

REFUGYM: Establishing a Sports Program for Refugees

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Peace

By the time individuals reach refugee camps they have experienced immense physical and mental trauma that is not being addressed. Many residents have health issues from war, travel, torture, and unhealthy living conditions and almost all have PTSD, depression, generalized anxiety and somatization. This leads to violence, substance abuse, self-harm, emotional dissociation and difficulty integrating. The wait time to receive an asylum interview is most commonly 2-4 years, a period of frustrating limbo of uncertainty, fear, and boredom. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, these health and resource problems have been exacerbated by restrictions and the penalization of refugees' movement. The effects of trauma and mental health problems are amplified and exacerbated for waiting refugees when nothing is done to address the stagnation and lethargy that ensue.

With the support of Davis Projects for Peace I will be working to alleviate these issues, launching REFUGYM, a community-led and operated sports program, in Thermopylae Refugee Camp. Classes will be taught by refugees for refugees, with operations overseen by a paid refugee Field Manager and an Assistant Field Manager. The services provided by REFUGYM mitigate the effects of trauma through personal and community mental and physical health, which in turn builds sustainable peace both in camp and ultimately in the communities into which residents integrate. Exercise has been scientifically proven to reduce stress and depression, improve mood, and boost self esteem. During displacement, refugees are made entirely reliant for their food, shelter, healthcare, education and general safety, thereby removing their autonomy and self sufficiency. By teaching their own classes residents find pride and confidence in themselves, and regain some of the professional purpose and independence of their previous lives. With the chance to work as a team or to meet personal goals through sports, the environment of camp improves.

While Thermopylae is generally safe, there are conflicts between individuals, ethnic groups, unregistered and registered asylum seekers, and International Organization of Migration officials and residents. Sports programs span these differences, developing camaraderie and increasing community. Improving individual health and fostering a community atmosphere is integral to having a safe camp. REFUGYM enables residents to have genuine human interactions between previously separate and opposed groups in a lighthearted environment. Additionally, as only 25% of the children in Thermopylae have access to school or educational activities, sports can be essential to teaching skills like team collaboration, following instructions and being a leader.¹ While logistically more challenging, offering programs outside of camp allows residents to escape and momentarily forget they are a refugee. As most residents crossed by boat from Turkey, many have trauma associated with water and few know how to swim. By offering water based courses, residents develop critical life skills but also confront and overcome their trauma, forming positive associations and confidence in the water. Through REFUGYM programming, residents who receive asylum reenter society healthier, acclimate more easily, and are able to constructively contribute to their new home.

Background

Thermopylae Refugee camp sits 200k northwest of Athens and is home to 500 primarily Syrian Arab and Kurdish residents. These asylum seekers are predominantly families with a smaller population of

¹ UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency. *Site Profiles-Greece*. p. 19

unaccompanied minors, males between the ages of 12-18 years. Residents live in the rooms of two abandoned motels and UNHCR containers. While the living conditions within camp are sufficient, because of the remote location healthcare, education, and professional opportunities are slim. The insular setting offers no primary healthcare, no educational activities for three quarters of the children, and no stores or public transportation within a 5km radius.

Proposal

Prior to Wellesley I spent 14 months living in Greece launching REFUGYM, a UK Registered Charity (#1181499) with organization founder Brittany Pummell. Together we built a sustainable community-led gym inside Malakasa Refugee Camp. With degrees in Disaster Management and Search and Rescue and 8 years experience in field work, Brittany is an invaluable resource. Launching REFUGYM's sports program in Thermopylae Refugee Camp, Brittany and I with a team of refugee and external volunteers will provide a varied sports timetable depending on the interests and skills of camp resident teachers. We are prepared to offer soccer, yoga, volleyball, self-defense, basketball, aerobics, gymnastics, dancing and Kung-Fu. As requested by the residents, all classes will be separated by gender. I will be strengthening an established partnership with Tony Frey WindSurfing Club to provide activities such as swimming and paddleboarding twice a week. Additional partnerships with on ground partners are highly likely. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all sports classes will follow CDC guidelines including social distancing, the use of masks by all participants, and limited participant capacities. REFUGYM is held to the same standard as any other gym in Greece and can only open under the restrictions placed by the Greek government. If gyms are not allowed to open or we cannot make the necessary accommodations we will pivot to focus on water sports and activities which can be easily conducted outside and from a distance. Volunteers, Brittany, and I will live together, all following a volunteer contract adjusted for COVID-19 safety.

Timeline

The first month will be spent doing community engagement and renovations to the camp space currently dedicated to sports. Community engagement will be fostered via presenting and facilitating discussion at community meetings and in informal settings, recruiting and training prospective class teachers, and distributing class timetables in the languages of the camp. After the first month we will maintain a consistent timetable of activities, facilitate sports classes and support their teachers, and continue engagement to increase class attendance. In the third month we will hire and train residents for paid positions as Field Manager and Assistant Field Manager to oversee the project. Within three months the program will be primarily community operated and within nine months will operate entirely independently of external volunteers or funding.

Sustainability

At its essence REFUGYM is a project *for* refugees *by* refugees. Moving away from a reliance on international volunteers, REFUGYM instead empowers camp residents to use their skills and knowledge to help their community. By establishing paid positions for refugees the project encourages professional development and invests directly into refugees. With improved mental and physical health, a reclaiming of personal autonomy and self reliance, and an experience that models mutually supportive community relationships, REFUGYM will create sustainable peace both within Thermopylae Camp and within the communities into which refugees ultimately integrate.