



PHOTO BY YIANNIS ZINDRILIS

Youths in the Refugee shelter in Thessaloniki, Greece, play soccer with vendors from Shedia, the street paper in Athens.

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Outside the gates of an old paper towel factory in the northern Greek seaport of Thessaloniki, a group of Shedia street paper vendors waited patiently together with players of the Greek Homeless Football Team.

The players were here for a football match with people living on the other side of the gates. Beyond them, they could make out the white tents where over 1,500 refugees slept. Social initiative Kick Out Poverty recently recorded the figure. They counted 5,780 refugees in various suburbs of Athens – and 4,127 in Thessaloniki. The list is long – and growing.

The Shedia vendors were partnering the footballers through the connection with Kick Out Poverty, as organisers of the visit. Shedia and Street Roots are among 120 newspapers and magazines in the International Network of Street Papers.

Two police officers checked the group's ID cards and the list of residents sent by the Ministry of Migration Policy. These were the names of those who'd meet the players and take part in the match.

Among members of the Greek Homeless Football Team were six women who played in last year's Homeless World Cup in Glasgow, Scotland. They proudly returned from Scotland with the Fair Play Award – the trophy presented for embracing the spirit of the tournament in each of their

Universal pitch

Street paper vendors join Greek Homeless Football Team to bring joy of football to refugee camps

matches.

Today is just one of many visits by the Greek Homeless Football Team to refugee centers. Setting up mobile pitches to the standard of the Homeless World Cup, they are organizing matches with refugee children, their parents and anybody else who wants to kick a ball – refugee center volunteers, security guards, police officers and soldiers.

The ultimate goal is to bring the children a little bit of joy through playing football, and the chance for the Greek participants to get closer to and understand refugees from different countries. The Friendship and

Understanding Tournament may sound a little obvious, but the meaning behind it is wholly genuine.

As soon as the ball bounced into the makeshift center circle, the first match began, and with it a joyful chaos that lasted for most of the day. Around six balls were lost due to misplaced kicks. But they did not lose anything really. They only gained.

"This is the happiest day that I have spent here in the center," said the coach, who seemed to enjoy the joyous upheaval of getting the games started.

Said one of the team players, "Look at it this way: it's like tightly embracing all those

people, those children, and caressing their face and their soul. Giving them a bit of joy. That's the bare minimum."

There was also no shortage of actual hugs. The female team members showered one child after another with affection.

Everyone involved – the footballers, the refugees and the vendors – have all experienced the loss of home at some point, each in their own lonely way. That is why they were there, to share common ground and experiences.

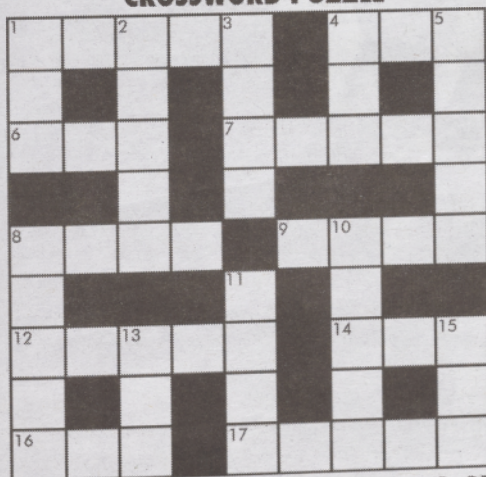
The sight of one of the women tightly holding a refugee child, speaking to him with affection without taking her eyes off him, is something that stayed with the group all day.

The game lasted until the early afternoon. "When will you come back?" asked the children as the team loaded the mobile pitch back onto its truck. Nobody knew the correct answer. They left saying they would be back "soon."

As they left, one young man, around 25 years old, continued running up and down in front of the old factory. He wore football boots and a look of deep concentration, kicking a leather ball. He didn't want to lose control of it; his face was lit up with a bright smile. That was a piece of the legacy they left behind.

*Translated from Greek by Jay Fratzeskos
Courtesy of Shedia / INSP.ngo*

VOODOO DOUGHNUT CROSSWORD PUZZLE



ACROSS

1. Fermentation agent
4. Have a bite
6. Tree fluid
7. Cake ingredient
8. Three-ply cookie
9. Hook's henchman
12. Ground grain
14. The gift of ____
16. Tease or ridicule
17. Francis or Kevin?

DOWN

1. Affirmative!
2. Type of fritter
3. Analyze or try
4. Cake ingredient
5. Tres
8. Deal
10. Potter's practice
11. Nosh!
13. Late rapper; abbr.
15. ____ appetit

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