Birds of Hope

On the 20 June 2019, as part of Refugee Week, advocate and volunteer for refugee rights Emma McNamara and artist George Sfougaras will be working together on a project entitled ‘Birds of Hope’, with the support of the University of Leicester and ArtReach.

Emma McNamara is a trainee teacher at Rowlatts Hill Primary Academy and the instigator of the initiative. She has visited Greece 7 times as a volunteer in the last 3 years and has spoken to children at a range of schools across Leicester/shire about her experiences. Emma says:

"The refugee crisis is not a high priority for mainstream media any longer, there were high levels of interest after the discovery of 4-year-old Alan Kurdi’s body on a Lesvos beach in September 2015, but sadly that’s old news now. Many thousands of people have perished since but their deaths have been largely unreported. As well as helping provide essential aid in collaboration with numerous grass roots organisations, I passionately believe that human connections and solidarity are an essential part of the support and solidarity we can offer. It's a small thing, I know that, but it can help people in camp to feel that they have not been forgotten and abandoned by the wider world."

This project seeks to extend this solidarity with creative workshops that, as George Sfougaras says, "aim to form a bridge between children in Leicester and their peers living in the most difficult circumstances in refugee centres in Greece". Kites and smaller handheld birds will be decorated by year 4 students at Rowlatts Hill Primary School and will carry messages of hope to children in the Vial camp on the island of Chios, Greece. A storybook will also be produced, which will be sent over along with blank cards for the children in Vial to decorate and send back to Rowlatts Hill. It is hoped that this will be the start of a ‘dialogue’ between those stuck in camps and children in Leicester.

This project has been facilitated by ArtReach, producers of Journeys Festival International - the UK’s first Festival of Sanctuary. The festival supports and celebrates the creative talent of refugee and asylum seeker artists and shares their stories through arts and culture. (www.journeysfestival.com)

The University of Leicester, which was awarded the status of University of Sanctuary in 2018, already works with a range of organisations across the city and beyond and has previously funded staff visits to deliver training to volunteers in Greece, is delighted to be part of this community project. "We think it is important that groups come together and support both refugees and asylum seekers here in Leicester but also to take opportunities to support those whose education has been disrupted through having to flee war and persecution and find themselves in camps in Greece. We would love more schools across the city and county to become Schools of Sanctuary and this is a small step in supporting one school in this fun act of solidarity” stated Philip Horspool, Chair of the University of Sanctuary group.

If you would like to know more about this initiative, the work of the University of Leicester, ArtReach, Emma or George, please contact us by email sanctuary@le.ac.uk.