

Life on a Mediterranean Rock

The air is hot long before the school day starts. On Chios, Greece, it starts late at around 10am. Turkey cradles the sun as it rises but I hide in an old, cool, stone building, fitted out and repurposed as a High School for refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Algeria, amongst other war-torn countries.

As Summer arrives on the island and the bitter temperatures, the snow and the rain - those winter afflictions felt so keenly by the thousands living in UNHCR tents and containers - give way to scorching days, I realise how quickly the past 6 months have flown by. Still bodily carrying the weight of mince pies along with my EasyJet baggage, in early January I flew out to the Aegean. Here, on an island south of Lesbos, north of Samos, and just 6km west of Turkey, I've been working to help provide basic education and a safe-space outside of the two refugee camps for the hundreds of children trapped here.



All who arrive here arrive on small boats that cram up to 100 people onboard. Smuggled across the channel through the night for €500 - €1000 each, the vast majority end up waiting, endlessly, for their asylum requests to be processed. For many of them, this Greek Summer is their second Greek Summer. All the while, children - many of them unaccompanied minors - miss vital months of education.



The organisation *Be Aware and Share*, with whom I work, has just celebrated its first birthday. Yet despite its youth, it has managed to do one thing the Greek government has failed to do: uphold these children's human right to education. We have a flexible curriculum that focuses on English language teaching, but includes a range of standard subjects that any caring government would want its children to know: Science, Geography, Music, Art, History, Maths.

Working as part of a diverse team of volunteers heralding from Switzerland and Spain, England and Egypt, Spain and Syria, whilst teaching Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish children, makes every day a challenge. But being part of a dynamic

organisation largely unconstrained by bureaucracy means change happens quickly. We have the flexibility and drive to constantly adapt and evolve to the developing situation and the current needs of our students.

It is demanding yet exhilarating and rewarding work. The hours are long, but the opportunity of meeting and having some passing impact on the lives of the 350 children that come every week is constantly energising. I have witnessed some overwhelming scenes here, including attempted suicides and racially-motivated fighting. But massively more common on a day-to-day basis are moments of tenderness, trust and unbelievable tenacity on the part of individuals who are waiting patiently for months on end with no end in sight.

Over the months, it has been a privilege to be a part of creating a safe and engaging learning environment for these children. Personally, this has included acquiring 30 ukuleles and leading weekly music lessons to children of all ages. It has involved setting up a school loaning library to ease some of the boredom felt in camps, setting up open evenings to bring the disenfranchised Greek locals into contact with our incredible students. One of the most exciting projects has been facilitating a student creative platform that showcases poetry, writing, personal stories and videos. There is now a huge collection of refugee children's writings online, available at www.medium.com/chios-voices with new pieces being added every day.

But ultimately, the work of *Be Aware and Share* is not extraordinary. It is offering only the most basic form of education and fulfilling a basic right being otherwise withheld from these children. To find out more, to volunteer, to support, visit www.baas-schweiz.ch/?lang=en