

I first became involved with CRAG towards the end of 2015. Like many people I was very aware of the huge movement of people across Europe fleeing different countries for different reasons. What was going on in Syria added new horrors and a feeling of tremendous sympathy for the suffering of all these people.

I knew CRAG existed through reports in the Cumberland News and got in touch with them and began helping to sort clothes in the warehouse in Edward Street. The generosity of local people was astounding and we ploughed through masses of clothes, shoes, toys, kitchen equipment and saw it regularly leave the warehouse to go to both northern France, Greece and latterly Syria. With it went our love, solidarity, sympathy and a strong hope that those receiving it might find it of help on their road to a better and safer life.

In November 2015 a group of us from CRAG travelled down to Calais to volunteer in the Jungle camp which at that time had a population of about 6,000 people. All the work that was done in Calais and Dunkirk was done by volunteers and we joined a band of helpers doing a variety of tasks from sorting in the warehouse to distributing food and clothes within the camp itself. Going down to Calais and working there was a very moving experience. The conditions within the camp were atrocious. The weather was terrible - cold, wet and very windy. People were living in tents that were being blown around and were leaking and totally inadequate for what they were being used for. The conditions were insanitary with piles of rubbish, inadequate toilets and washing facilities. People looked cold, demoralised and sad. There was however a strong spirit of helping one another, solidarity with people's suffering, and a feeling that we were distancing ourselves from our governments who were treating the residents of the jungle as less than human. It was hard to believe that what we saw and experienced there was happening in one of the richest countries in the world.

I returned to Calais a month later to volunteer and spent new years eve in the jungle camp releasing balloons of hope and listening to music from many different countries. The atmosphere was hopeful, friendly and busy. The living conditions had improved slightly in that some residents were now living in wooden shelters built by the volunteers including people from CRAG. The population had increased and was increasing weekly and when the camp was finally destroyed by the French authorities in November 2016 it was estimated that there were 10,000 people living there including many unaccompanied children.

I have continued to be involved with CRAG in different ways from giving talks to various church and youth groups, collecting unwanted tents and sleeping bags after Solfest music festival and continuing to sort and send clothes to France and Syria. I also helped with the Escape to Freedom exhibition at William Howard School in Brampton which attempted to re-create the refugee journey for the pupils who donned ear phones in order to listen to refugee stories while being taken through a rather desolate and unfriendly system. We also rebuilt a "jungle shelter" so that pupils could see first hand the space that people were living in not so very far away from their own homes.

Talking to people about the issues, writing to MP's and councilors, visiting our MP's surgery, reading and spreading information through social media and maybe even, one day soon, having the opportunity to welcome a refugee into our homes and community. These are all part of being a CRAG volunteer.

CRAG is standing up for what it believes to be the correct response to an overwhelming and awful situation and we need to do this and not be silent about what is happening in our time.

