

PAUL

“I DECIDED TO GET INVOLVED WITH COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP WHEN I SAW A PIECE ON TV ABOUT THE FIRST FAMILY WHO ARRIVED IN IRELAND. I SAID TO MYSELF, IF YOU COULD DO ONE THING IN YOUR LIFE, SOMETHING PRACTICAL, HUMAN TO HUMAN, FOR ONE FAMILY, COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP IS IT.”



I got to visit Syria in 2009 and 2010. My visits opened me up to the beauty of Syria and its people, the ancient city of Damascus with its stunning Umayyad mosque, the Church of St Paul in Straight Street, the bazaars, coffee houses and most of all the warm and welcoming people.

I mean, who is my neighbour? It's often the person that we least expect. We join people at the time in their life that they need us to. I wrote up a list of about ten people I knew in the community.

I told them, this is the idea I had, and would you be interested in doing it? They all said yes, absolutely. The thing is, like most people, we had no agenda. We just wanted to help people.

We were delighted when we were told they were coming. They arrived on the 10th of December. We were in the minibus driving down from Dublin Airport, it was late at night, it was coming up to Christmas.

My role was to coordinate the group. To invite people to it, coordinate the meetings. And to introduce the idea to the wider community.

It was so wild and wet outside. They were shattered, exhausted. I could see in their eyes, like, what was going on? We had the fire going in the house waiting for them, there was food there, some of the group waiting for them. When we arrived at the house, the father gave me his little girl in her child seat. She was asleep so I carried her in.

At that moment, looking down at her, I imagined her in twenty years' time - a grown woman, educated, confident. And me being able to tell her that I was there. I carried you into your first home here in Ireland. And to be able to tell her about the incredible courage of her parents that night, bringing them here, doing all of this for them.

We invited them down to the Christmas carol service. I gave them a little introduction and people gave them a big clap.

People were coming up and shaking hands, being very welcoming. It was a wonderful thing to see. They were refugees who had to flee their home, and here we were at Christmas welcoming this family.

It's a very humbling experience to think that you can actually help another human being really. With the war in Syria, seeing what's happening to the people. This was my way of reaching out and saying that I'm with you through this time.

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Education is very important - their English has hugely improved, and the children are eager to go to university, and we're helping them to step by step. Now, we're looking forward to the kids starting school, and seeing a really different level of integration.

I also want to bring them to Croke park, I want to show them a hurling match. When people visit from all over, one of the best things is watching them watching the hurling. It's fantastic to see their reaction. And I want to show them the real Ireland.

If I could imagine an Irish family having to go to Syria, then wouldn't it be wonderful to think the local Muslim leader in a little community somewhere, saying we're going to try and help them? When you turn things on their heads like that, you see that it's our common humanity that connects us.

