

# A local initiative to a global challenge

Many Dutch are volunteering to help refugees adjust to life in the Netherlands. When news got out early 2016 in Benoordenhout, The Hague, that around 30 refugees would likely come and live in the former Aloysius College, there was an overwhelming reaction of people offering to help.

BY DANIELLA GIDALY

 Then, in the summer word started going around that the refugees might not come after all because of the diminishing numbers of people seeking asylum in the Netherlands. The President of the Benoordenhout Wijkvereniging (Neighbourhood Association) actually implored the municipality of The Hague not to withhold us our refugees, since that would disappoint so many people: he had counted at least five volunteers lined up for every refugee!

Volunteers have different reasons for wanting to help. Many volunteers are already active in the local Duinzigtkerk (church) and simply feel the need to extend a warm welcome and show hospitality to people who have suffered so much and who have lost their homes. One of the volunteers added that she

was convinced that the refugees in turn would enrich our society. Some also mentioned that they wanted to make a clear statement that not all Dutch agree with the political party PVV (Party for Freedom), whose leader Geert Wilders has been outspoken against Islam and against immigration.

As for myself, all the above reasons play a role of course. However, seeing my own parents as warmly-welcomed refugees once is probably the most important motivation. I also hope I can add some value from the lessons I have learned watching my parents struggle to understand the unwritten rules of Dutch society, the rules a Dutchman could not explain, because they seem so obvious to him.

## Role of volunteers from the neighbourhood

As you have probably noticed, in Holland we always start by organizing and making very clear who does what. So when the refugees announced themselves and people started offering to help them on social media, it seemed logical for Robin de Jong, the community worker at the local Duinzigtkerk, to organize the volunteers and the interaction between refugees and volunteers.

This volunteer work would be different from that of Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland (Dutch Council for Refugees) which helps refugees with things like getting registered with the municipality, acquiring a residence permit and registering with an *inburgeringscursus*.

In Benoordenhout, a coordination committee was started, more or less of its own accord. Long before the refugees had arrived more and more people started asking the churches, Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, the municipality and the *wijkvereniging* (neighbourhood association) questions about them, about what kind of help they would need and when they could start. So De Jong, a young theologian with four years of experience working with volunteers under his belt, hosted a meeting to inform the volunteers.



PHOTO: COA

At that point in time nobody yet knew when the refugees would come, what nationality they would be, whether they would have children and of what age. Nevertheless, prospective volunteers eager to act started forming groups to make preparations anyway. The main role of the committee, *Buurtplatform Benoordenhout voor nieuwe burens* (community platform for new neighbours), is to coordinate all volunteer activities.

### Timeline

Refugees started arriving in December 2016. Moving in meant usually that just the most able man of the family would arrive, since the apartments were literally bare. The floor was concrete and the walls had no wallpaper or paint. The kitchens were without even the simplest appliances and the rooms had no curtains. The beginning of January saw families start moving in, from Syria, Libya and Afghanistan. Our new inhabitants are now going through the necessary red tape: completing the intake at the municipality, registration with the municipality and intake at *Vluchtelingenwerk*, getting advice about schools for the adults to learn Dutch, registration

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at schools for the children, getting the children organised while at school, etc. Because these processes are not yet finished, most of the volunteers are still waiting to get involved.

### Planned activities

**Language** Since the level of English and/or Dutch varies greatly among the refugee families, from quite fluent to none at all, the most important role assigned to volunteers from the neighbourhood is the role of *taalmaatje*. A *taalmaatje* is a native Dutch speaking person who spends one or two hours a »

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week with a refugee speaking Dutch to complement formal Dutch lessons, and to help the refugee, for example, to understand all the mail from the municipality, from Vluchtelingenwerk, from the tax office, and so on.

**Social** We also have *sociale maatjes*, buddies who help refugees find their way around the area, visit Madurodam and local museums, but also accompany them to register with a family doctor, or to the Consultatiebureau (children's health clinic) with their small children or find a school for the children, explain how for example garbage collection works, and other basics for daily life. In Benoordenhout we are also looking at starting a neighbourhood daycare for the many small children, so that the parents can go to their Dutch lessons together.

**Tailor-made buddies** Experience has taught us that it is difficult to remain a *taalmaatje* for a sustainable period of time if you do not share interests. So we now have introduced the "interview buddies". They will interview the new Benoordenhouters in order to be able to write a small portrait focused on the hobbies, the profession and the studies our new neighbour has. These portraits will then be published in our local magazine and on our local social media asking people to become "tailor-made buddies" by responding if they share similarities with one of the refugees.

If you share a hobby you can introduce our new neighbour to your running club or chess club. What better way to get integrated into Dutch society, meet many new people and have a chance to create sustainable relationships?

### Understanding each other

In order to be able to interact, it is important to understand the differences in background. We are very happy that Basma Ismail has volunteered to introduce us to the world of Syrian refugees and...



PHOTO: COA

**Did you know...**  
Nearly one in two Dutch people age 15 and older volunteer at least once a year.  
(CBS)

to introduce the Syrians to the world of the Dutch. Basma is an Iraqi who came to The Hague with her husband five years ago for his work.

Having been born close to the Syrian border and having lived through some horrible wars herself, she is an excellent go-between both for us and the refugees. She comes to meetings and translates between the refugees and volunteers. She also gives us tips as to how to better help them, such as do's and don'ts when interacting with Syrian refugees. Soon she will host a meeting with the Syrians at Aloysius to explain more about their host country.

The enthusiasm of the community encourages us to move forward and continue to find ways to support our new neighbours. To anyone wishing to be a part of something similar, start local, keeping it simple and personal. Reach out to your own neighbourhood associations to get involved. «

### About the author

Daniella Gidaly was born and raised in The Hague by refugee parents from Eastern Europe. After a career in corporate life she is now following a Master's in Philosophy of Law. Her ambition is to become a philosopher and writer.