

Charity founder

STEVEN McCLUSKEY

After meeting a young refugee with a barely functioning bike, **Steven** co-founded Bikes for Refugees Scotland. Sam Waller spoke to him

When Cycling UK member Steven McCluskey met a young man called Yaman to help him shift some furniture, it set in motion a series of events that would change both of their lives – and help thousands of refugees to discover the joy of cycling.

Yaman had fled the conflict in his native Syria and was starting to set up a life for himself in Edinburgh. Steven had a van and responded to a request to help Yaman move into his new home. But what has this got to do with cycling? The pair built up a friendship and Steven was keen to help Yaman adapt to his new surroundings. When Yaman got hold of a bike in very poor condition, Steven stepped in to see if they could get it fixed up. “It was more of a bike-shaped object than a functional bicycle that could get him anywhere,” Steven laughs.

A trip to the local bike shop confirmed the worst: the bike was beyond repair. However, Yaman got chatting to the owner, who kindly gifted him a refurbished bike. Steven saw first hand what a big difference a bicycle made to his new friend's daily life. “It really helped him to explore his new surroundings, to connect with meetings, legal advice, community services. It made a big impact.”

Steven and his partner Beth were convinced they could help more people like Yaman, so together they founded Bikes for Refugees Scotland in early 2016. The premise was simple: ask the public to donate bikes, fix them up, and donate them to New Scots (refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland).

It's not difficult to understand the massive impact that a bicycle can have for someone seeking refuge in the UK. Asylum seekers in the UK are not allowed to work and can't access mainstream welfare benefits. The allowance they do receive – to pay for daily necessities like food, clothing and toiletries – is around £5.80 per day. A day pass for Glasgow's First Bus network costs £4.90.

Steven addresses this stark reality: “We know people who are having to make difficult choices between putting food on the table – to feed themselves and their families – or expensive public transport costs to access essential meetings and services.”

Volunteer for Cycling UK

Whether you would like to lead rides, organise events, fix bikes, become a marshal or even set up and run a new cycling group, we can support you to volunteer in a role and at a level that works. You may want to give something back to the community, make a difference to the people around you, find a rewarding opportunity that helps you develop new skills or build on existing experience. Whatever your reasons, we can support you to do this and at the same time you can empower, enable and inspire others to cycle too. For more information, visit cyclinguk.org/volunteer



Steven with a bike that could transform a life

Steven tells me that Bikes for Refugees – now a registered charity with bases in Glasgow and Edinburgh – is celebrating a remarkable achievement: having supported 2,000 people with a free bike. “The important thing is it's 2,000 people that have been supported – with a free and sustainable method of transport, means to access essential community services and support for people's resettlement in Scotland.”

While 90% of the bikes the charity distributes are donated by the public, it also uses grants to purchase and distribute new bikes. Cycling UK's Access Bikes scheme has recently enabled 20 happy recipients to cycle away on new bikes. It has also provided bike maintenance classes.

Keeping bikes on the road is also an important role for Steven and his team of 60 active volunteers, in part thanks to funding from the Cycling UK-run Scotland Cycle Repair Scheme. “That's been a great scheme for us, it's been a big help,” Steven says.

Many of the volunteers who keep the project running are New Scots who've received a bike in the past and want to give back. Steven proudly tells me that one such volunteer recently secured employment as a mechanic at a local bike project. Another has set up his own community bike project.

As for Yaman, he is now a trustee, using his lived experience to help shape the future direction of the organisation.

Reflecting on all the project has achieved, Steven feels the biggest strength is its simplicity. “A simple thing like the humble bicycle, something that you and I might take for granted, can impact so many people and in such a significant way.” ●



More info

To find out more about Bikes for Refugees Scotland, visit:

bikesforrefugees.scot