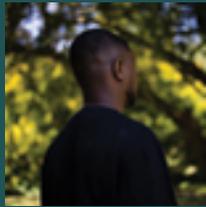
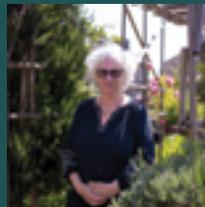
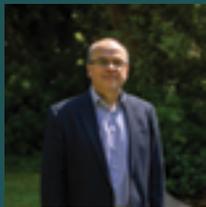
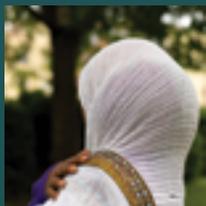
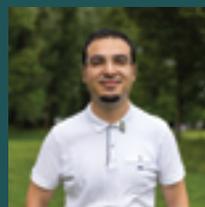
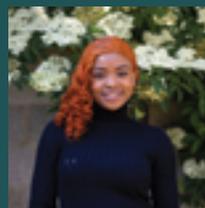
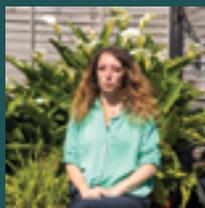


# 30 Years 30 Voices

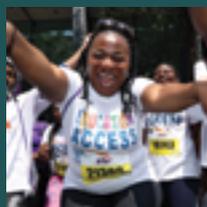
→ The Power of Protection



**Irish  
Refugee  
Council**  
30 years



# 30 Years 30 Voices



## Foreword

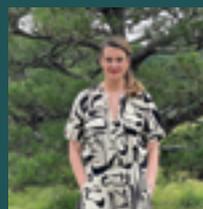
**The Irish Refugee Council (IRC) has been fighting for better treatment of people seeking protection from war and violence for over 30 years.**

Our organisation has been a leading voice in demanding that we, as a country, live up to our legal obligations to treat the most vulnerable among us with the dignity and respect that every human is legally and morally entitled to. The IRC has stepped up to provide services where the State has failed to meet them, and challenged and encouraged the Government when systemic change was needed. In these troubled times, the role of the IRC has never been more important.

This book provides a sample of the incredibly special and passionate group of individuals, employees, partners, friends, supporters, and volunteers who have come together to be on the right side of history for this generation.

Most of all, it honours those who the IRC serves, some of whom have since gone on to serve others in their turn. Treating people with humanity, dignity, and respect is at the core of who we are. These stories represent the huge impact we have had over three decades. The voices also demonstrate the power and impact of the Irish State in providing protection from persecution and harm.

On a personal note, we are incredibly proud of the scale of impact the organisation has achieved, which has been driven primarily by our exceptional staff and volunteers over the years. As we face challenging times ahead, the voices in this book are a reminder and guide to us all to relentlessly strive for a just and inclusive Ireland.



*Doireann Breathnach*  
**Chairperson,**  
Irish Refugee Council



*Nick Henderson*  
**CEO,**  
Irish Refugee Council



# Homayoon Shirzad

**My decision to seek international protection was driven by the escalating security situation in Afghanistan. I was working with an Irish international organisation, experienced constant fear, and narrowly escaped several dangerous ambushes. I was forced to leave behind my family, job, and homeland to seek asylum in Ireland.**

Upon arriving in Ireland in 2016, I faced restrictions preventing me from the right to access the labour market. I began volunteering with Places of Sanctuary Ireland and the Edmund Rice International Heritage Centre, teaching English and computer classes to fellow asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees. I'm now working with Schools of Sanctuary Ireland, an organisation that promotes a culture of welcome, safety, and inclusion for all, especially for refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland.

My time in Direct Provision was marked by adversity. Dealing with high blood pressure and the weight of uncertain circumstances. I grappled with limited food choices and a lack of control over my own diet. With just a meagre weekly allowance, I relied on personal savings to ensure access to healthier food options.

Despite gaining refugee status in 2017, I encountered difficulties finding housing due to the stringent requirements of landlords. The absence of landlord references, bank statements, and other documentation posed significant barriers. These challenges led to fear and uncertainty about being able to reunite with my family, who remained in Afghanistan under dangerous conditions.

Fortunately, my perseverance paid off when I secured a full-time job through the Irish Refugee Council's refugee employment schemes in Dublin. This employment opportunity not only provided stability but also enabled me to secure a rental place in Dublin, open a bank account, and initiate the process of bringing my family to safety in Ireland. This turning point marked a significant step towards my integration into Irish society.

My message to fellow individuals and organisations dedicated to supporting refugees and international protection applicants is one of encouragement and gratitude. To refugees and asylum seekers, self-care, connections with local communities, and active engagement in volunteer work are important. By sharing skills, expertise, and personal experiences, refugees can foster understanding and mutual support while waiting for their asylum applications to be processed.

It is important to educate children about Ireland's history of seeking refuge in times of hardship to foster empathy and understanding among future generations.



# Katie Mannion

Currently the Irish Refugee Council Independent Law Centre Manager, I joined the organisation as a legal casework intern in 2005. It was a privilege to meet refugees and asylum seekers, whose resilience and strength belied their heartbreak at forced unemployment and prolonged separation from their families. I found at the IRC a respectful, inclusive culture with colleagues who were compassionate, committed, knowledgeable, and fun – I was hooked.

Returning in 2018, much had changed, including the single protection procedure, the right to work, and narrower family reunification entitlements. Now an Independent Law Centre, the IRC represented clients throughout the international protection process, modelling the importance of Early Legal Advice, identifying gaps in rights protection, and engaging in advocacy and litigation.

The absence of legal aid for family reunification, delays, exclusions, and burdensome documentary requirements remain of significant concern and a vital part of the Law Centre's casework. The KIND project was established with the Immigrant Council to provide legal representation to unaccompanied minors in their family reunification applications through pro bono partnerships with law firms.

When the Taliban overthrew the Afghan government in August 2021, the IRC helpline was inundated with queries from the Afghan community in Ireland about bringing their families to safety. The Law Centre provided representation for visa applications under the Humanitarian Admission programme, and established additional pro bono partnerships and training to meet the demand.

Though disappointingly slow, family members continue to arrive in Ireland.

Another focus has been the age assessment process for age-disputed unaccompanied minors, and the inappropriate treatment of children as adults. As a result of our litigation and joint advocacy with the Jesuit Refugee Service, an improved system with an appeal mechanism will shortly be introduced.

From January 2023, newly-arrived male international protection applicants were not offered State-provided accommodation and consequently experienced street homelessness. The Law Centre wrote on behalf of over 450 such people and initiated High Court proceedings, two of which were treated as lead cases. In April, Mr Justice Meenan declared that Ireland had breached its obligations under the Reception Conditions Regulations and applicants' right to dignity under the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

While change can be slow and difficult, I am proud of the role the IRC is playing both in direct support and advocacy. I remain in awe of the people I meet and their capacity to overcome adversity.



# Lassane Ouedraogo

**For most people, it is hard to imagine what it means to be a refugee; a refugee whose life will never be the same, having gone through unspeakable trauma on their refugee journey, leaving everything behind. Family, friends, their homes, their jobs or businesses – everything lost in the rush to escape.**

I arrived in Ireland 16 years ago from Burkina Faso. After my six-year struggle as an asylum seeker, my family's life changed completely. I was given the right not only to reside in Ireland, but also the right to study, work, and family reunification, which saw me reunited with my beloved son in 2015.

For me, the power of international protection was in seeing my claim being accepted and being given a residence permit. That was the ultimate life-changing moment.

One of the most powerful aspects of being given international protection is without doubt the restoration of your human dignity, decency, integrity, and self-esteem. It restored my sense of humanity and of belonging.

However, it is important to note that refugees still face challenges and discrimination in their daily lives, and may require additional support and resources to fully integrate into Irish society.

As a champion of equity and diversity, and an inclusion advocate, when I was living in Direct Provision, I was involved in an IRC campaign to increase the then €19.10 weekly payment and allow residents the right to work and study in Ireland.

Later, after being recognised as a refugee, I was a founding member and coordinator of a nationwide campaign in 2013 to call for an end to Direct Provision in Ireland.

I have worked with numerous NGOs since coming to Ireland from my native Burkina Faso, including human rights and anti-racism networks and Sport Against Racism Ireland (SARI). I've advocated for migrants, people of African descent, asylum seekers, and refugees' rights. I was also a founding member of Dublin City of Sanctuary, and served as a board member of Places of Sanctuary Ireland at its foundation.

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Lassane received employment support from the IRC. He works with Africa Solidarity Centre Ireland.



# Sue Conlan

I joined the Irish Refugee Council at the beginning of 2010. In June of that year, the Department of Justice gave notice to over 100 men and women at Mosney Direct Provision Centre that they had to move.

There was no consultation with them, no examination of their individual needs, no contact with those responsible for their medical treatment at the centre. Staff entered their chalets without invitation, invading the limited privacy that they had at the former Butlins campsite. The residents protested, speaking up for themselves. The treatment that they received led to the IRC publishing a report entitled *Mosney: Without Rights or Recognition*, which concluded with the statement:

“It is hoped that lessons will be learnt by all parties which, in future, will lead to more humane treatment and a better system for the reception of those seeking international protection.”

Towards the end of my work with the IRC, Ireland and other EU countries could not ignore the forced movement of people across borders. This led to a very public tragedy when the body of Alan Kurdi, a two-year-old Syrian Kurdish boy, washed up on a beach in Turkey in September 2015. The IRC published *Protection, Resettlement and Integration: Ireland’s Response to the Refugee and Migration ‘Crisis’* in December 2015, stating:

“As some European countries tighten border controls or close borders completely, it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to identify safe routes and secure options for migration and settlement. Political leadership is vital now in the fight against discrimination, exclusion, racism and Islamophobia. Upholding human rights and humanitarian values, along with our collective international obligations for people seeking protection, is critical at this time.”

Two years after I left the IRC in June 2016, my PhD thesis on asylum policy in the Republic of Ireland and the UK was published. The short title of the thesis was *Organising for Exclusion?* and it was dedicated to “asylum seekers in Ireland and the UK, who continue to struggle in systems that are not designed to provide them with protection”.

I could write the same dedication now. The situation has actually got worse, with some people seeking asylum in the Republic of Ireland living on the streets, their tents set on fire, and the hotels accommodating them surrounded by far-right agitators. The lessons have not been learnt and the system is not more humane. The struggle continues.



# Éamonn Conlon SC

About 10 years ago, I was involved in setting up a partnership between A&L Goodbody (ALG), where I was working then, and the Irish Refugee Council, to give early legal advice to international protection applicants. Free Legal Advice Centres' (FLAC) Public Interest Law Alliance made the match. I think it was the first collaboration of its kind between an Irish law firm and an NGO providing legal services. I am delighted that it is still strong, and that this kind of partnership is now part of the Irish legal landscape.

The IRC had developed the early legal advice model with only four lawyers: all brilliant. ALG had lawyers who were enthusiastic and full of talent but knew very little about refugee law. So, the IRC organised a "boot camp" to train-up some ALG lawyers, who then shadowed the IRC lawyers on early legal advice cases. We then started taking referrals from the IRC.

We were very grateful to have the IRC legal experts' sound advice at the end of a phone. We started to have good results in getting positive decisions for our clients. I think we also earned the respect of the decision makers at the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, now the International Protection Office, who have a difficult job.

For lawyers who spend most of their time working on business transactions, and disputes and suchlike, international protection work has its challenges. It's not about learning a new area of law.

It's about earning the trust of a client who may have suffered torture, whose experience is so different from anything in the lawyer's own life; and who is still marginalised in the country from which they are seeking safety.

Another challenge is the realisation that, for the client, success in a protection claim is less a milestone to celebrate than the beginning of a new life in a strange country, far from home and family – who may still be in danger.

It is a privilege to stand in solidarity with, and give some practical support to, people who seek refuge in Ireland. I am immensely grateful to the IRC for (still) trusting me and other pro bono lawyers to work with their clients in this way. We should never take that trust for granted.

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Éamonn is a lawyer who has worked with the IRC pro bono for over a decade.



# Aminat Kikelomo Lawal

**I came to Ireland in August 2022. I was a journalist in Nigeria. Journalism is a very interesting profession. You know, they say the pen is mightier than the sword, but you may put some things together and get yourself into trouble.**

Before I left, I wondered how I would cope in a country where I didn't know anybody. I had to run for my life and my children's lives. I don't think I would still be alive if I had remained there.

This was the first time I had left Nigeria. When we arrived, it was a bit tough. We had to move a few times. This is the third accommodation we have lived in over the last eight months. Some places had so many people, and I always had to watch the kids (12 and 11). This one (in Donegal) is good. With patience, I'm beginning to find myself here.

I got my work permit two months ago and have been trying to get a job, but not in journalism. It's a profession I love, but it landed me in a lot of trouble. My life was terrifying back home. I'm in a new country, so I want to give other things a chance. I need a break.

Getting any job out here (in Donegal) is so difficult. I have heard Dublin is where things happen fast. One thing here is that they collect CVs and keep quiet. I have dropped my CV everywhere – shops, hotels, and at the library. If you go back, they will collect it again and again. One of them told me today that I should keep dropping in; they might need someone one day.

I have also decided to study Healthcare Skills from September. Sitting at home when you're used to working is not easy.

The information I got from the IRC is helping me a lot. I've learnt many things, including how to navigate job sites like Indeed and use my LinkedIn effectively.

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Aminat completed the IRC's Integration From Day One Programme, which gives people seeking protection and refugees the skills to work.



# Orla Ní Éilí

**I moved to Ennis in 1993. At that time, Russian aircraft flew from Cuba through Shannon Airport and on to Moscow. The first people I met were from Tiananmen Square, then Cuba, and then Kosovo. Because of US pre-clearance, people found themselves in Ireland and not in America as they expected. So many people were arriving that when you went into the Lifford Arms, the new arrivals' B&B, a carpenter would be partitioning a bedroom into two, then four.**

Social welfare was different then. We were supporting people to move into rented accommodation. Everything was arranged through the Department of Justice, which was quite small, and we all knew each other. Linking with Nadette (Foley) and the IRC was invaluable as I was able to share information, deepen the work, and become an IRC officer with all those benefits and other workers.

Alongside linking with other agencies and running English classes, we used to run socials where people would play cards and go out and do school talks, etc. As Tony McEnery (Red Cross) would say: "When your own was away, wouldn't you want them to be treated well?" I think the work we did managed to hold the frame, but this May in Clare, that frame felt so shaken. It was devastating to see.

The bulk of the sector's work is with the applicants. They need to be on top of their cases. It's a privilege for me, although some days are very tough, knowing that you might be the instrument to make things happen.

It is great for Ireland to offer international protection to people who find themselves in terrible circumstances that force them to flee, but aspects of the system badly need to be changed.

Wouldn't it be great if people were only travelling for fun, work, tourism? It's heart-breaking to sit with people every week who had to leave everything behind, to try and find their feet in another country and a system that's hard to understand.

The onus is on our government to try to convince other countries to respect their own citizens' human rights and stop penalising people because they are gay or have particular political affiliations, etc.

In 30 years, we've met people from many different countries, backgrounds, and religions. We've seen people settle down, marry, and get on with life; some have moved elsewhere. The common denominator is that people want to live life and build a better future for themselves and their children. The contribution they have made is huge. It adds to the texture of all our lives.

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Orla worked with the IRC from 1993-2007 and recently coordinated the Clare Immigrant Support Centre.



# Marwa Zamir

**My name is Marwa Zamir and I am from Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan. I moved to Ireland in 2016, when I was 13 years old, with my mom and three younger siblings. We left my home country because of war. I spent three years in Direct Provision, and my parents got refugee status in 2019.**

Now I am studying law and criminology at Maynooth University. My passion for human rights and law developed while watching my dad working at the United Nations office in Kabul.

My life was very different in Kabul but, before moving to Ireland, I thought it was normal. In Afghanistan, I lived in a society where going out at all carried a risk, as anything could happen at any minute. My parents made sure we had a good education though. My siblings and I went to school, but otherwise, we spent most of our time indoors. But I was very close to my family, especially my cousins, and we had so much fun.

Moving to a new country, leaving everything behind to apply for asylum in Ireland, introduced me to Direct Provision, where I struggled with depression, insecurity, huge responsibilities, isolation, and an overall sense of not knowing what was going to happen next.

But generally, it was a journey that made me stronger, boosted my confidence, and made me mature more quickly.

Ireland is my home now, and I love everything about it.

My hopes for my future include being a lawyer and a kind and passionate person working in the human rights sector, where I will be able to be helpful to my community, make changes, and also have a voice.

My advice for young people that are in the asylum process: This is a hard but quick journey that's going to pass. Don't lose hope; it will all be over one day. Just be strong and learn from it.

I miss the feeling of being home. I miss the family gatherings we had and everything really, to be honest. But I am happy that we are all safe and that my siblings and I have a normal lifestyle and bright future.

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Marwa is a leader for the IRC Youth Group and a member of the UNHCR Refugee Advisory Board.



# Kensika Monshengwo

**My name is Kensika Monshengwo, and I am from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I first came across the Irish Refugee Council in 1998 when I heard Nadette Foley, its Director at the time, speak very eloquently about the plight of asylum seekers in Ireland.**

My experience of the IRC is that of an open organisation, literally and figuratively, because the doors were actually open to the public. It was a place where refugees and asylum seekers regularly went to acquire information or get help with their cases.

An army of professional lawyers, trainees, and volunteers were personally involved in defending clients who found a warm and human welcome. I made lifelong friendships there. I frequented the IRC first as a service user and, subsequently, as its Chairperson.

The most memorable and bitter moment was the decision, under my direction, to close the IRC office in Ennis – a regrettable step necessitated by the difficult financial situation at that time.

In its 30 years of existence, the IRC can boast of having collaborated with other NGOs to pressure the State to adopt appropriate legislation, create specialised agencies, and implement mechanisms for processing asylum applications.

Today, the situation of international protection leaves a bitter taste when one comes from a developing country. The right to asylum was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, but, at that time, most African countries were still under the yoke of colonisation.

Consequently, everything seems to suggest that these rights were published for Europeans and not necessarily for the rest of the world. Logically.

The toughening of measures penalising asylum seekers and sympathetic NGOs in Italy, Greece, or in certain European countries contrasts sharply with the warm and human welcome that was reserved for refugees from Ukraine; there are obviously double standards in the implementation of the said international protection. Failure to denounce this would constitute intellectual dishonesty.

Despite recent attacks and the rejection of asylum seekers by organised extremist groups, Ireland is still one of the few countries in the European Union that does not have far-right political parties in its parliament. Long may it last.

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**Kensika works with the Immigrant Council of Ireland and authored the book *Okani agus Banríocht an Chrogaill*.**



# Oksana Starzhynska

**I remember the sound of the first downed plane as it happened right over my house in Kyiv on the morning of the 24th of February, 2022. We spent the night in my garage with my parents and two kids. The walls were shaking because of air defence, sending chills down my spine. I feared for my kids (nine and 18 then). I couldn't imagine that life could change in a moment.**

My children's father called the next day, saying I needed to leave immediately. I didn't even have enough time to pack the essential stuff. My kids and I jumped in a car and just left. My parents stayed in Kyiv. The most painful thing was to say goodbye to them as we didn't know if we would see each other again.

We left for Poland the day Russian troops entered Kyiv. We saw many tanks. It was difficult to know if they were Ukrainians or "invaders". We were stopped at a military checkpoint. My heart stopped for a few minutes. Thank God, it was Ukrainian soldiers. We had to stay a night with our relatives in Zhytomyr – 150 km from Kyiv – because the traffic was heavy. 30 minutes after we left, Russians started shootings in Zhytomyr.

We finally got to the Polish border. We queued for three days to get to customs. We were hungry. My older daughter, a vegetarian then, bought the only thing she could find in a nearby convenience store – a small pack of chicken wings that we shared.

After customs, we went to my oldest daughter, who was living in Poznan (Poland). We were finally safe, but the stress of the war was so severe for my youngest that she stopped talking. Just as we were looking for a psychologist to help her, my friend here called and told me to come. The decision was made – we were going to Ireland.

Ireland welcomed us with open arms. We've met a lot of nice people and got support from different people. After a week of silence, my youngest started talking again.

Time passed. I just couldn't sit still when my people desperately needed help and I have good English. I was delighted that the IRC was opening a Ukrainian language helpline. I joined. Since last April, we have helped thousands of people. Whenever I hear, "Thank you. You really helped me," it makes me tick.

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Oksana is leading the IRC's Ukraine Response, providing information to people fleeing the war in Ukraine.



# Roisin Boyd

**We faced hostility then too, but it was not on the scale we see today. Despair, hope, relief, frustration, unsettling power relationships, laughter, courage, determination, a government minister's anger at an IRC press release – these are some of the words and phrases that come to mind when I recall my time at the IRC.**

Looking back now as we witness attacks – verbal and physical – on refugees and migrants from racist groups in Ireland and internationally, it feels more important than ever to protect those seeking international protection.

In a "culture of disbelief", the media plays a crucial role. Together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and National Union of Journalists (NUJ), I worked on *Reporting on Refugees – Guidance by and for Journalists*, which is even more relevant today. Immigrant communities (which now include some of our own journalistic colleagues) have told us how inaccurate press articles or broadcasts have even led to violence against them. Many of my former colleagues were ethical in their reporting. However, the "criminalising" of refugees, wrongly identified as "illegal", is amplified when crime or security correspondents are assigned to cover migration.

What I remember most about my time with the IRC is the huge energy. Everyone was committed to changing an unjust system. The legal team, particularly Maureen Kirkpatrick, worked tirelessly and forensically on asylum applications. Our Direct Provision campaign highlighted how the basic weekly payment of €19.10 had remained the same since its inception in 2000. Participants wore T-shirts with the slogan, "€19.10 = Not fair" at the Dublin City Marathon.

I remember the enthusiasm of those living in Direct Provision about taking part when I visited Direct Provision centres around the country. It was about being visible, about participating and being recognised. This marked one of the early events in a long campaign to expose the injustice of Direct Provision.

Bringing the stories of refugees and international protection applicants into the public domain is a complex process. Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche reminds us in *The Danger of a Single Story* that "if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding".

One stark reminder of how little I understood was when an asylum seeker I knew received their papers after a long and painful procedure. I expected they would be happy, but they expressed mixed feelings, explaining to me how much they had lost as they remembered all they had been forced to leave behind. While of course they were relieved, there was both heartbreak and celebration. There is no "single story".

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Roisin is the former Head of Communications for the IRC and teaches journalism at TU Dublin.



# Daniel Kamenyezi

**I'm from the east of Congo. I've been here in Ireland since 2019. I came under family reunification to join my mother. Being here is a game-changer. Although there are challenges, there are many opportunities to access education and employment in different sectors.**

I'm a student at TU Dublin studying Industrial and Environmental Physics. I have always been passionate about science. I want to be a physicist or an engineer. I hope I will be able to go back to Africa someday and use my knowledge and skills to develop industries.

Being here hasn't been easy. It was hard to connect with people when I arrived because English isn't my first language. I had to learn and adapt. I would sit in the library in the Ilac Centre (Dublin) during the day reading and go back home to teach my siblings in the evening.

It was challenging to get back into education; I couldn't go back to secondary school because of my age. I eventually got a place in Pearse College to get my Leaving Cert. I had to take three buses to school every day. One of my teachers knew I lacked English and she said, "Daniel, you just have to leave this subject and do something else. You can't get enough marks." I knew my purpose and ability, so I told her, "I choose to stay. If I fail, it's on me." I was studying twice as hard. Thank God, I got what I wanted.

Another challenge was with finding employment. They all wanted me to have experience, which I didn't have. One restaurant eventually offered me a job and trained me as a chef. I only left because managing my studies and work was hectic.

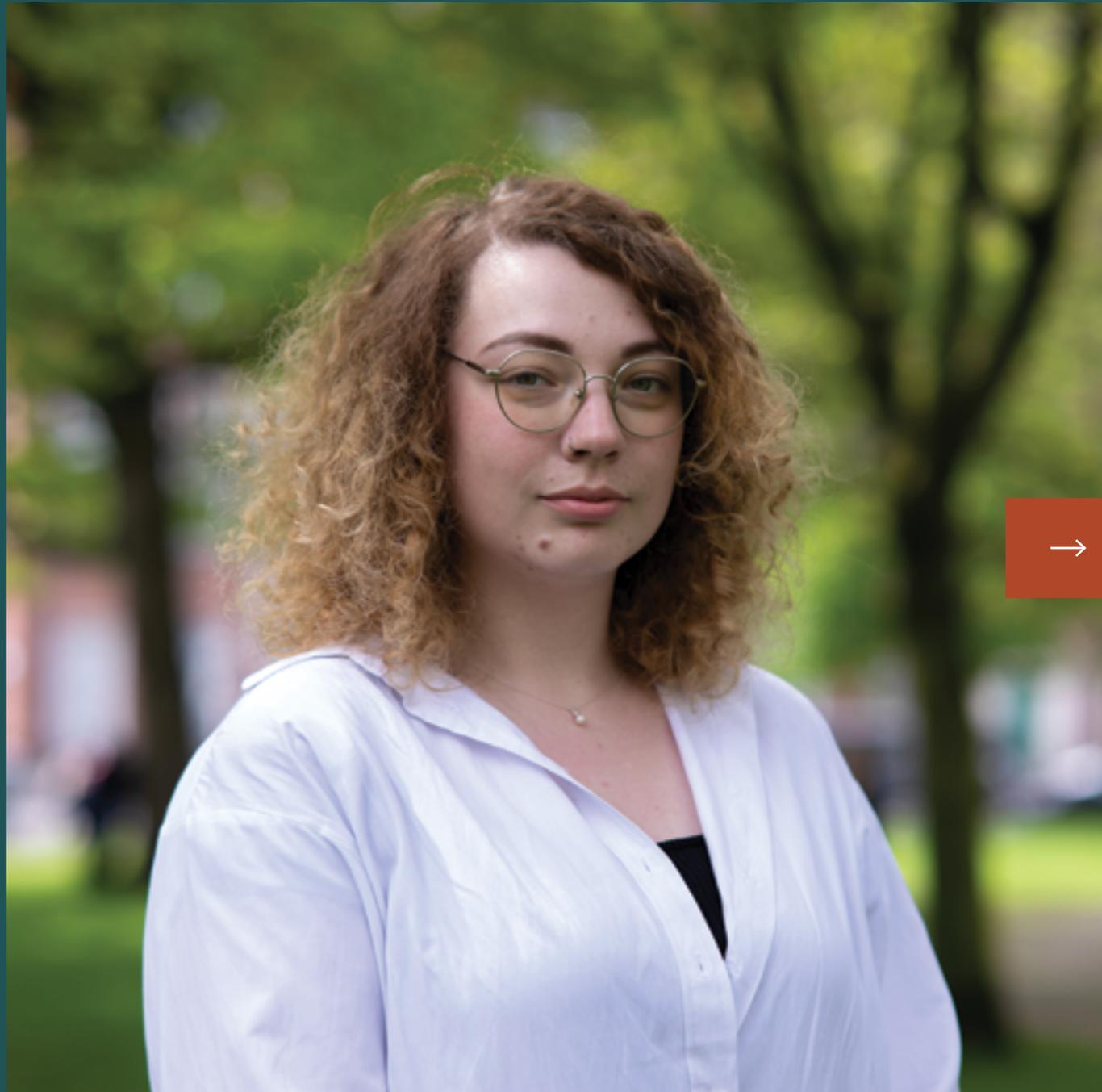
Now I'm looking for another job as I do music professionally. I go to different places in Ireland to perform at weddings and events.

I encourage those in similar circumstances to pursue their dreams and share their story – not with everyone, but with some people. Don't struggle alone; find someone you trust and let them in. They may know how to help. Don't lose hope.

The IRC is one place where we come together, forget about our trauma, and find hope about where we want to go and who we want to be.

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Daniel is a leader in the IRC Youth Group, bringing together young people in international protection.



# Anastasiia Kovalchuk

**On the morning of February 24, 2022, my friend came into my room in Kyiv and told me Russia had invaded Ukraine. “Stop joking,” I said, “I still have almost an hour of sleep,” only she wasn’t. I immediately called my parents, who lived in Vinnytsia. With our house close to a military airport, my mom told me she could hear bombings. By the end of that day, that airport had been destroyed.**

We called friends, watched the news constantly, and wondered how long the war would last. The longest was six months, we believed. We drank champagne. “We might be dead by the end of the day, so no waiting for a special moment.”

That evening my parents called to tell me that Dad was coming to fetch me. The Russians were bombing airports and military units all over Ukraine, and the way from my hometown to Kyiv was through the most intense battlefields. In tears, I told them not to. They cancelled the trip.

We spent that night in a shelter in Kyiv with small bags containing essential documents, clothing, money, a laptop, and sandwiches. We played cards, joked, laughed, and listened to the news. We slept on the stairs. Kids around us were crying; dogs were barking, but we were safe.

In the morning, my friend’s brother came to fetch her. We cried because we didn’t know when we would see each other again, if ever. It was hard, but I had to gather my thoughts. I had to go home as it was safer than Kyiv. My aunt found someone to collect me in a car – a young woman and her 10-year-old son.

A satnav told us the fastest route was through Vasylkiv, which had been bombed the evening before. My father met us on the way.

My parents and I decided that I had to leave the country. It was the most difficult decision in my life. I came to Ireland alone. Hardly knowing anyone, I felt so lonely, and I spent the first two weeks in tears. I missed my parents, friends, job, and life. Eventually, it sunk in that my life would never be the same again. I had to live with my past and future.

It’s over a year since I moved to Ireland. I am working with the Irish Refugee Council. We have helped thousands of Ukrainians. I’ve never been as proud of any job I’ve had before. I am grateful to the Irish people for opening doors to Ukrainians. You allowed me to live a normal life and to help my people and country.

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Anastasiia came to Ireland from Ukraine in 2022 and joined the IRC Ukraine Response team as a caseworker.



↑ This camping trip took place in Connemara in August, 2022. It was a collaboration between IRC's youth project Move Your Mood and Venture Out, and was funded by the VHI Wellbeing Fund. Twelve young people from our Youth Group took part in a three-day/two-night camping trip, where they built confidence, learned new skills for managing their mental health, made new long-lasting friendships, and had fun.



# Professor Afshin Samali

**I came to Ireland in 1985 when I was 17, fleeing the religious persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. Three days after arrival, my family moved to Sligo. There were not many non-Irish people in Sligo then. My brother and I attended a school with about 800 students, of whom only two boys were non-European. We stood out, were a novelty, and everyone was very curious.**

The '80s in Ireland was a difficult time economically. People wondered why we came to the country when so many were leaving for better opportunities. It wasn't an easy time for us. My mother, a teacher, worked as a waitress, while my father's veterinary qualifications weren't recognised and he did odd jobs, voluntary work, and wrote a couple of books.

Despite having no English, I decided to take advantage of every opportunity that was offered to me. If we want to succeed, we must strive for what we think is right, make sacrifices and not let failures stop us. Rather, we should learn from them.

About five years ago, a member of the UNHCR suggested to me that my story of success in my field could be inspiring for other refugees coming to Ireland today. Witnessing the growing negativity surrounding refugees and asylum seekers, and as a former refugee myself, I felt a moral duty to get involved.

So, I started working with the UNHCR, talking at events and giving media interviews. I could see the impact; even colleagues were surprised to learn I was from a refugee background.

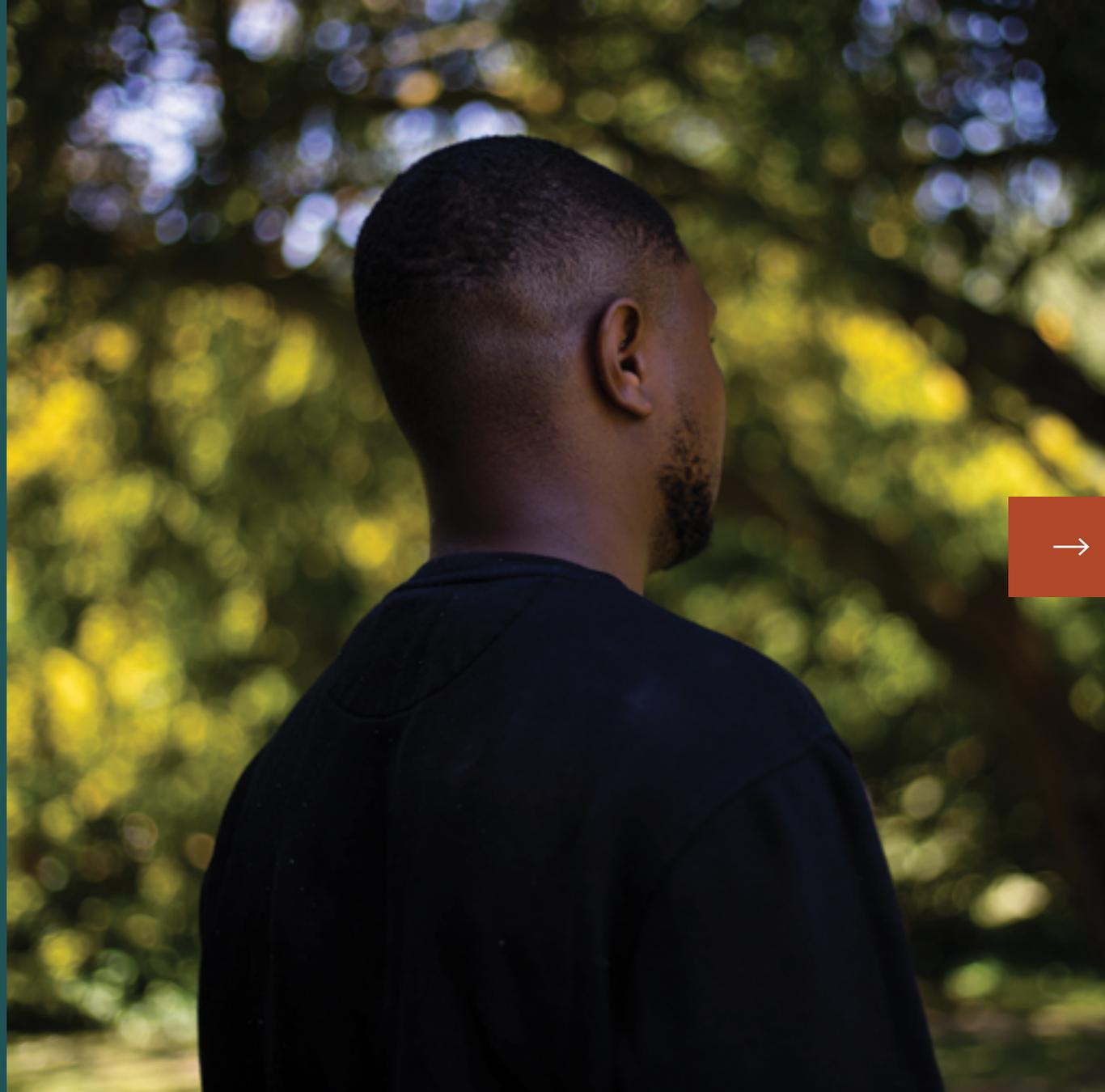
When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, I was invited to help those arriving in Ireland. Shortly after, I had a call from two women who were sponsoring 20 Afghan girls to come to Ireland and began to work with them.

Now, that number has grown to 150 across the country. Many are young girls aged 16-25, but there are also some young families. I have become a father figure for them, advising on family issues, education, giving them a sense of hope, purpose, and belonging by involving them in community-building initiatives.

Working with refugees in recent years has brought back many difficult memories. Sometimes we don't have to talk; just looking at each other, we can feel each other's pain. International protection is a lifeline for people who have lost all their hopes and dreams.

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Afshin is a Professor of Cancer Biology and leads a research team at the University of Galway.



# Ngqobile Mvundla

\*(name changed to protect identity)

**I arrived in Ireland on the 12th of February, 2022. I'm gay. In Zimbabwe, when you're like me, you aren't regarded as a person, but a demon that must be gotten rid of. To survive in the community, I had to fit in. It was hard having to hide who I really am and live a lie constantly, but I didn't have a choice. It was painful, disgusting, and depressing. I faced circumstances that made me consider suicide.**

My aunt understood my pain and suggested I leave Zimbabwe. We initially considered South Africa, but people there can be xenophobic. It's not exactly safe for gay people either, and it would mean living there illegally. After learning Ireland was a welcoming country for people needing safety, a friend suggested I come here. I saved up some money, and my aunt gave me some; that's how I got here.

At the airport, they took my biometric details, told me to go to the International Protection Office (IPO) on the 14th of February, and showed me the exit. I didn't know where else to go, so I slept in a McDonald's near the airport. Two days later, I went to the IPO, hoping that I would get accommodation. They gave me a €25 Dunnes voucher and told me they couldn't accommodate me immediately. I had to wait for their email, and also email them every night to confirm I was still unaccommodated. I remember having to ask to charge my phone and use Wi-Fi in coffee shops. Some would say no, some would let me.

The IPO officer told me I could get food and a bath at the Capuchin Day Centre. Due to pressure on their services, I soon discovered I could only shower 3-4 times a week. I would wake up in the morning, go for meals, roam around Dublin with my backpack, then return to McDonald's to sleep. I was very cold and didn't have much to cover up with.

I left my suitcase at the airport. It was pointless for me to have it when I didn't have accommodation.

A week later, Frank (an IRC caseworker) helped me get €70. I bought a small tent and found an abandoned building. I pitched my tent behind it and shared it with another homeless applicant.

I never imagined that I would be homeless. It was tough, but still better than home. I was never going to go back, even without accommodation.

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The IRC provided Ngqobile with information on housing and the protection process.



# Sylvia Wigham

**For many years, I have been involved in befriending activities with several international protection applicants. Most were introduced to me by the Irish Refugee Council who have always been extremely helpful in providing supportive advice. (A big thank you here to Rory O’Neill in particular). For me, befriending means accompanying people on their journey through the difficulties of living in Direct Provision, negotiating the labyrinthine international protection application process, gaining status or citizenship, and gradual settling into Irish society.**

Of course, each person is an individual with very different skills and needs. Those I work with either have no family at all or none in Ireland. My husband and I see our role as acting as an “Irish family” and supporting whenever required. The following are some of the things that come to mind: accompanying those sitting distressing interviews at the International Protection Office (IPO), providing overnight accommodation, sharing meals, celebrating birthdays and Christmas, day trips to Co. Wicklow, help with written English, form filling, job applications, accompanying to Social Welfare offices and credit unions, attending at Junior Infants induction day, hospital visits, and so on...

Sometimes we have provided financial help like paying for gym membership or a laptop, but most important of all is extending the hand of friendship and providing a listening and sympathetic ear. Recently I’ve become very aware of just how lonely life can be for exiles when most of the practical problems have been overcome and the prospect of remaining in Ireland permanently becomes a reality.

Why I support this issue in particular?

I have been influenced by family, faith, and training. My grandparents took in Jewish refugees during the Second World War, my Quaker faith stresses the importance of welcoming the stranger, and my occupational therapy training enables me to establish boundaries and help people to solve their own difficulties. A hand up, not a handout! It’s not all deadly serious – I have had fun, and gained some good friends and an insight into other cultures and customs.

The burgeoning homelessness problem and the rise of the far right makes me very despondent, and as an Irish citizen myself, also deeply ashamed. I feel it is incumbent on me to do whatever I can in whatever small way to make someone who is seeking our protection feel welcome here. And, who knows, one day the tables could easily be turned, and we who are safe today could be forced to flee and seek protection ourselves among strangers.

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Sylvia is a retired Occupational Therapist, a Quaker, and a long-time supporter of the IRC.



# Phillip Naomi

**I came to Ireland in 2010 at the age of 18 to study. I knew nothing about international protection, but I knew who I was and that returning to Malawi would be unsafe. I belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and that's a big no-no in my home country. However, people here saw the real me and made me realise that I could be protected.**

Back home, after receiving so much bullying, I was depressed and suffering from severe anxiety. I told my parents I wanted to leave, and I'm grateful to them for understanding that I didn't belong. They were very supportive and they made that happen for me.

I was lucky because before going into the (asylum) process, I was in an LGBTQ+ group for young people between the ages of 13-24, through the organisation *BelongTo* – that's where I got the information to access the IRC. It was small then; I remember my lawyer was Nick (Henderson, CEO of IRC), who I have so much respect for.

When I applied for protection, I was just thrown into the world. I had no idea where to start. I lived in two Direct Provision centres and information wasn't as readily available as it is now. Mostly, I was thinking about my family and wondering will I see them again? Am I doing the right thing? Am I being selfish for choosing myself?

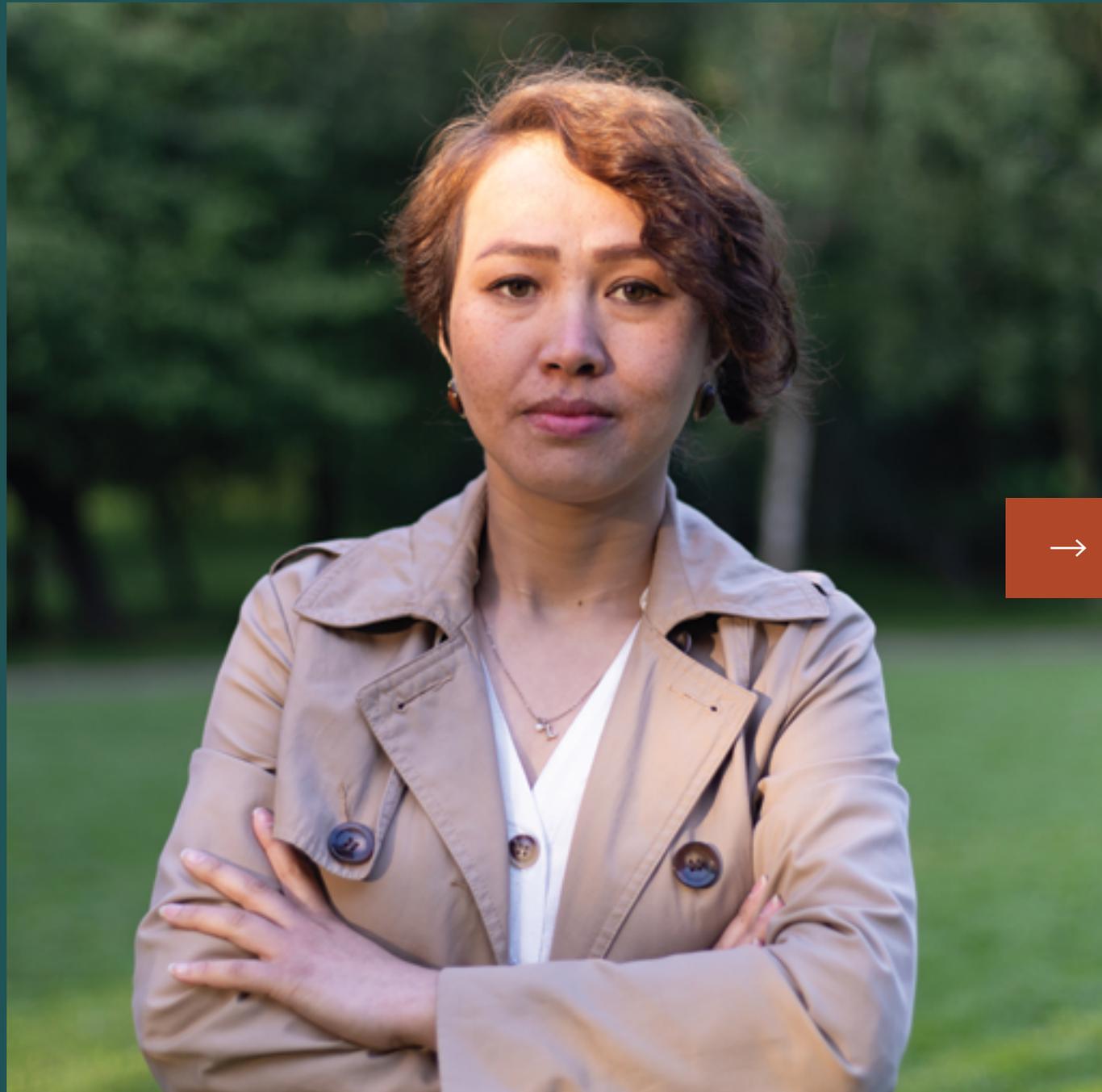
Living away from family, I have been my own support, mentally and physically. All I've done, since I was a teenager then transitioning into my twenties, is work, pay bills, and educate myself. I've never lived on social welfare. I wish I'd had all the resources and support provided by organisations like IRC around my time – I feel like I missed out on a lot.

I've been fully Irish for almost a decade now – I call myself "Ifrish" (Irish African). I don't think I could have been talking to you now if it wasn't for the protection I received.

Though it's hard to be a minority within a minority, here the law allows you to be who you are, and there are protections. It's very different to Africa. You can hold hands with whomever you want; nobody will say anything unless you happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

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Phillip works in fashion, supports our Youth Work, and holds a degree in Business Management.



# Latifa Javad

**I arrived in Ireland in 2021; my son joined me in 2023. The Irish people saved me from the Taliban, from death and imprisonment. I never imagined that, one day, I would be in another country, starting from zero, with another language, culture, and alone.**

For six years, I was a lawyer in Afghanistan. I was Head of Legal Aid in my hometown and managing six lawyers. I went on to work with the office of the Vice President of Afghanistan as a legal advisor and child rights advisor. I rose to Head of Corruption Investigations in the (Afghan) Anti-corruption Commission. I worked hard to get there; then, I lost everything in one day.

When they (the Taliban) took over Kabul, it was like watching a movie; like witnessing the end of life, the world, the earth. Horrible. I lost everything, even my son. I missed two of his birthdays. I spent a week in hiding before I got out. I still get emotional when I talk about it.

Starting over wasn't easy. I got depression. I thought about the dreams I had had, my friends, my family, and all the women imprisoned by the Taliban. I try to make the most of my life here now, but I don't have a lot of energy because I have experienced a huge trauma. Over time, I have made Irish and Afghan friends and life is getting better. I have applied for a Master's in Peacebuilding at Maynooth University – this is my favourite subject because of my experience. My dream is to get my master's and work for peace. I can feel the pain of the people from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, and Sudan because I too am a refugee of war.

Fellow refugees, we must be strong. We must continue to live our lives.

The night before my son arrived in Ireland, I thought my heart would stop when I saw him. When I hugged him, it was like his blood was running through my veins. Before he came, I had nightmares. I dreamt of explosions, the sound of the Taliban approaching, and sometimes I dreamt that my son got hurt.

Once he reached Ireland, I could finally rest easy. I felt so tired that I fell asleep very quickly that night. Now, by 10pm every night, I am asleep.

Refugees don't want to be refugees. They become refugees as a result of war, fear of persecution, and financial hardship. When I was in trouble, I had to tell myself that a living mother is better than a dead mother – for my son and for myself.

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The IRC helped reunite Latifa with her son.



# Nadette Foley

When I started as a volunteer for the IRC in 1991, Ireland had no system for determination of protection applications under the UN 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Despite Ireland ratifying the Convention and joining UNHCR, the 1936 Aliens Acts and its statutory instruments were the only Irish immigration laws. The Department of Justice had two and a half staff in the Aliens Division, and people got their immigration stamps from the Aliens Office of An Garda Síochána. Some solicitors knew nothing about refugee protection and erroneously applied for "visas" for people who had strong protection claims under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

When I returned from working with Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Dr Wendy Cox, one of the founders of the IRC, told me of the need for training for solicitors and barristers in international refugee law. With this training, they could provide pro bono legal advice to the very small but growing number of those seeking protection.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and Bobby Eagar provided expert input into the first ever refugee law training day at the Law Society in Blackhall Place in 1991, organised by volunteer members of the IRC.

Opening the first IRC office in early 1992 was significant. Meeting refugees who had been living in Ireland for many years, but who never had the opportunity to put their asylum claims in writing and get pro bono legal support, made it clear that there was a real need for a specialist organisation to advocate for refugee protection in Ireland. Around 39 people were recorded as seeking asylum in 1992.

In 1994, the workload increased to the extent that one member of staff and one volunteer could no longer cope, and Fás (the government agency supporting and training unemployed people) approved a Community Employment Scheme.

This brought a full-time manager, 15 part-time employees, and a training budget. People who had been recognised as refugees, recent graduates, and others joined the IRC to learn how to support newly arrived refugees and establish the first ever refugee legal project in Ireland.

I am shocked that though Ireland is now a much richer country than it was in the 1990s, we are failing even more seriously to fulfil our responsibilities to protect those who are forced to seek international protection than we were before we had a specific refugee protection law or system of determination.



# Jonah Mudehwe

**I will be 15 years in the service of the of the IRC in a couple in a couple of months' time. Time flies, and it only feels like yesterday when I was recruited as part of a team that was responsible for the affairs of the Council during a transitional period. I did not think that I would stay beyond the transition, but here I am 15 years later.**

Over the years, I have seen the work of the Council grow hugely in response to the increasing number of people seeking international protection in Ireland, and as new needs emerge when these people try to become part of the society and make Ireland their new home. It has also evolved from just helping people with the asylum application process to advocating for a just, fair, and efficient asylum processing system and, now, to supporting refugees to settle down in communities.

As a result, over the past seven years, we have seen the Council help people leaving Direct Provision to secure housing, continue with further education, and secure jobs so that they are empowered to become active citizens.

I love my job and there is a good team environment where every effort is made to live up to the ethos of the organisation. The Board is well-engaged and supportive through progressive policies.

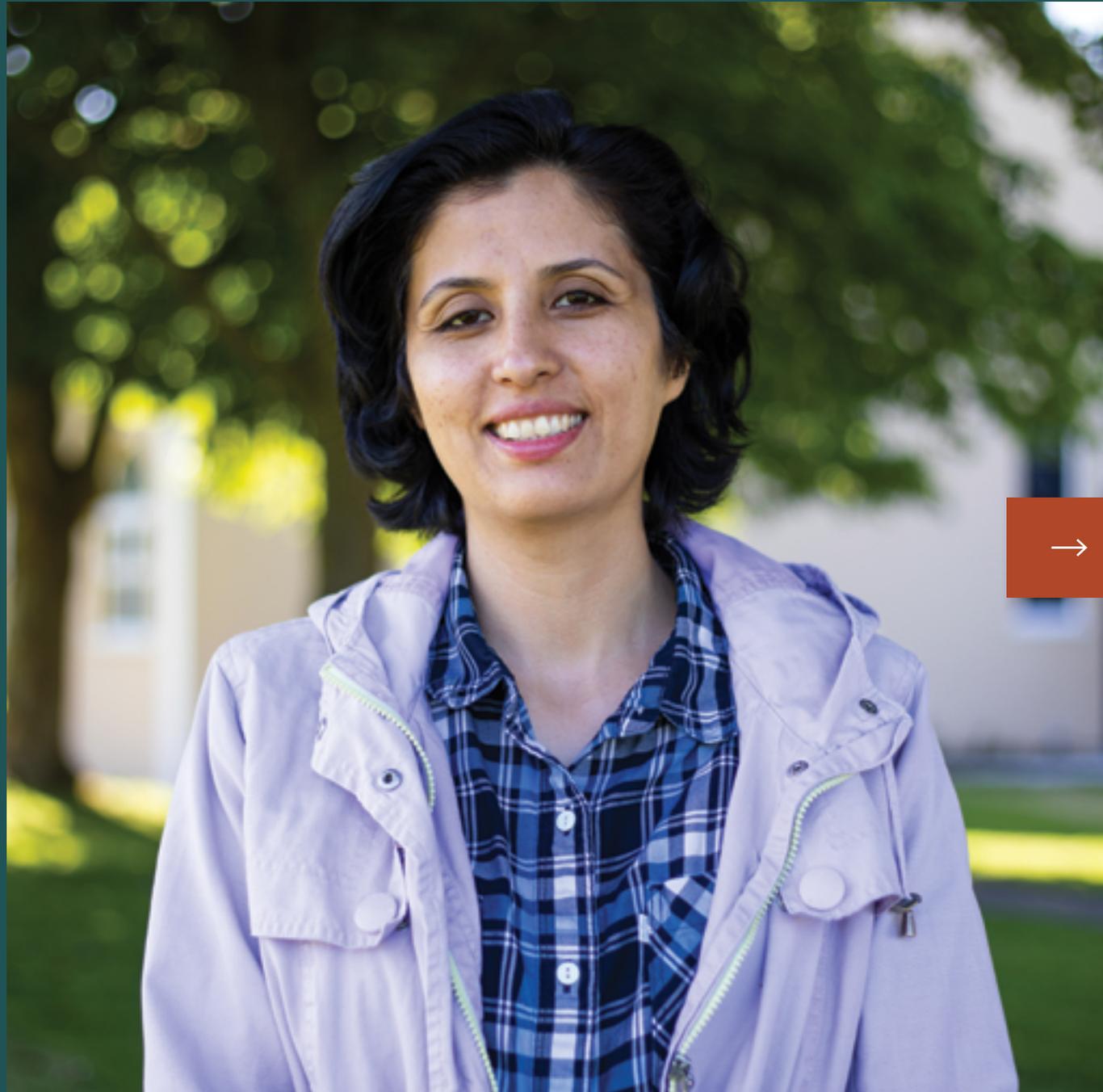
I feel that it is an honour and privilege to be part of the work that puts us into the service of others. I have been working in the charity sector for a long time and have come to appreciate that, although we need to take care of ourselves and are entitled to fair compensation, not everything is about money. We also need to give back to the community by helping those who are disadvantaged, and this is greatly rewarding.

What keeps me going in challenging times is a combination of my personal beliefs and values and that strong spirit of "Ubuntu" (an African term used to refer to humanity to others) that we get from the broader Irish society. It makes me feel that we are part of something much bigger.

I have seen this from one refugee crisis to another when members of the community do whatever they can, from organising bake-sales and special church collections to opening their doors to refugees in support of the work of the Council.

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**Jonah is Finance Manager at the IRC and the longest-serving member of staff on our team.**



# Ghazal Maher

**I arrived in Ireland in September 2021. Before leaving Afghanistan, I was a university lecturer and a dentist at my clinic. My husband was managing an Irish company. We lived in a beautiful apartment, and our daughter attended the best school in the city. I had just bought a car, but never got the chance to drive it. I left with nothing, not even my savings or certificates.**

For me and my family, things took a drastic turn with the fall of the Afghan government. The news terrified me, especially when I discovered that the Taliban were looking for my husband and my neighbour was a member.

On our first attempt to go to Kabul airport, a suicide bombing forced us to turn back. We had to stay on the bus for four days, driving around the city. We ran out of food and water, but we couldn't leave the bus, even to relieve ourselves. The rescuers gave up and told us to return to our homes, but home was too dangerous.

One hotel was still in the hands of American soldiers, so we went there. They could accommodate us for 24 hours only. My family and a few others who had kept their hope alive got onto another bus, which reached the airport. We left on a US military plane without knowing where we were going. We just wanted to get out of Afghanistan.

When we landed in Qatar, we were informed that Ireland had given us refugee status, and the US and Germany had also offered to take us in. We had 30 minutes to decide. We chose Ireland because it gave us great status and was an English-speaking country, so we wouldn't waste time learning the language.

After two weeks of feeling safe in Ireland following such life-and-death moments, I wanted to return to my homeland. I was convinced to stay after my friends told me how the Taliban were treating people, particularly women.

Now I feel very lucky to be here. The proper way to repay the Irish people for their kindness is through our family's expertise. My husband is already working as a senior project manager. I'm working as a dental assistant while I process my accreditation to practise as a dentist, and I recently got my driver's licence.

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The IRC helped Ghazal reunite with her father.



# Niamh Phelan

**The power of protection is sharing a country, a home, friendship, and love when that has been taken away. It is safety when it's most needed. Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right. To exercise that right, we need the EU and our governments to provide safe, legal migration routes. We must ensure these mechanisms operate humanely and efficiently to benefit both people seeking international protection and our communities.**

Sadly, this is not currently the case, with pushback at European sea and land borders by governments and Frontex. Those who make it to Europe often experience poor reception conditions, as seen in the for-profit Direct Provision and emergency accommodation system in Ireland.

Inequality in reception conditions has grown in Ireland under FG/FF/Green governments, reaching a low point in May 2023, when over 500 non-Ukrainians were left street homeless on arrival in Ireland.

I helped my community welcome a Syrian family to Dublin 8 in 2021. Our (Community Sponsorship) group secured accommodation, fundraised, and offered our friendship to the family on their arrival.

Having hosted in my own home informally and through the Red Cross and Afghan Ascend, it has been my honour and privilege to work with Syrian, Afghan, and Sierra Leonean refugees as they rebuild their lives in Ireland. These experiences have expanded my life to include their wonderful, diverse cultures.

I used my skills as a technologist to manage volunteer technologists who created the Irish Red Cross National Register of Pledges in 2015. The Register aggregates pledges of accommodation, goods, and services from the public.

Over 6,500 Ukrainians were housed in accommodation pledged on the website in 2022. I want to recognise everyone who made this happen.

I encourage the third sector in Ireland and overseas to facilitate digital transformation to ensure they are equipped to provide services that scale efficiently and safely to comply with data privacy regulations and ethics. The criticality of supporting technologies in scaling any programmes needs to be recognised. I also encourage IT professionals, and professionals from all backgrounds, to pledge their specialist skills to support the third sector – because together, we can create the power to protect.

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Niamh is a founding member of the Dublin 8 Refugee Community Sponsorship group, supported by the IRC.



# Azad Izzeddin

I am Syrian and Kurdish. I claimed asylum in Ireland at the end of 2013 and will be 10 years here in December. I left Syria two years after the war started. I know people have different views about refugees. Who wants to move out of their country, leave their history, family, and everything to be somewhere new, learn a new language and everything? If these wars stopped, millions of people in Europe would go back home.

Being a refugee is tough, even after you get status. You have cousins and uncles who are still in danger, and you can't bring them over.

I was an English teacher for seven years before leaving Syria. I had to start over in Ireland. In 2016, I graduated with an MPhil in Applied Linguistics from Trinity College Dublin, and I now work as an interpreter.

As someone from a refugee background, who is now an Irish citizen, I decided that, whenever I could, I would help others. When I got here, I was happy because all my problems were sorted. Many people come here without family and have gone through a lot. They need someone to talk to – a friend. Emotionally and mentally, it helps. I found the support I needed at the Irish Refugee Council. I would love to see other refugees get the same. By offering to volunteer, I hope to help others too.

Do whatever you can. For someone who is newly arrived and has nothing, helping, even a little bit, is like saving them from drowning. I could be on my way to the IPO, and somebody might say something racist to me. When I get to the office, someone else might smile at me; that could change my impression and make me happy for a week.

If somebody offered me a room, how could I ever forget that? I have nowhere to go, and you have put a roof over my head. This is coming from my heart because I saw and felt it.

One day, just before I got my citizenship, I watched people get on an Aircoach bus to go to the airport. I got so emotional watching the bus move away. I thought about how lucky I was to have a safe home here and not have to go anymore.

International protection saves your life and changes it for the better.

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IRC helped Azad reunite with his brother. He helps the IRC with the interpretation of Kurdish and Arabic.



# Princess Graham

**I have been in Ireland for a year. I arrived in March 2022, a month before I turned 18. I fled because of female genital mutilation (FGM). My mum's tradition believes in FGM, so everyone was putting pressure on me to undergo it after my dad died in 2021. One of my relatives helped me escape to Ireland a month before the ceremony.**

I had no idea what international protection was and didn't know anything about Ireland as a country. On March 27th, 2022, I walked through the doors of the International Protection Office, not knowing what to say. I have been living in Direct Provision ever since.

My journey has been a rollercoaster. It's hard to be in a new country with no family. I can't eat well. I miss my family, friends, and living in a home, not a hotel. I can't cook my own food or dress how I want because I stay with hundreds of people I don't know.

I walk 30 minutes to school from Tuesday to Friday because there is no bus from the hotel to school. I'm still waiting for my IPO interview. I don't know my fate, and it's giving me anxiety. I am just doing stuff without knowing what the outcome will be. There are a lot of young people in my situation. We see older people who came after us being called for their interviews. I was eligible for the Erasmus programme to do my placement in France but I couldn't go because I'm still in limbo.

It's not easy, but there's a brighter side; I have just finished my level 5 qualification in social care. In September, I will progress to level 6, then 7, and then 8. I am trying to make a life for myself. I want to go as high as I can.

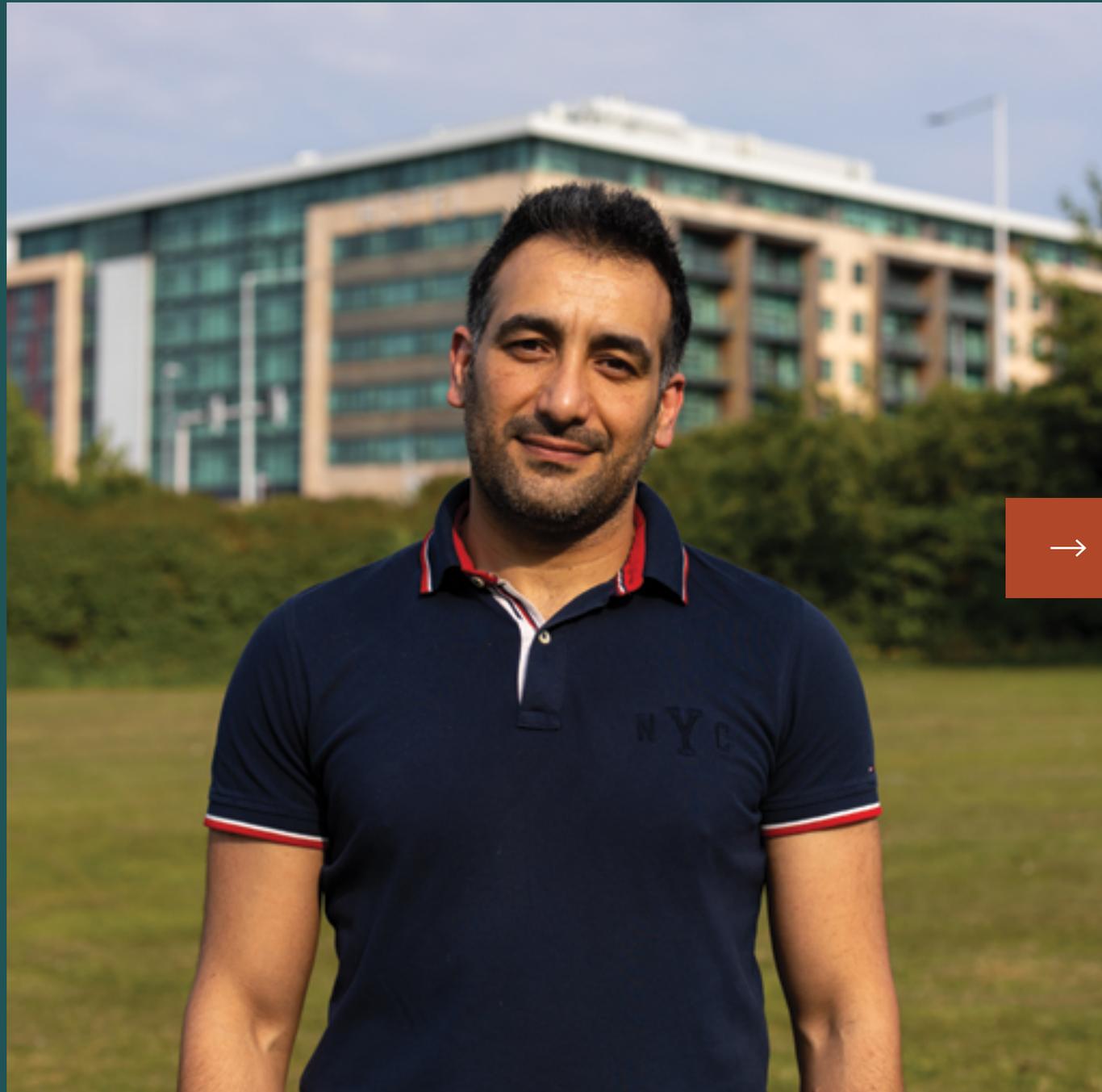
I have applied for an online Community Development and Leadership Course because I don't qualify for Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) yet and can't afford to pay tuition at local universities.

I want to work in a sector where decisions are made, like in Tusla or the IPO, because I have been in the shoes of their clients. I know where those shoes pinch and I will do whatever I can for the young people who come after me.

I know this situation has a way of making you older than you are, but I would say to young people in international protection, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

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Princess is a member of the IRC Youth Group and has been supported by our teams to get funding for her studies.



# Mohsen Ghatei

I'm originally from Iran and arrived in Ireland in April 2010. I fled because of persecution. I was a third-year medical science student and student activist in Shiraz. We had a big demonstration about electoral processes. Undercover police filmed it. A few months later, they raided my home and took all my documents. I was banned from the university because I was against their idea of dictatorial politics. My life was threatened. I escaped and came to Ireland with my wife.

I only knew Ireland as a small country close to England that's always raining. Even when I left Iran, I didn't plan to come here. I just wanted to escape and be somewhere safe. With my documents gone, I had to travel illegally, and this is where I landed.

Ireland was a new world for me. For five years, I lived in a hostel in Clonakilty. I knew a bit of English, so I first worked to improve my language. Then to continue my education, I learnt about Irish culture and history, and how they were colonised by the English years ago. If you look at Ireland's history, they are very strong people who helped each other reach this stage.

Living in a hostel in a new country is like being in a desert. You're looking for help to survive. Language is a barrier. Many people come here with little to no English. I was one of those people at that time. I got help to work toward my future at the IRC.

Through the IRC, I made friends and got to know the many groups that support refugees from all over.

I offered to translate English to Persian to help others, because I got help when I needed it. Helping others is the best karma.

Even now, when the cost of living and housing situation is making people turn against each other, we can't throw our sadness or anxiousness at each other. The system is the problem.

The best thing to do is try to help each other improve our lives.

International protection opened a new season for my life. I was reborn and started from zero again. To someone starting this process, there are always people willing to help. If they weren't there, I wouldn't have this life I'm living.

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Mohsen continued his education with IRC's support. He's an Interim Medical Scientist at the Beacon Hospital.



# Maeve Foreman

**Social justice and human rights have been important to me since I worked with Simon Community as a teenager. My role as a social worker brought me in contact with refugees and asylum seekers.**

I joined the Board of IRC in 2017 when the campaign to end Direct Provision was gaining momentum. There was real hope that it might end and the living conditions of asylum seekers would improve.

Then along came COVID, the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and a massive increase in homelessness and lack of housing opportunities.

Kakuzō (1906) said: “The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings.” The IRC epitomises that, particularly when you look at how it responded to challenges over the past couple of years. Asylum seekers were particularly vulnerable during the early days of COVID, as evidenced by the IRC’s 2020 report *“Powerless”: Experiences of Direct Provision During the Covid-19 Pandemic*. When the Taliban took over in Afghanistan in August 2021, the IRC assisted many people in relocating to Ireland. Just six months later, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in a mass exodus, the IRC set up an emergency helpline to provide advice and information.

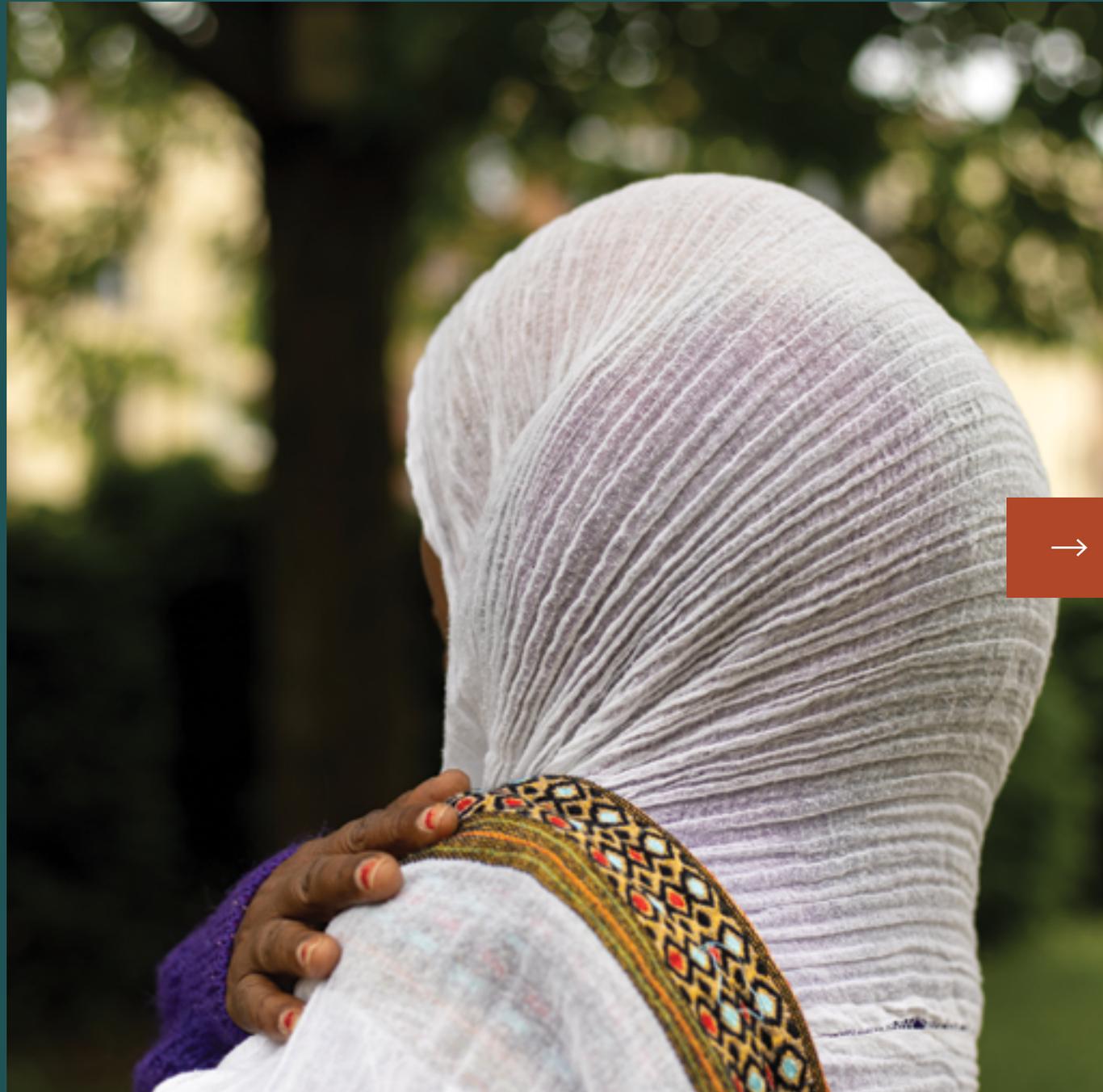
Since I’ve joined the Board, the IRC has grown significantly to meet the needs of the people it serves in increasingly challenging times. Over the past year, we’ve been working on a new Strategic Plan for 2023-25. This has involved revisiting the IRC’s vision, mission, and values, as well as its priorities and goals.

Examples of the power of protection can be seen in the positive impact the IRC has on improving the lives of people it serves, and on government policy and practice. This includes the employment for migrant women, education access and youth work projects, and the Law Centre’s recent landmark court case, which challenged the State over its failure to provide accommodation for international protection applicants.

The situation facing asylum seekers and refugees arriving into Ireland seems worse than it’s ever been, with increasing numbers experiencing homelessness on arrival, highlighting the need for protection for all asylum seekers. The need for the IRC to continue to develop its work in the area of international protection has never been so evident.

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**Maeve is on the IRC Board of Directors. She is a retired Trinity College lecturer and former senior medical social worker.**



# Kahasa Tesfay

**I have been in Ireland since July 2019. I never thought I would leave Eritrea until soldiers took my husband away for reasons I do not know. I still don't know whether he is alive or not. It became very difficult for me to take care of my children. Life was very hard and unsafe. My first-born son had to leave because the soldiers were coming to conscript him while he was still a child. He never returned.**

My husband's friend, whom we trusted, convinced me it was better for my children and I if I left Eritrea. I had no idea I would end up so far away from home and would be separated from my children for so long.

When I arrived in Ireland, it was very tough because I didn't know anyone. I can't speak English and can't write. Life got much better once I got in touch with the IRC. Heidi (Holden, IRC Legal Officer in the Independent Law Centre) helped me with everything, including my medical appointments.

However, I remained worried about my children. Eventually, they left for Ethiopia on foot. For a long time, I didn't know where they were, and they didn't know where I was until they got to Ethiopia.

It was a miracle that the person who took them in was known to someone in my church in Dublin and by luck, we were reconnected.

Soon after my children arrived in Ethiopia, the war in Tigray broke out. The three older children managed to walk to Addis Ababa, but my youngest, 12 at the time, remained in Tigray because he wasn't strong enough to make the five-day journey. They left him with a woman I hope to meet someday who helped them in my absence.

For about another year, I didn't know how he was doing because the war cut off all communications with Tigray.

Since I received my refugee status, my life has been renewed. When I meet my children, I'm sure that my health will greatly improve too. To be with them is everything to me.

I miss my country because there is no place like home. Here, my religion (Orthodox Christian), which I used to practise every day, has church only once a week. But my hope for the future is to see my children get an education and live a good life, because I didn't get the opportunity.

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The IRC supported Kahasa with her application for International Protection and her Family Reunification application.



# Abdul Mohamed Jama

**I am from Somalia. I came here as an asylum seeker in September 2021. I left because of the war and al-Shabaab.**

No one bothered me when I was underage. It was after I finished my high school that the al-Shabaab came for me, telling me I needed to join them. They said if I didn't, they would do anything to my family. My father and my uncle helped me escape. Immediately after I left, they were threatening my father and he had to flee too. We're still looking for him. My father and I were like friends.

I got my refugee status last May. It means a lot that I was accepted and protected here. Before, as someone from a far country in a new country, I was afraid they might send me back.

I live in Newbridge now, my third place since I arrived. Unlike the other places I was in, I like that I have been here for a long time, and we all know each other. It's nice not to be moved around a lot. It has allowed me to develop friendships.

While I still worry about my family in Somalia, life in Ireland has been good. The people are nice and the system of government works. If you need education or a job, you get it. I can't wait to start school in September. I used to help my father in his garage, and I liked it so I will be going back to study mechanical engineering. I dream of the day I will own a house.

The support I have received from the IRC through the Youth Group made things a lot easier, and now I refer all the young people in protection to them.

For me, international protection is like a parent or adult protecting a child running away from an enemy. It is when other countries put us behind their back to protect us from attacks.

To someone who is just arriving to seek protection, I want to tell you not to lose hope. God has good plans for you, and everyone has their time so wait for it.

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The IRC has supported Abdul with his education, employment, and family reunification needs.



# Çağdaş Gökbel

**My wife and I arrived in Ireland in September 2019 from Turkey. I am a journalist and a writer. Turkey has been in a dramatic change for a long time. The Erdoğan regime of 21 years has liquidated the republic with all its values. It was no longer possible to be a journalist and writer in Turkey, where constitutional order has completely disappeared. I was openly threatened because of my profession.**

Fleeing to Ireland was a conscious choice for me. I knew its history, struggles, and the historical partnership between Turkey and Ireland, which dates back to the Great Famine period.

We have been living in Direct Provision for over four years. I am directly witnessing the difficulties and tragedies experienced by the most vulnerable in society. There is no such thing as life in Direct Provision. People's lives are being put on hold, and it's very difficult to cope with this. Although I have witnessed many difficulties and even massacres in Turkey as a journalist and writer, it has been hard even for me to cope with what we are facing here. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, I was able to find the energy to do my job and write my second book.

There are huge problems in the Irish refugee system. For example, it does not know what to do when it encounters a journalist and author. There is a racist approach that assumes every person from outside Europe is ignorant. There is a Ministry of Integration that has a budget, but there is no vocational language training for adults. I envy children because they have schools and friends. Unfortunately, adults do not have such privileges. Instead of looking at people from a human point of view, they are treated only as cheap labour.

I have submitted research project proposals to many places, especially the Ministry of Culture, and received negative feedback from all of them.

The Irish Refugee Council and our solicitor Virginija Petrauskaitė have been by our side throughout this difficult process. We will not forget this solidarity.

The existence of these institutions is vital for us, they work for Ireland and make a great contribution to society. We must fight racism and uphold the ideal of a real republic where there is equality and justice.

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Çağdaş has continued writing articles, books, and poems while the IRC supports his protection application.



# Derek Stewart

**I was a solicitor practising refugee and asylum law with a number of Cuban clients in the late '80s. They were a few hundred applicants but increasing slowly, presenting “problems” for the Department of Justice, which had only a handful of immigration staff. As a result, asylum applications were being referred to the UNHCR unit in London. Years could pass before a decision might issue.**

At the same time, the Irish Refugee Council was established. It operated on an uncertain budget yet was capable of sourcing an impressive staff (mostly underpaid or voluntary). However, it was committed to ensuring their many clients were represented in pursuing their claims for refugee status.

During the years even before the Council opened its doors, Nadette Foley had known of my work with asylum seekers. She contacted me and soon had me join the Board. Later, I became its Chairperson. As a solicitor practising in this area of law, I had the expertise and experience to be the spokesperson.

The Board gave every encouragement to Nadette, a supreme networker and overall co-ordinator who was Director at the time. Her loyal staff gave each of their clients not only shelter from the administrative storms raging against them but also well-founded reasons for hope in their cases.

The office in Arran Quay became a well-known, all-embracing, one-stop shop, organised on a co-operative basis. The staff would assist with processing legal cases, finding accommodation, teaching languages, taking clients shopping, and liaising with accommodation and welfare officers.

There were so many clients that they often had to queue down the stairs, something that concerned the benevolent landlord given that the floor beneath was a solicitor's office.

By 1997, our work was beginning to be taken seriously by the Department of Justice. Our much-publicised annual conference that year was addressed by Senator David Norris and President Mary Robinson. At the same time, both the Council's lobbying and court challenges paved the way for the setting up of a government legal aid board for asylum seekers.

Thirty years later, many if not all of the legal officers who played a crucial role in the development of an effective legal service as a basic right for asylum seekers went on to higher positions in both government and NGO organisations, at home and internationally. There is a certain pride in being an instrument of their beginnings and knowing how much change they have brought in this and other areas of human rights over 30 years.

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**Derek was a Board member and its Chairperson, 1994-1999.**

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