

OUTREACH TO REFUGEES: Carrick on Shannon, 2nd December 2019

Experience as a volunteer with LEITRIM DEVELOPMENT COMPANY_(L.D.C.) to welcome a new group of ten families, mostly from Syria, arriving to the town.

*Early in 2017, having been vetted and accepted as Volunteer Support Worker with the L.D.C. in their Ministry with Adults and Children, **Sr Imelda Layden** became registered with the 'External Organisation/Church Body'. At that time she was greatly encouraged by a Mercy Sister who had accompanied an earlier group of refugees. However, Imelda began alone as there were no other volunteers available. She writes:*

I was delighted to have these first months to get to know the families and their concerns, but more importantly still, was, that they had time to get to know and **trust** me. They each had their own stories of so many sad and difficult experiences that they needed time to settle in their new homes. These people on the whole have had a good education, are very intelligent and are **grateful**. Gradually, they became attuned to the people around them and felt the need to **learn English** and progress further. They asked for help from the National Educational Board through the ENGLISH TRAINING BOARD (E.T.B.) now functioning in beautifully transformed premises here in Carrick. The above have provided paid and fully trained Teachers who assess their students' grades to suit their classes, on two days weekly, for each student. All of us concerned knew they were making progress, but, realized, **INTEGRATION** is vital at this stage and that the classes alone were not enough to get the ADULTS out of their homes and among the people of Carrick. The children had little difficulty in learning the language and integrating at school – thanks to ALL Primary Teachers who do this great work!

The L.D.C. and the rest of us, concerned, wanted to further the adults' integration... The Coordinators soon discovered that Leitrim was the only County in Ireland who had not invited 'FAILTE ISTEACH' to help with their organisational Input to include Conversational English Classes for Refugees, so, they set the ball rolling! In May, 2018, they came on Board and following another vetting procedure, it was arranged to have a two-hour **Conversation Class** every Wednesday Evening. This has been a great success on the whole and we have an unique Band of Volunteer Teachers who have great enthusiasm for these sessions, as this 'Gives Voice' to our friends in a relaxed atmosphere, to speak about LIFE and what they have been learning at their more structured classes. Besides, it's a social gathering for them each week, ending up with Hot Drinks and Biscuits! We have had one **OUTING** and now are preparing for our second **Christmas Party** helped with donations (including from our own Marist Community). These are very happy joyful occasions with Music and Song in the air when all the children join in with the adults, coordinators and teachers and needless to say, Gifts are in abundance! Now, our families say that they feel more **at HOME**.

Both Organisations with whom I work are doing a great job, through very efficient and caring **Coordinators**. These latter have developed the Project from day to day and are delightful to be responsible to. I'm just the **Liaison Person**, a go-between the families and Coordinators, while the Teachers see to the Classes and do all the work. My role is only a drop in the ocean in the **NOW**, as our students become more and more independent, many of whom have found employment locally and are able to help support their families.

What **joy**, if, one day, some of these people will be able to take up again, their Professions that they left behind? **Some, thankfully, are heading that way!**