

Mission Trip to Greece 2019

Greece has been inundated with refugees from many countries over the past 4 years and when the German and Macedonian borders were “closed” to them they became stuck in Greece. The Greek government, social services and other churches are not able to handle the number of people on the islands or in the city of Athens and many of them are living on the streets or in tent camps. When an apartment does become available, there maybe 14 men, women and children living in one small place. The most recent group of refugees are from Iran. Iran is suffering with inflation, high taxes and unemployment, corruption and the economy has been dragged down. All the people are struggling to pay for housing, food and many lost their property, for these reasons are seeking asylum. The Government of Iran prosecutes and sentences Christians to long jail terms. “House Churches” have been raided and few are surviving at this point. Many Christians lose their jobs and hardships abound for these people. It takes years for them to get out of Greece to their destination, wherever that may be. Many are Muslim looking for a better life for their families, some have become Christians and were forced from their home county. Many are seeking information about Jesus and Crossroads offers them both physical and Spiritual food.

Our mission team of 7 people from the USA met with Efthemes and Eirini Sioukiourogrou missionaries in Greece along with 3 other Crossroad missionaries, Fasil and his wife Belle along with Hanna all from Finland. We also had 2 ex-refugees arrive from London to join us as interpreters of the Farsi language. Arman and Sylvia Delbahar are the “adopted children” of John and Karen Elias, our team leader from our sponsor The Bridges Options international missions. They were crucial to the success of our mission in Greece from everything as speaking the language and for knowing firsthand what these people are going through. The goal of this humanitarian mission at Crossroads is to support their outreach efforts to provide a retreat for new believers. Crossroads provide in depth Bible teaching, meals and a secure place for the refugees to stay during the retreat.

We arrived in Greece on March 16, 2019 to find the weather a pleasant 70 degrees. The Sioukiourogrou's were able to secure transportation of us and our 18 duffel bags of donated clothing and goods for the refugees. We delivered the bags to the Crossroads facility and headed to our hotel to unpack and rest before going

out for a wonderful Greek dinner at a near by restaurant. Efthemes and Eirini Sioukiouoglou ordered up a sample of Greek dishes for us to try and we enjoyed our meal together. On Sunday we went to a Protestant Greek church then enjoyed a day of tourism at Mars Hill and the Acropolis and shopping in the markets before getting started with the real purpose of our trip.

Monday we separated the donations that were brought and assembled gift bags for the men, women and children that would be joining us at Scripture Union for the 4 day retreat. Tuesday was spent at Crossroads where food was prepared for 5 meals that was served to about 300 refugees. They prepare food on Tuesdays and Thursdays at a cost of 200 Euros per day. That's just for the basic food and does not include the condiments or cost of the facility itself like rent and utilities. There are some paid staff but mostly it is done by volunteer staff that help cook and run the facility. Several large pots of rice and meat along with a salad and pita bread are prepared and served in a fast and efficient manner. I wish everyone could witness the way the refugees had bowed heads and quiet respect for our Pastor as he said a quick Bible teaching and prayer before each meal was served.

Medical supplies that we brought were set up in a makeshift first aide drawer and we had the opportunity to help several people that were dealing with different medical issues when they arrived for the meal. Some had colds and others had back pain. They are not able to get the free medical treatment at the hospitals because they do not have their Greek papers yet. This also prevents them from getting housing and work. We did what we could to help them but were limited by our medical supplies.

In speaking with some of the refugees at Crossroads they expressed sincere gratitude for the programs and teaching that are offered along with the food including such personal needs as clothing, shoes and baby diapers. They said of Crossroads staff "everyone here are angels" and they didn't know how to express their gratitude for the services and support they receive there.

At Scripture Union the refugees arrived and were settled into their areas for women and children on one floor and the men and boys on another. The first night of the retreat was their Spring revival celebration called Nauryz on the spring equinox, the name of the holiday is translated from Farsi as "new day". They asked and were given permission to stay up until 12:30 to sing and dance in the new year. We prepared a Nauryz table for them that included all the desires for the new year. These included food, money, flowers and items of fertility and growth.

Over the next 4 days we heard many heartbreaking stories and testimonies from people sharing the experiences that brought them to Greece. There is great concern for the children as they are forced to leave their home and families taking them out of school and the safe familiar life they had enjoyed before. We heard about 2 families that decided to transfer the custody of their girl children to an Agent to take them to Germany. There they are placed in a children's refugee camp where their parents hope to be able to join them once they are able to obtain the appropriate papers to go to Germany. This could take a number of years before they see their children again. The parents were crying as they think of sending their children off with the agent. This will have tremendous impact on their future, their sense of security and ability to trust others. The parents and the children need your prayers as well as your support.

We tried to have fun things for the children to do while the parents were hearing bible teachings, the first day I was able to get through the lesson and have them color pictures before they wanted to go outside and play. Since we were in a gated retreat area they felt safe playing on the swings and soccer court so it was difficult to keep them indoors. After that first day we just tried to do fun things with them like face painting or singing songs. During one of the parents' meetings we had the children go there first so they could enjoy the praise and worship songs and then Pastor John prayed over each one by name. The parents were crying and taking pictures of their children as they were so happy that God's people cared for their children.

During the parents' meetings there were testimonies from several people about their journey to get to Greece. Karen Elias reported that during the retreat she had two women asked her for prayers. The first woman was an unbeliever who was very broken up over the recent changes in her life that have deeply distressed her. Karen felt that the Holy Spirit was guiding this young woman in asking for help. The second one was a married believer with 2 boys who had recently lost her apartment and was living in a tent. They both bonded with Karen and this set a positive tone for the rest of the retreat. The entire group prayed for both women, the power of the Holy Spirit could be felt at that time and Karen could feel the Holy Spirit working in their hearts. The team prayed for the Holy Spirit to encourage the believer and the non-believer to bring them to faith and see the love of Christ from among their people at the retreat.

While listening to a number of refugee's testimonies, we were moved by their experiences and how this adversity brought many of these people closer to Jesus Christ and they were lead to the realization they needed to let Him into their heart. Mohamed, a 72 yeas old man, was financially secure in Iran until his business went bankrupt and he was unable to pay his debts. He had been a generous person lending money to many of the people in his community who were also struggling to make ends meet. After he lost his business, felt he brought shame to himself and his family and he had to leave Iran. He still agonizes over his inability to pay his debts. He stated this situation had a huge impact on his family whom he has not seen in over 4 months.

Another refugee, Hussein a 40-year-old man, escaped Iran by boat. The vessel was not sea worthy and it sank in the water. He was a swimming coach and he was able to swim to shore; he was the only survivor on the boat out of 16 people. He is now a Christian and praises Jesus for his life.

Vadda and her husband have been in Greece for 7 months. When they were leaving their country, they were on a bus heading to the train station to escape. She had some pamphlets with her about Christianity and she put them in her purse. She was so nervous about what they were doing that she forgot her purse on the bus. They were not able to board the train and had to return home. At the bus station she asked if her purse had been turned in and to her surprise, they said is this it? All her money and possessions were still in the purse along with the pamphlets. She believes that helped her and her faith was validated. Praise God.

A 25-year-old man was a soldier in Iran's Army at age 18. One night on patrol his group ran into Taliban fighters who used a strong light to shine in his eyes and his fellow soldiers. From what they could tell they feared an attack and started shooting in the direction of the Taliban fighters. In the morning he learned that 3 civilians were killed and he still feels stressed and guilty about their deaths. The Taliban are known to use civilians as human shields, this is not an unusual occurrence. Unfortunately, he feels the Muslim clerics were insensitive in responding to his feelings about this issue. This left him feeling angry and isolated. Since he has been in Greece and speaking with staff at Crossroads he is learning about Jesus and forgiveness. He is now a Christian and although he still struggles with the issue of war, he sees that he may find some sense of peace through Jesus Christ.

There was one Bible teaching on adversity give by Dave Gilson, a man who has experienced his own hardships in life when he was diagnosed with cancer in his left leg. He had his leg amputated below the knee and wears a prosthesis to be able to walk. During his talk he used this experience to show how the world has many reasons for us to give up, but God is our source of strength to overcome the adversity that comes against us. Later some of the refugees cried and prayed for Dave because of a new bump recently discovered on the same leg.

We all needed God in our lives wether we are living in a strange country or dealing with our own personal problems at home. God is our source of strength and comfort in times of trouble. As we get ready to head back home after the retreat, we are filled with a sense of great sorrow and hope for the people we have come to know and love these past 4 days. They go back to the city with an unsure future and we head home to our safe homes and jobs. It has been a very humbling experience and one that has changed our lives forever.

Crossroads and Bridges Options are accepting donations to help the Sioukiouroglou's in their effort to bring Gods word to a hurting community in Athens Greece.