goodbye to Nnenna, one of our volunteer co-ordinators, who left for pastures new at the end of March. The family have relocated to Birmingham where

URC churches. In the short time that Nnenna worked at WERS, she achieved an enormous amount and quickly became a valued member of the WERS team. We wish Nnenna, George, Rock, David and Sharon every success and happiness in the future.

We will shortly be advertising for Nne replacement and in the meantime Carol will be holding the fort. We have temporarily put a hold on volunteer recruitment which will resume when the new member of staff has been appointed.

The volunteer co-ordinators also have a new email address:

[wers.volunteers@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:wers.volunteers@yahoo.co.uk)

### Spreading the word: WERS education, training and awareness-raising programme

Many years ago I began to give talks on asylum issues both locally and regionally to try to dispel some of the prevalent myths about asylum seekers. I gave talks initially

local comprehensive school in the west end of the city. I found that the most effective way of changing attitudes was to tell stories, the stories of WERS clients. Much of the negative press coverage centred around sweeping generalisations about asylum seekers: lumping them all together, accusing them of scrounging from the state and depriving local people of services and resources. Stories of individual human beings, of families torn apart by violence, of torture and beatings, of remarkable escapes and dangerous journeys came as a shock to audiences and feedback at the meetings showed that opinions and viewpoints were being changed.

The work in schools developed. As well as giving assemblies I was asked to talk to particular classes and year groups. Asylum issues fitted well into the citizenship module in the national curriculum. The work spread into other secondary and primary schools and then into some of the Northumberland schools. Each year around 50 talks were given across the region to a wide variety of audiences.

In 2003 Musa Hassan Ali joined the staff at WERS as a support worker. A Rwandan refugee, he had lost many family members in the genocide of 1994 and claimed asylum in the UK in 2002. He expressed a wish to tell his story and although at the beginning this was an immensely difficult and painful thing to do, he passionately wanted to continue letting the general public know about the issues that affect asylum seekers. The Project Director and Ali then started to deliver joint sessions, sometimes in the form of an interview, and gradually Ali felt able to lead sessions independently.

Accurate information about asylum issues continues to be thin on the ground. People from all backgrounds tell us how little they know about the circumstances that lead to a person being forced to leave their home country. Little is known about the asylum process in the UK and how it affects the men, women and children whilst they await the outcome of their claim. WERS has reached many hundreds of people of all ages but there is still an enormous amount of work to be done.

Although usually very well received, we have learned to respond to aggressive questioning and negative attitudes which can still be found in any audience. A factual response which shows that the statement or comment is inaccurate is often the most effective. A Mythbuster, updated annually by the North East Strategic Migration Partnership is a most useful tool here and WERS distributes hundreds of

contain a commonly stated negative statement and a pithy, concise factual retort.

The WERS programme now has a number of different strands each designed to reach different groups of people:

#### Education

Assemblies and teaching sessions are delivered in both primary and secondary schools across the region. WERS works both independently and in partnership with a number of other organisations in the city. During 2009 a new partnership with Newcastle City Council was established through the Holocaust Memorial events. Each January, education days are held in primary schools in the city. Ali contributes to these sessions by giving talks to the children and answering their many and varied questions. WERS also works with Show Racism the Red Card, working in secondary schools in Newcastle, Gateshead and North

appreciated by the students.

local universities and colleges and sessions are led in a number of different departments, including geography, psychology and medicine. Two training sessions for staff teaching at a local further education college have been booked for the coming summer.

A new partnership with the Youth Offending Team has recently been established and the first session with staff and young people was very well received.

#### Organisational Training

WERS provides training sessions for Northumbria Police probationary officers as part of their community phase. 6-8 groups a year visit the project and the half-day training programme includes sessions on the asylum process, direct experiences of asylum seekers and refugees and working with the police.

This work is of the utmost importance. A better understanding of asylum issues amongst police officers is vital to engender good relations with the newly emerging communities.

#### **Making a difference: the task ahead**

Over the last decade WERS has reached thousands of people through the programme. The work has been effective and has without doubt contributed to the improving situation in the city. More refugees are settling in the city out of choice when they have been granted leave to remain in the UK a clear sign that local people are becoming generally more welcoming to the new communities. Many front line staff in agencies across the city are now better informed about asylum issues. There is a long way to go, however, and WERS has an important part to play in spreading the word.

Lindsay Cross

#### **Office Details**

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**Office & Clothing Store Opening times:**

Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri: 9.30am - 1pm

Wednesday: 11am - 1pm