

Manx Linksa series in which Cheryl Cousins from the One World Centre talks to local people, who have lived or worked in the developing world, about remarkable people they have met!

Summer is the season for voluntary migration. Most of us manage to fill our wallets, pack our bags and head out to countries new. For a brief period we are as nomads living in a different place. We make a break with our own habits and routines, and experience a different culture all be it and with the security of travel insurance and bankers cards!

But even with that security, how often do you hear people recounting harrowing tales of holiday experiences where they have felt alienated and vulnerable? The last week in June was officially refugee week, I find myself musing that possibly holidays are as close to experiencing refugee status as many of us will ever get... but for over 21 million people in the world refugee status is for real. It is almost impossible for any of us to imagine the emotional trauma of having to flee our country, leaving home and family members, and arriving with none of the securities or rights that we take for granted.

I recently met with Jacqui Keenan from Douglas, a former student of Castle Rushen High school who did a BA in community studies with drama at Winchester University. Last year she accompanied her friend Joanna Owen to work with the Tibetan refugee community in Manali, in Northern India.

Situated in a remote area, at an altitude of 6700ft, they were to spend four months working with children who are sent to board in the Himalayan Buddhist Cultural School, their parents were refugees living in remote areas of the North. The school houses approximately 300 children who have been sponsored through "Freedom to Learn" a charity set up by Joanna and her husband, Mark.

Since the Chinese occupation of their country in the 1950's Tibetan refugees have continued to flood across the border into India. Today there are 54 Tibetan settlements throughout India, Bhutan and Nepal where approximately 121,143 people live, and with increased deprivations for the Tibetan population in China, the number is still growing. Some have walked for months through hostile terrain to seek safety and sanctuary settling in the most remote hill areas. Initially the refugees stayed together as close knit communities. The Tibetan area in Manali was one of the most deprived areas with cramped and unhygienic conditions.

But the Tibetan settlements are examples of refugee self-help; with extremely limited resources, coping with the trauma of loss of nation and family, adjusting to vastly different cultures and climates the refugees have started businesses, created farms, homes, schools and monasteries and grown from primitive campsites into unified, economically self-sufficient communities. Literacy is now 96% among the generation born in exile.*

The school Jacqui was working in was established to bring education to the people of hill areas and is supported by the Buddhist Association and Save the Children. It was set up to

preserve and promote the traditional cultural heritage of the Himalayan regions and to provide modern education to the children of poor families. The emphasis of the school is on world peace and environmental protection.

Jacqui remembers “the boys slept in out buildings, the girls were housed in the school, a bare concrete shell with bars at the windows, no glass or doors in temperatures that are -5C at night. The kids get up at 5.30 am and work until 10.30pm. They have only one hour of free time in the day, the rest is for work and study, they have no recreation.” Jacqui describes the head teacher Palki Thakur, as a “whirlwind”. A short stern woman in her thirties, filled with warmth and energy that is purely focused upon the development of her school and students. She has remained single, dedicating herself completely to her job, living a simple life housed over the school. Working with 20 teachers a typical day for Palki includes personally coordinating the school time table for students aged 4-19 years, developing funding initiatives for the renovation and extension of buildings, overseeing the sponsorship funding of every child, as well as personally shopping for food!

Joanna and Jacqui were working closely with Palki and her staff introducing techniques and ideas that are innovative even in some of our schools on the Isle of Man. In a culture where education is still very much teacher led, and based upon traditional rote learning they were using development education techniques that introduce teachers to becoming facilitators of the learning process rather than being seen as the font of all knowledge. The process is aimed at enabling young people to learn how to think and express their opinions whilst having respect for the feelings and opinions of others... a system that is quite alien to children in that society.

Palki has worked tirelessly to create the opportunity for schooling for under privileged children in the Manali district. That she should also be embracing contemporary education theories is an indication of the vision she has for her students! Over the four months Jacqui found that the children gradually grew in confidence expressing themselves through drama and video. Not surprisingly the final research revealed that the majority of children wanted to have more say in their own lives, wanted more free time... and a bigger playground!

Jacqui hopes to return to Manali next year to continue her work in the school. If you would like any more information about the project she is working on, or would like to support the work of the school please do contact Jacqui Keenan on:

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* From: <http://www.tibet.com/dasaguide.html>

http://www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/1997/5/20_3.html

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Little known world facts and figures about refugees

- Two thirds of the world's refugees are living in developing countries, often in refugee camps. Africa and Asia between them host over 70% of the world's refugees. Europe looks after just 22%.
- Conflict in Sudan has forced four million people from their homes. More than half a million have fled the country, mainly to neighbouring countries such as Chad. Only 895 of those made it to the UK in 2005.
- The UK is home to just 3% of the world's refugees – 289,100 of them
- In 2005, the UK ranked 14th in the league table of EU countries for the number of asylum applications per head of population.
- In 2000, the UK ranked 32nd in the table of the world's refugee hosting countries on the basis of size, wealth and relative populations.

All the statistics above are sourced from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Home Office.