



West End Refugee Service

*strength through support*



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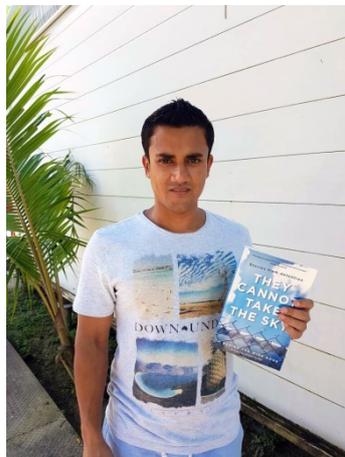
**WERS wishes you all a very Happy New Year!**

### Festive Week

**A huge thank you for all the gifts for the destitute clients! We were able to give out bags of gifts, a shoebox of presents from the Mothers Union and an extra week's cash to each of the 150 destitute clients currently supported by WERS.**

### Imran's story

'I try to find a peaceful place where I can be myself. I sit on the ground so that I can feel the earth. I place my hands on my chest and bend my legs and keep them close to my chest. I look up at the sky and then recall the memories.'



Courtesy of Imran Mohammad

The programme of repatriation of some 650,000 Rohingya refugees has been now agreed between Bangladesh and Myanmar, but there are huge concerns about the impossibly short timeframe that is planned and what perils the refugees will face on returning home. Surely refugees must not be forced to go back and those choosing to return voluntarily must be assured of a safe resettlement.

I have been inspired recently by some writing by a young Rohingya refugee called Imran Mohammad. Imran, who is in his early twenties, fled the horror in Myanmar, ended up in Australia and was held for a number of years on Papua New Guinea's infamous

Manus Island. Here he taught himself to read and write English and became a prolific writer. In 2016 he entered and won Amnesty International Australia's Blogging Competition, writing a powerful description of his life in Myanmar.

The above quote is taken from an oral history book, 'They Cannot Take the Sky', made up of the stories of 35 people in Australian immigration detention. Imran describes how he takes time to think about the time spent with his girlfriend before he was forced to flee Myanmar at the age of 16. Here is an extract from his winning blog:

'For the Rohingya ethnic group, creating a sense of identity is a difficult task. My ancestors have lived in Rakhine, Myanmar for generations. However, our country won't acknowledge our existence. We're known as illegal migrants in our own land, stateless people. Many people in this world take for granted that they can get a passport, but we are denied this right.'

'We are not even given a birth certificate or any other documentation to prove our citizenship. Rohingya people are denied freedom of movement, access to social services and more importantly, education. Tragically we are victims of unprovoked violence, spread by fear, ignorance and hate. When a government doesn't allow media or international visitors, the world should question this. They would be horrified; women and girls are raped, brothers buried alive and young boys killed.'

News stories come and go and continuing atrocities of persecution and ethnic cleansing may fade from our consciousness if we are not being constantly reminded on our TV and computer screens.

Each refugee who comes to WERS has a story. Many, alongside the trauma, pain and sadness associated with events in their home countries, retain an affection for and a longing for their homeland – their family and friends, their house,

their job, the countryside – everything that made their life there.

Unlike Imran, many do not have a voice, but each of those individual stories is important. Each of those experiences has made an indelible mark on the lives of the men and women forced to flee.

We must always remember that.

## WERS' new digital project: SkillsMatch

**Creative  
FUSE  
Innovation Pilot**

This Creative Fuse North East Innovation Pilot is supported by:

 Arts & Humanities Research Council

 European Union European Regional Development Fund

[www.creativefusene.org.uk](http://www.creativefusene.org.uk)

WERS is very pleased to have been awarded an innovation pilot grant by Creative Fuse North East for a new digital project. The idea behind the Creative Fuse North East programme is for academics from the 5 universities to work alongside industry, cultural organisations, charities and the public sector, exploring how creative, digital and IT firms can have a sustainable future in the region adding value to the region's broader employment base.

We are very much looking forward to working collaboratively on this exciting new project. It is great to have the opportunity to work with experts in digital design and research dissemination on an initiative which will enhance and develop the programme of services and activities WERS offers to its asylum seeking and refugee clients.

Our project will explore the viability of a skills-matching website, pairing asylum seekers and refugees with community volunteering opportunities which specifically correspond to their specific interests and skills sets.

We will be working with Newcastle Business School and a local creative agency, Roots and Wings.

The lives of the men and women who come to WERS for advice and support are dominated by their asylum cases. Feelings of social isolation, loss

of confidence and in many cases low mood and depression are commonplace. Spending a couple of hours in the company of others, concentrating together on a particular task can allow a brief period of time when their case is not uppermost in their minds. It is also a great way to help clients feel more integrated in their local communities and to help local people get to know clients as individual human beings and better understand their circumstances.



Up until now, this matching has been done by our two Volunteer Co-ordinators through existing networks and contacts but WERS is ready and keen to extend its 'skills matching' process to include a digital interface. Although there are many interfaces matching skills with paid employment, we are not aware of any other project that focuses on volunteer skills-matching solely for asylum seekers and refugees.

**Lindsay Cross**

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