

REFUGYM: Establishing a Community Sports Program for Refugees

Attika, Greece

Wellesley College

Clara Shanabrook, United States, Wellesley College

<https://www.refugym.org>

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project

REFUGYM is a community led and operated sports program designed to mitigate the effects of trauma through supporting mental and physical health. REFUGYM builds sustainable peace both in refugee camps and in the communities into which residents eventually integrate.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

Fund-raising done by NGO Touch of Water purchased four SUP boards. Volunteers also raised donations.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

REFUGYM was born from founder Brittany Pummell's experience working in various refugee camps in Greece. She witnessed how the fear, boredom, and stagnation felt by refugees awaiting an average 2-4 years for an asylum interview, compounded by trauma, resulted in poor mental and physical health and violence within camps. I met Brittany in Greece in 2018 and we worked together to launch REFUGYM. This project was designed in tandem with Brittany and is a continuation of the work done by REFUGYM.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

Displacement is caused by a cycle of violence and underdevelopment. Physical violence in addition to national health and development problems such as poverty, inadequate education, low employment, and few economic opportunities have caused decades of refugee migrants. This crisis has been met with Western laws and policies which place European and American fear of refugees and xenophobia above human rights or international immigration law unless prevented or pressured by international and domestic outcries. Over this summer the Afghan refugee crisis has been significantly intensified by the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan and Taliban control of the country.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

I chose Greece as my site country because of my previous experience and existing connections there. Thermopyles Camp was chosen specifically as our team was able to gain permission to work there, which in light of COVID-19 and new government laws in Greece is exceptionally rare.

What was it like to work in your host site?

Thermopylae Refugee camp sits 200k northwest of Athens and is home to 500 primarily Syrian Arab and Kurdish residents. Residents live in the rooms of two abandoned motels. While the living conditions within camp are sufficient, because of the remote location healthcare, education, and professional opportunities are slim. My team found the community to be highly engaged from the very beginning.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

This spring the Greek government forced all NGOs which seek to work in camps to register with the government. While designed to encourage accountability, the cost of registration is in the upper thousands, there are a number of logical barriers, and the government has rejected the majority of applications. However, the ultimate decision of who can enter camp is decided on an individual basis by the camp manager. We chose to work in Thermopiles Camp because we had been given permission to operate, but in July camp leadership changed and we were denied entry to camp by the interim manager. At the time I questioned if the program was too new to remain stable. However this test of sustainability was successful. While in our absence every class continued. As Thermopiles is an open camp, residents are able to leave thus we were able to continue with swimming and SUP lessons outside of camp while camp residents led sports classes and teams within camp. While the project was different, it was in the end successful at its goals of sustainable, resident led programming.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

Since I was remote I struggled with the seven hours time change. Frequently I would hear about events or challenges after the fact rather than during which made it difficult for me to be 100% included in everyday or emergency decision making. In interacting with Greek locals we experienced racism against residents and were told on multiple occasions to leave public land. Language barriers with residents were present but not insurmountable- we were able to find a translator for each activity.

How do you define peace?

I define peace as the absence of personal and structural violence, the access to basic needs, and a lack of barriers to reach individual potential. Maintaining peace is a constant, dynamic process, not an end which can be set aside once achieved.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

- Please describe changes created by the project during the summer?

We have taught 24 students who could not even float, core aquatic skills, how to swim and advanced to rescue others in water. For men, who are culturally held responsible for their families, the inability to protect them or provide for them during the refugee experience is demoralizing; learning how to rescue others restores a level of confidence. For the women who are largely culturally viewed as incapable outside of the home and family, this is a new experience of independence and empowerment. We have seen an increase in personal mental and physical health amongst attendees and an increase in community and camaraderie.

- Please describe anticipated changes that will continue in the future as a result of the Project.

REFUGYM is designed as a sustainable project to continue long after this summer's Project for Peace. By teaching their own classes residents find pride and confidence in themselves, and regain some of the professional purpose and autonomy of their previous lives. With the chance to work as a team or to meet personal goals through sports, the overall environment improves. By offering water based courses, residents have developed critical life skills but also confronted and overcome water-borne traumas, forming positive associations and confidence in the water. Through REFUGYM programming, residents who receive asylum will reenter society healthier, acclimate more easily and be able to contribute more to their new home.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

Working with refugees in this context is challenging since everyone has fresh and untreated trauma. This project increased my awareness of and capacity to handle trauma responses and taught me to hold compassion for individuals in the space of these responses. I'm able to identify and hold consequences for inappropriate behavior while recognizing that the situation which has created that response is responsible for the behavior. Trauma is not exclusive to this population and these lessons are not exclusive to this project. I have greater patience and forgiveness in negative interactions than before this project.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Due to COVID-19 related restrictions I was unable to travel to the project site but remotely oversaw the project while it was led on ground by Brittany. This led me to a more administrative role within the project: grant and contract writing, organizing collaborations with other NGOs and partners, long term planning and financial management. In guiding the everyday progress of the project I had to draw upon previous experience and academic knowledge as well as heavily trust the judgement and expertise of Brittany. Successfully managing this project remotely would not have been possible without a strong professional and personal relationship with Brittany who was unwavering in both her commitment to the project and my involvement with it.

What advice would you give to future PfP grantees given the pandemic-related challenges you experienced?

For future Project for Peace grantees, I encourage embracing the additional difficulties of a pandemic or other unexpected disasters as additional practice in the key skills of humanitarian aid. Working with limited resources and a constantly changing demographic demands patience, flexibility, resilience and adaptability. These elements are the nature of humanitarian aid work and, pandemic aside, I've found being in situations that demand their implementation to be infinitely valuable in my development, professionally and personally.

If you were able to implement your project remotely, speak to the highlights and challenges of a conducting a remote project

Selfishly, when I learned that I would be unable to travel to Greece I thought this project would not be emotionally rewarding. In my previous experience personal relationships are what sustained me in a difficult environment and made this work enriching. While I remain resolved that this is true and I struggled with the distance throughout the summer, I learned to harness and harbor my deep connection and care for the refugee and Middle Eastern communities without being amidst them and without being known by them. That connection with a community is what encourages effort when those faces aren't in front of you.

"Working with REFUGYM, I feel the urgent need for an adequate global response to the refugee crisis. Simultaneously, I feel confident in each person's ability to make an individual contribution to counter injustice. Anyone has the capacity to become a refugee at any time; likewise, anyone has the capacity to help a refugee at any time."

Clara Shanabrook (shanaclara2011@gmail.com)

