St Andrew’s Refugee Services

Boys’ Brigade World Mission Project for StARS

**We dream about creating a safe, green space, using a small garden space near the entrance to the St. Andrew’s compound. The space is roughly 10x20 metres. As natural turf is so difficult to come by, but also difficult to maintain, we would begin by laying down high quality artificial turf that could withstand the high traffic of this area. In this space, we would like to build a children’s play structure, giving children a safe space to climb, play, and imagine. We would also like to create green murals, using potted plants, mounted to the wall, as well as plant trees and potted plants to create a welcoming gathering space for people to use as they wait for appointments, watch their children play, or sit to talk with their friends. This space would include wooden benches and umbrellas or other shade source to shelter people from the blistering desert sun.**

The Cairo Metropolitan area is home to over 20 million people. It is incredibly dense, with approximately 10,000 people living per square kilometre. Among these are over 200,000 people who have come to Cairo as refugees from countries such as Syria, South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Yemen. Without the right to work or education, refugees, including thousands of refugee children, live in incredibly difficult circumstances in one of the largest cities in the world.

StARS (St. Andrew’s Refugee Services) was founded in 1979 by members of St. Andrew’s United Church of Cairo, a historically Church of Scotland church in the heart of Cairo. In addition to StARS and the English-speaking congregation, eight other congregations use the space for worship, study, and play. Hundreds of refugees gather for worship each week and over 20,000 are served by StARS over the course of the year.

The StARS school has over 500 students. They are all refugees, coming from countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. Their families have fled war and they come to Egypt with next to nothing. They come from all over Cairo to attend school at StARS. Almost all live in places in Cairo where they do not have access to a safe space to play. There are very few public green spaces available in the city, and these are rarely located in the neighborhoods where refugees live.

Because the space is so limited at StARS, the school operates on two shifts. Often, families come together to school, but younger children have to wait for their older siblings to finish classes in the afternoons. Sometimes, they play football in the courtyard, using whatever they can find to kick around—rocks, water bottles, or highly coveted footballs. They also like to play hopscotch, hula hoop, and skipping rope.

Among the nine congregations who worship at St. Andrew’s, upwards of 200 children come each week for worship and Sunday school. The services are often quite long and children’s programming is offered for children who cannot sit through the service. As is true for the school children, the children coming to church often do not have safe space to play and love to take advantage of the space at St. Andrew’s to be able to play games with their friends at church.

On most days, more than 150 people wait for appointments or come to StARS to seek drop-in services. Many children come with their parents for these appointments with StARS social workers or lawyers. As it is currently set up, the space is very crowded and hot. There is little space for children to play.

Ideally, the play structure would be made from high quality plastic or metal to ensure longevity and safety. It would include a climbing structure, slide(s), and swings. It might also include spaces that could be used for creative play, such as a lookout point, steering wheels, or pulleys.

The vast majority of St. Andrew’s United Church of Cairo and StARS operational budgets are tied to specific line items and do not have the capacity for a project such as this. Not only would it provide safe space, it would also make the small space much more welcoming for everyone who comes.

We often hear from students, clients, and church members that St. Andrew’s is a safe space for them to be. They come knowing that when they enter through the gate they will be welcome and free from some of the pressures they face daily as refugees living in Cairo. This is true for children, as well as adults. Studies show that children (and adults) who have access to green space perform better in school and have lower rates of depression and anxiety. With little access to green space in the urban spaces of Cairo, creating even just a small green space could have a big impact on the StARS school students and others who come through the gates.

Case Studies

Sarah\* comes to church and school at St. Andrew’s. It is one of her favorite places to be. Because of the Cairo pollution, she suffers from asthma and sometimes her breathing is so bad that her parents tell her she needs to stay home and rest. She argues with them because she would much rather be at St. Andrew’s, learning, singing, and playing with her friends. She tells her mother that St. Andrew’s is like her second home.

Abdi\* started coming to StARS as a student in the Montessori preschool. He loves to climb and has more than once used the banister on the staircase leading to the school offices as a climbing frame. He is now a student in the StARS school, where he is learning to read and write. He would love a playground to be able to play with his friends and show off his excellent climbing skills! His friend, Khalid\*, adds that he would use it to play while he waits for his mum after school, while she finishes her work at StARS.

Every space at St. Andrew’s is used every day of the week, from early in the morning until late in the evening. The spaces are used well and used hard. Though it seems simple, creating a green space with a children’s play area would go a long way in creating a safe and welcoming environment for the thousands of refugees who come to St. Andrew’s to worship, study, and receive services every year. Thank you for your generosity and support!

The person who currently takes care of our little garden is a young man called Abdulla\* who came to Egypt as an unaccompanied child. As part of our youth development programme, young people, ages 18-24, who came to Egypt as unaccompanied children are given additional training to develop professional and on-the-job skills. We anticipate that the gardener position will be part of this programme for the foreseeable future. In addition, we can work with knowledgeable volunteers from refugee and other communities for the development and care of the green space.

\*Name changed

Rev. Kirsten Fryer, Pastor, St. Andrew’s United Church of Cairo