

Press release from Newton Abbot Town and GWR Museum

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Syrian refugees explore the meaning of home in museum exhibition

THE sights, sounds and aromas of the Middle East were welcomed to Newton Abbot Museum on Monday [May 30] when Syrian refugees gathered to celebrate an exhibition about the meaning of home. Dozens of families have made new lives for themselves in south Devon after fleeing the civil war that has ravaged their country since 2011.

In a bid to make them feel part of a new community, museum staff suggested they take part in creative workshops and produce memory boxes containing objects close to their hearts.

The resulting mini treasure chests were on display in the museum throughout May, prompting heartfelt comments from visitors.

One box was created by young woman Jamil Alamatr who used to live near Damascus but has now settled in Dawlish.

It featured the jewellery she once loved to wear at parties or when out with friends.

Grateful to have found a warm welcome in Devon she said: 'Life is so good here, it's better and safe for my family. We have nice people here.'

Another box contained Syrian flags and the text: 'When I was little, I remember the time I was sleeping on the roof of our house. A helicopter was circling above me and I was very scared. I'm really sad about Syria because it was a beautiful country but now it's just ruined and destroyed.'

Museum Outreach Worker Kate Green organised the project. She said: 'We didn't have a title for the work when we started but everyone talked about home, about their pride of being Syrian and the things they were sad about having to leave.'

'One man told me he'd been a successful businessman in Syria but is now a farm labourer. He said he was 100 per cent grateful for the help he's had but also 1,000 per cent sad.'

Newton Crisis Aid has supported the refugees as has Refugee Support Devon whose manager Rupert Blomfield said Newton Abbot had successfully integrated refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, with those from Ukraine likely to be next.

Speaking about the value of the museum project he said: 'Isolation and loneliness are often the result of a lack of integration into a local community.'

'The roots of Newton Abbot's community are expressed in its museum and the people of the refugee community who have created pieces for the display will have learned something about Newton Abbot and the people of Newton Abbot will have learned something about the new residents, that has to be a good thing.'

ENDS

Jamil Alamatr with her memory box



Families and support workers who have taken part in the project with Mayor Cllr Carol Bunday and representatives from Newton Crisis Aid and Refugee Support Devon. Traditional Middle Eastern food was served alongside cream teas.



Other memory boxes

The exhibition has now ended with the memory boxes being returned to their makers. For more information email kate.green@newtonsplace.org or call 01626 201121.