Dream high as kites fly: Nowruz and Refugee Week celebrations

by Annie Lancashire and Sameerah Mahmood

Annie and Sameerah explain why Migration Yorkshire staff delivered kites to resettled refugee families across Yorkshire and Humber recently, and give some insight into what the Nowruz celebration is all about.

Kite flying is a huge part of Afghan culture, so when we were considering a gift to give to the children resettled in Yorkshire and Humber to mark the Nowruz celebration recently, kites immediately soared to mind. Our Migration Yorkshire resettlement team spent the time between Nowruz and the start of Ramadan visiting women's groups, delivery partners and accommodation sites, to gift kites to children and young people. With Refugee Week upon us, our team are again wrapping up packs of kites as contributions to celebrations and events across our region.

Flying a kite is a collaborative experience. To get a kite successfully in the air needs more than one person; one to throw up and the other to run (and usually a few more to run alongside, provide advice on technique or just to pick up spirits when a launch crashes back to the ground). But when a kite is soaring, the experience is uplifting for everyone involved, including those nearby who can't help but watch it dip and dive in the wind.

Much like kite flying, how well people from a refugee background settle into their new communities relies on favourable conditions, as well as the will and skill of the protagonist. Refugees are agents in their own integration, but the community

has a vital role in creating a welcoming environment that allows them to thrive.

On the days around Nowruz the gifted kites were enthusiastically received by Afghan children in our region, who immediately created a tangle of strings and ribbons outside each venue as they competed to get theirs in the air first. Teenagers who initially scoffed at our enthusiasm (as only teenagers can) were eventually cajoled into joining in. It ended with those same hesitant teenagers crafting their own magnificent kite that put our offering to shame and promising to run kite making workshops during school holidays. Passers-by cheered as kids got their kites in the air and as we ducked under the spinning strings, parents told us of their own Nowruz traditions, sharing memories of picnics and family meals.

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Our research into refugee integration told us that ‘remembering practices, places and people not in the UK can aid the integration process here. It can increase the sense of familiarity, bringing some elements of “home” to the present’.

We saw that remembering on our visits. When chasing his kite across a patch of grass outside a hotel that had been used as temporary housing for over 18 months, a young Afghan boy turned to our team with a beaming smile and told us, ‘This is just like being at home’. There will inevitably be challenges in his and his family’s integration journey, but at Nowruz we hope that he and his family felt recognised as valued members of our Yorkshire and Humber community.

We hear from our support teams that when the wind has picked up, families have been heading out to fly kites after school. I’m proud our new Migration Yorkshire brand is being launched in this way, and hope that over Refugee Week our message of welcome will continue to soar above the parks, beaches and gardens of our region.

What is Nowruz? A bright new day, new season and new year

The story about the origin of Nowruz is told through different myths and anecdotes across different communities. Each link it to a specific myth or story, but the message is one: freedom, Spring and brightness winning over darkness. This contribution gives an Iraqi-Kurdish perspective.

Nowruz in Kurdish is a compound name of Now which means new and Ruz which means day; that is, the new day. Nowruz is a

holiday celebrated by all Kurds on 21 March of each year. It is considered the Kurds' national holiday and a symbol of the victory of the oppressed over injustice. It's based on a legend that in past there was an unjust ruler called Duhhak who had a very strange condition; two snakes were born on his shoulders and he had to kill every day a young Kurd to feed the snakes from their brain and the blood.

This continued for a long time until the day came when a strong blacksmith called Kawah decided to revolt and attack the palace of the unjust ruler. He had the support of his people and carried his strong hammer and put it to the head of the unjust ruler and killed him to free the people from injustice and oppression. Kawah has been a national hero ever since.

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To celebrate the victory, people decided to light a large fire on the top of the mountains and the hills surrounding them to inform the rest of the regions of the victory of the revolution. This tradition has become a public occasion that Kurds celebrate all over the world by lighting fires. Included in their celebration is

wearing national clothes, organising picnics, going out into the wilderness, enjoying the stunning scenery, cooking and sharing traditional foods.

Nowruz coincides with the end of the cold winter and the beginning of the greenery of the spring, with daffodils and other flowers. Nowruz is a new year, and a national celebration Kurds have with each other especially in Central and Western Asia. Each group in these different regions celebrate it and consider it a holiday, the beginning of spring. Each base their celebrations around other legends and stories that differ from the Kurds in content but in essence all the legends and the stories carry the same meaning of the new day, the new dawn or the victory of the oppressed over the unjust or the victory of light over darkness. Children are taught about Nowruz in schools and at home, learning about their ancestors' fights for freedom against unjust rulers.

Nowruz in 2023 marks the year 2723 in the Kurdish calendar. Freedom, victory, celebration, traditional clothes and foods, not to forget folklore songs and traditional group dancing, are features of Kurds' Nowruz.

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