

FROM SPONSORED REFUGEE TO SPONSORSHIP AMBASSADOR: HOW REFUGEES ARE GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

Interview with Khadeja Alamar, sponsored refugee in the UK and ambassador for the Pickwell Foundation

“My name is Khadeja and I arrived in North Devon on 15 November 2017 with my husband and kids via the community sponsorship programme. We are originally from Syria, but we lived in Jordan for four years before moving to the UK.”

At first, Khadeja’s story might seem like just another example of exceptional solidarity. Yet, her work with the Pickwell Foundation, the local lead sponsor, as an ambassador and employee, adds a further layer of incredible sense of community and willingness to help others.





Khadeja's integration journey through active engagement in sponsorship

Khadeja's journey in the UK started out with the wrap-around support provided by the sponsor group ready to welcome her and her family. *"I had little expectations"* she tells us *"and in the end the help we received from the volunteers, which touched every aspect of our lives, was really great"* she continues. After her kids were enrolled in school, her husband had secured a job as an electrician and the initial transition period to life in the UK had passed, Khadeja felt the need to give back to the community that had supported her, so she started volunteering at the [Pickwell Foundation](#). *"I really wanted to help"*, she explains.

She gradually became more involved in the Foundation's everyday work with the groups and the newly arrived families in North Devon and, after some time, she was officially offered a position within the organization. Her tasks? Contribute to the Foundation's vibrant advocacy activities as an ambassador for Community Sponsorship, act as a mentor for new sponsored families in the area and gather material for the monthly newsletter. *"It's a bit challenging but very rewarding"* she says. *"It allows me to meet many different people and to make friends in my village and elsewhere."*

Refugee Ambassadors: the key role sponsored refugees can play in advocacy and awareness raising

Khadeja's advocacy work has kept her particularly busy. Besides supporting the Pickwell Foundation in their campaigns, together with the organization 'Sponsor Refugees' Khadeja was asked to participate in a meeting with the UK's Minister of Immigration to re-open community sponsorship after the hardest months of the Covid 19 pandemic. Khadeja also collaborates with [the Voices Refugee Ambassadors Network](#). Created by the British Red Cross, the ambassadors programme provides a space for sponsored refugees to discuss and advocate for matters relating to Community Sponsorship. They provide input and ideas to RESET (The UK's community sponsorship learning hub) to improve practice and receive training in things like social media, fundraising and more. As an ambassador, Khadeja often speaks at the Pickwell Foundation's webinars targeting volunteers willing to get involved in sponsorship. In addition to that, she has supported RESET in the creation and



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translation of toolkits and guides for refugees and sponsor groups, particularly in the area of education. In a toolkit she developed for them, she explains how a newly arrived family might experience the UK education system, discussing it in simple, clear terms. This complements her education in Syria where she had attended university to eventually become an Arabic teacher.

A close-knit community network of newly arrived families and sponsors in North-Devon

“At first, I really felt the need to connect with others who spoke Arabic, and thanks to my work I have found them within the network of newly arrived sponsored families. As the South West of England covers a large geographical area, it is not easy to bring newly arrived families together. Therefore, as part of the South West network – which is coordinated by [CHARIS Refugees](#) – a network of newly arrived families was developed to welcome new families to the region. The tightest network of newly arrived families is in North Devon, where the Pickwell foundation is. This close-knit network was built very organically through collective activities, close relationships, the community newsletter, and the ability for everyone to come together for common activities. This year, for example, the families and sponsoring groups went on a 'nature walk' together, where they were able to dive into a pond in search of newts and frogs and eat fish and chips in a park. They also had the joy of seeing all the daughters of the families – including Khadeja's – come together for a six-week, fully funded surfing programme. Many of the girls had never set foot in the sea before. The association planned swimming lessons for the mothers and a cold-water experience with a local club that promotes it as a wellness tool. With the passing of time, and the development of wider community networks, Khadeja began to feel more integrated in the community and did not feel the need to speak in Arabic so strongly anymore, *“they have a lot of respect for me and my religion, and that makes me happier and more relaxed”* she concluded.

