



PHOTO BY COLLEEN SINISKY

Help is always easy to find in the transit refugee camps on Lesbos. These three helped me pass out food and water to a large group of people from Afghanistan who'd been stuck waiting in a registration line for hours.



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Two children in a family of Afghans who had left Turkey and were waiting to get clearance to take the ferry to Athens, Greece.

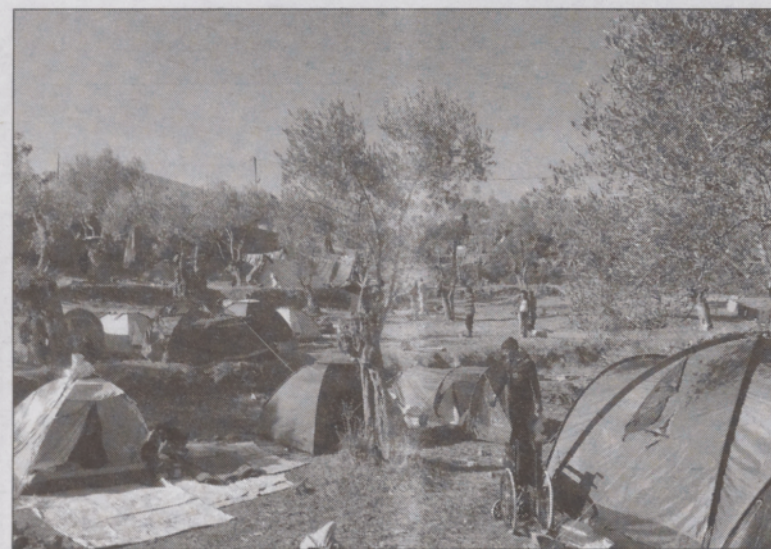


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The transit refugee camp on the island of Lesbos.

"The refugees think that they are escaping oppression, but there is no end to the horrible journey that they are on."

HOPE and HEARTBREAK



"Sara is blind in one eye from shrapnel from a rocket blast hitting their neighborhood in Damascus, Syria. You would never guess what she has been through, though, from how well she looks after her younger sisters."



PHOTO BY COLLEEN SINISKY

This girl from Syria had just arrived with her father to Lesbos and were waiting for a bus to take them to register.

A volunteer's perspective on the international Syrian refugee crisis

BY COLLEEN SINISKY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

I was driving my small rental car, full of fellow volunteers and supplies, during a beach patrol shift when we got the call about a nearby boat in trouble. The engine of the small wooden boat that 5-year-old "Sara" and her family were on had given out while crossing the 4-mile stretch of the Aegean Sea between Turkey and the Greek island of Lesbos, leaving the Syrian refugees on board to drift helplessly toward a dangerous coastline.

We stood on a nearby cliff beside a team of Greek lifeguards, unable to do anything but watch and pray that the coast guard arrived in time. The boat was close enough for us to see the scared children and hear the shouts from the people aboard waving frantically as the swell pushed them toward the rocks below us. I took a deep breath and rehearsed CPR in my mind.

This story, unlike many others in the Aegean this year, has a happy ending. A local fisherman appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and managed to tow the boat to a rocky cove, where the lifeguards and my team of six volunteers had raced to meet them. We formed a human chain to pass the babies and small children safely to shore. I didn't hear the chaos around as my world zoomed in to carefully receive the tiny crying baby that was handed to me. I took the hand of a lost little girl, and the three of us sat down out of the way of the action, but within sight of their mother, so that I could remove their inflatable toy life jackets and check for injuries.

More volunteers descended with lollipops, emergency Mylar blankets and dry clothes. I blinked back tears and smiled for the terrified children, who watched as their mother rushed from the boat to embrace us in a sobbing hug of relief. They had made it to Greece.

Sara is blind in one eye from shrapnel from a rocket blast hitting their neighborhood in Damascus, Syria. You would never guess what she has been through, though, from how well she looks after her younger sisters, how ready she is to play a game, and how quickly she figured out my iPhone camera.

I cannot imagine the anguish of risking the open sea in an overcrowded boat with one's children. I cannot imagine the horror that they are escaping. Her family has one suitcase among them and nothing left of their home. There is nowhere to go but forward. Sara is whose life is torn apart by a war that we Americans only vaguely understand and whose future will be made hopeless by xenophobic border closures. An average of 3,000 refugees smuggled

through Turkey have arrived on the shores of Lesbos each day for the past several months. With a population of just 86,000, Lesbos is one of several remote, rural Greek islands overwhelmed by the recent explosion in the number of refugees landing on its shores. The unfortunate reality is that people will not stop fleeing violent countries destabilized by war, so Lesbos has become established as a dramatic stop in a long journey toward the hope of safety.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the Red Cross and other multinational aid organizations each have a presence here but still leave major, acknowledged gaps in providing lifesaving

services to refugees. This is where private donations and grassroots volunteer organizations come in. After landing on the beach, refugees may have to spend up to seven days in substandard transit camps while waiting to register with Greek authorities and take the ferry to Athens to continue their journey north, where they will not be warmly welcomed into the overburdened European

Union.

Volunteering here has moments of photogenic glamor and adrenaline on the beaches with arriving boats, but so much work also happens in warehouses sorting donations, taking shifts at a lookout tower to radio in boats in distress, picking up litter, driving families to camps, and serving tea.

For me, volunteering is no heroic rescue mission. Those stories do happen every day, and I'm privileged to work alongside the people who do so. For me, it feels as important to be in a position where I can share a genuine smile while loading a bus, listen to stories of home, high-five while yelling "Welcome!" in Arabic, or help a tired mother dress her child in a new set of dry clothes. At a time when the world feels fractured by mistrust and fear, maybe it's these shared moments that are the most heroic. The beauty of that kind of heroism is that you don't have to be on Lesbos to accomplish it.

I've been on Lesbos for three weeks now, and will be here until mid-December. The decision to come was last-minute and motivated by seeing Syrian families sleeping under bridges in Istanbul, Turkey, on a recent trip there. It was the part of my heart that I used working with Portland's homeless community for years that wouldn't let me leave this part of the world without getting involved. So I took a ferry to Lesbos without knowing anyone here, or how to start volunteering.

I quickly learned that this island has become home to a community of hundreds of dynamic and compassionate volunteers from around the world. I joined the small Norwegian team, "A Drop In The Ocean." Our name nicely summarizes the impact that each of us has on an issue like this, whether on a Greek beach or at home. To be here is to bear witness to the extremes of human suffering, but we do our best and



Colleen Sinsky



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The "Refugees Welcome" sentiment was a street art theme throughout Greece. Despite the crippling financial crisis and being overwhelmed by hundreds of thousands of refugees, Greeks tend to be amazingly compassionate.

then tearfully share stories and hugs in a dimly lit tent.

What I do here, though, is the easy work. It's obvious that sharing compassion and lifesaving assistance at this dangerous crossing is the right thing to do. The difficulty comes in zooming out to the overwhelming causes of why desperate migrations like this are happening, and where these people will go.

When the Paris attacks happened, it felt as though the mainstream news I had been following suddenly shifted its tone. Suddenly, it seemed, the United States was terrified of the very people that I was helping off rafts in Greece. Suddenly, governors were jumping on the bandwagon of bigotry and proudly proclaiming to their constituents that Syrian refugees would not be allowed into their states. I can't describe what an emotional blow that was – to feel that my country was abandoning the very families whom I had been working hard to protect and welcome. I've felt isolated and betrayed on behalf of the refugees.

It's impossible to feel the anti-Muslim sentiment the media tells me to feel when I spend all day talking to and shaking hands with the people I'm supposed to fear. The headlines I read break my heart in ways worse than seeing sobbing mothers on the beach, or the hope that I know will be short-lived in men's eyes. The refugees think that they are escaping oppression, but there is no end to the horrible journey that they are on.

I wish that I could be optimistic. I wish that I could propose a solution. I wish that these people weren't forced from their homes in the first place. But each time another overcrowded raft makes its way to shore and terrified refugees pile off of it and into our arms, the terrible reality hits me again, and I remember that our futures are bound together and that we are collectively in the same slowly sinking raft.

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