



Citizens and the migrant crisis



Christine, sponsor of a refugee family

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Six months ago, Christine Lekeu volunteered to support a family of Syrian refugees in Belgium. Her story is one of altruism coming face to face with the realities of refugee integration support in Europe.



Christine, her daughters and the Barzani family.

In a word, who is Christine?

I am 58 years old. I am a social worker in a public company and consider myself lucky to have a job. I have two children who are now independent and a third one who is still a student.

Why did you become involved in helping refugees?

We live in a society which, in my opinion, contributes to the exploitation of people in many countries. When wars or climate change drive people away from home, we like to say it's not our fault and we close the door to them. I wanted to demonstrate my opposition to this in a tangible way. I was also curious to meet people from another culture. I wanted them to know me and help them to overcome some of the misconceptions about our way of life.

When and how did you get involved?

I heard on Facebook about a citizen-led organisation called ["Live In Color"](#). I signed up for one of its information sessions on refugee sponsorship. Subsequently, I enrolled to be part of the project.

How did you hear about the Barzani¹ family? Did you choose them or were they assigned to you?

In fact, four months after my registration, when someone contacted me and asked if I still wanted to be a sponsor, I must admit, I had somewhat abandoned the idea. I thought it would not happen. But, well, I accepted. I was told that it was a family living in the small town of Hannut, 38 km from my home, or 45 minutes by car. I suggested that perhaps there was someone closer but, apparently, there wasn't. I didn't want to give up and so I went for it.

What was their situation like? What difficulties did they face?

It is a Syrian family; a couple and four girls aged 1 to 8 years. The mother was pregnant. She gave birth to little Mohammed in December 2016.

I went to see them for the first time with a social worker who worked part-time for Live In Color, and a young Iraqi who acted as an interpreter. The Barzanis come from Damascus. They can speak Arabic but their native language is Kurdish. They do not speak English at all and do not know our alphabet. They had just been granted refugee status at the end of August, so they had two months to leave the Red Cross reception centre. They found an apartment in Hannut. I still don't understand how. But it is a rather expensive and is quite a distance from Liège and Brussels. Hannut is a small rural town, and a little isolated. There are few organisations to help foreigners, and it is a long way from the hospital where the mother gave birth and where her doctor works.

Are the State and the different administrations up to the task of refugee reception?

What reception? If you mean after the refugees have left the centre then I have not found any reception desk! This is something I am very annoyed about!

What struck you the most about this family's experience?

Their isolation! On the first day I met them in their apartment, which is located on the town's main street, I suddenly felt very far away from the people I saw through the window. It felt like this Syrian family was in a bubble, far removed from the comfortable life we know.

This feeling was reinforced every time I assisted them with the various procedures. If I did not take them to the various public services, they would not have gone and no one would have cared. When refugees live in the reception centre, all their needs are taken care of. When they leave, they are left on their own but they are not familiar with the workings of our society. There is no coordination between the centre and the outside institutions. For example, a friend is taking care of an Iraqi family with two boys who are 6 and 10 years old. When she met the family, it had been a month since they left the reception centre. The children did not go to school, even though they had been registered by the centre. The parents just did not know. They did not know where their children had to go to school, so they were waiting. The school concerned was 500 meters from their home but they did not know that they could take their children there. And then we talk of a legal obligation!

What kind of help do you give to the family?

Too much for one person! I originally thought of helping with procedures, explaining how things work, so they wouldn't feel lost and would get to know our system, but their needs are so great that I have been forced to compensate for the work that social services are not doing, and this requires a lot of energy.

¹ Name has been changed at the family's request.

What have been the greatest difficulties to overcome in terms of help and support?

The main problem is language. Without a common language, communication is very difficult. You are never sure of being well understood. There are many things I would like to explain to them, so that they can become independent, but for the moment it is not possible. I still accompany the father to local social service meetings. He does not understand what he is being asked and he is always very worried.

Another difficulty is the obvious indifference of the administrative officers: *"You don't speak French? That's not my fault. Just come back with an interpreter"...* Even the Live In Color social worker told me: *"It's up to the father to find someone who speaks French or English."* Bilingual friends are rare or they live 40 km away. They are not easy to reach, and for the father it's a burden to always have to ask for help from others. So we do what we can, using Google Translation, but it does not work well with Arabic or Kurdish.

What are the main barriers to overcome, by both sides, society and refugees?

Again, language! If the refugees cannot express their needs and if the person in front of them, for fear of making a mistake, due to lack of time, or for whatever reason, does not take the time to explain the issues, there is no way to break down the barriers that separate them. Everything is complicated. Whether it's school, child welfare, healthcare, social services, they all look to me as an intermediary. They do not want to deal directly with the family, even though I do not speak Kurdish or Arabic.

Because they know me, I suppose the family is reassured and trusts what is being asked. For example, Bushra, one of the girls, who is in the first year of primary school, received a form from the school about a three day discovery class. It was up to her to explain what it was about, but she didn't understand it. Her father was reluctant, so I had to explain and assure him that the children would be taken care of, that the teacher accompanied them, and so on. He eventually agreed. Then came the problem of the cost of the trip: €120 for three days. This is very expensive for people living on a social welfare. So I had to fight with the social services and the school to ask them to intervene. The little girl is now back from her trip but the bill is still pending. There are no procedures to follow in these situations. Everything is complicated, postponed, time consuming... requires money that they do not have, requires transport that they don't have... Today I accompanied the father to register to take the theoretical exam for a driving license. He was a truck driver in Syria but since 2016 Syrian permits are not recognised in Belgium. He has to start all over again. On the positive side, however, there are sessions in Arabic. But you still have to go to the driving licence office to get an appointment, show your identity card and pay a €65 fee. The office is 50 km from Hannut, so I went there with the father. Fortunately, I had checked their website before leaving and discovered that procedures had changed since last week: all the Arabic sessions are full until August 2017... The driving license is, therefore, postponed!

Six months after leaving the reception centre, what is the situation of the family now? Are they ready to "fly with their own wings"? What are the remaining challenges?

The seven members of the family are healthy, they have food to eat, a roof ... That's already something! As with any large family, there are many medical appointments to be organised and they are not yet able to do that alone. They receive social benefits (integration income and family allowances), but their situation remains very precarious.

The father learns French two mornings a week. The mother has a friend she met in the school who comes to teach her French at home because she cannot get to a course, which is 20 km from their home and she still has two babies to care for and cannot afford a babysitter.

They would like to find a less expensive apartment, such as public housing with a social rate.

The family is a little less isolated and they are beginning to get to know some people in Hannut who live in a similar situation. The father has wanted to work from the very first day. He realises that learning the language is paramount but I think he lacks the self-confidence needed to learn.

Finding a job is the biggest challenge. A job will enable him to integrate with dignity and regain control of his life. Currently, he has no place in society and suffers because of this. Of course, he wants us to help him find work, but this is an area where I cannot do much. I was able to find him a French course, which was no easy task, and I will try to help him get his driver's license.

The mother's role is respected: she can stay at home and take care of the family, and she is kept busy with the five children! Once the last child goes to school, she will attend spoken and written French classes. She would also like to find a job. She admires the independence of women in Belgium.

How is your commitment perceived within your own circles?

Very well! Many friends offer to help and are interested in the situation. Many people would like to help but find it hard to make the first step. And my children, to my delight, worship "my Syrian family".

Because of your profession as a social worker, you are naturally inclined towards helping others, and you have the skills, you know the Belgian system, you know the "tricks". Would you encourage other people, who are less familiar with procedures, to commit as you do?

In fact the procedures are the same as for anyone who lives in Belgium. Enrolling in a health insurance scheme, for instance, does not represent an extraordinary challenge. But for Syrian refugees, it is. You just need to help them and do it with them.

My background helps me to set limits. As I said, these people come to us after many traumatic experiences. They do not have the means to communicate with us and the needs are immense. Their relations are scattered. One would be tempted to really share the maximum with them, to take charge of their burden. But this quickly leads to despair and exhaustion. I often try to step back and remind myself that the problems they encounter are theirs, which they will learn to solve themselves... They just need to be given time, to have a little confidence. I cannot fill all the gaps... As with my children, I cannot live their lives for them, and sometimes I have to accept that it is difficult for them. I am here to support, within the limits of what I can give. There are times when there are three important appointments to be honoured in the same week and that I am available only for one, so I have to tell them to do it without me. This might result in the appointment being postponed, but I cannot commit to everything at all costs.

Are citizen-led initiatives only temporary palliatives to the shortcomings of "official" public action or are they indispensable in the long term because of the added social and human value they bring?

Ideally, the two should work together. I really wanted to find partners within the official bodies, but I did not meet anyone who was interested in the situation or would take charge of part of the problem. The official social worker of the municipality did not want to help me get the family a healthcare mutual insurance company. She also told me that there was no housing allowance, even though there is an allowance for people leaving refugee centres. She did not look for a French course for the father, which is the first step to integration. I asked for the child welfare nurse to visit the family to plan the vaccination for the baby. To this day, no one has come. The municipal administrative officer did not want to help to solve a problem regarding the marriage registration of the parents. No one in the school was interested in the problem and they preferred to believe that the family was still living in the Red Cross centre, and therefore that all expenses were taken care of... A friend of mine who takes care of an Iraqi family encounters the same problems in another municipality. Are public servants overworked, or blasé, or racist?

Are you optimistic about the future in terms of refugee integration in general and integration of this family in particular?

I don't know how our society will evolve. There are a lot of people who are not integrated. In my professional life I meet people who have a job but are very unhappy. I do not know what "integrated" means. Integrated to what? Sometimes I look at this family, they have a lot of problems but they are always smiling. The girls are curious, intelligent, eager to learn. They do not seem to suffer from social injustices yet, and they are happy with the small gifts or little attentions they receive. A happy family in some ways, from the point of view of affection being given and received. The parents want to integrate into Belgian society. They often tell me that Belgium is a good country. Both are delighted to see the girls progressing at school. They have a lot of projects.

At the moment, being a Muslim does not seem to be a problem. At school, differences are respected from the point of view of meals and other Muslim customs, and they seem surprised and satisfied by that.

I really hope they will find work. If they don't, there will be great disappointment. But, one thing at a time ... Let's not think too far ahead.

(Interview conducted in French on 29/03/2017)



A refugee family

Originally from Damascus, the Barzani² family belongs to the Syrian Kurdish minority.

The father (aged 33) arrived alone in Belgium in 2015. He was joined six months later in 2016 by his wife (aged 27) and their four daughters (aged from 7 years to 6 months). In both cases, the journey was done on foot, through Turkey, the Greek island of Kos and then the Balkan route.

After a six-month stay (February-August 2016) at the Red Cross reception centre in Bierset, the family was granted refugee status and was resettled in Hannut (population:16,000), a rural municipality situated between Liège and Brussels.

A fifth child was born in Liège in December 2016.

After leaving the Red Cross centre, the Barzani family benefited from the help of [Live In Color](#). This citizen-led association found them a "sponsor", Christine Lekeu, who has since become a good friend.

² Name has been changed at the family's request.