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Seeking Refuge

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LESVOS, GREECE: The sun peeks over the hills surrounding the refugee camp in Moria, filling the sky with color and casting a warm glow on tents and corrugated metal structures within the barbed wire fence on the ground below. The camp is just waking up. Its inhabitants rise to inspect their tents. Volunteers in bright orange vests arrive for the day shift. Greek military and police guards trade posts as the new day starts.

A week earlier, a sunrise this vibrant was nowhere to be seen. The sun was hidden behind a thick layer of clouds that poured down rain, sleet, and snow—the worst winter precipitation the Greek island of Lesbos had seen in decades.

Taylor's Greece Lighthouse team had arrived to Moria in the thick of the weather, prepared for 40– to 60–degrees and greeted by 30 and below. They were here through Greater Europe Mission (GEM) and Euro Relief, partner organizations seeking to meet needs brought about by the global refugee crisis.

What the team would be doing, they didn't know when they arrived. They'd prepared to work with kids—play games, sing songs, do crafts—typical VBS–style mission trip activities. Within 24 hours, they

scrapped that plan entirely.

They got to Lesbos around midday and, after being welcomed into their hosts' home, were given a brief orientation on GEM and Euro Relief's work in the camp. The wind was blowing outside; rain poured in sheets. In the middle of their orientation, the power went out and their host received a phone call.

"It had rained all day and there were tents collapsing in the camp," said Noah Shingleton, a sophomore finance major.

All six of the men on the Lighthouse team were asked to go to the camp and help.

"We're thinking we're going to go in for like three hours and repair some tents, help fix some stuff, and then leave, come back with the team," said Robbie Brandkamp, a senior public health major. "We had no idea we would be there for a full nine-hour shift."

"Twenty minutes after I walked in the gate, I was in an Algerian guy's tent fixing a zipper with my pocket knife and a lighter," Noah said.

When they returned from the camp after midnight, they were cold, tired, and in varying stages of shock or bewilderment.

The next day, the rest of the team got their first taste of Camp Moria.

Moria is on the southeastern leg of the island of Lesbos, which rests in the far east of the Aegean Sea that separates Greece from Turkey. Lesbos is closer to Turkey than mainland Greece. A trip to the eastern coast reveals Turkish hills across the Mytilini Strait, which is just over three miles wide at its narrowest.

Most, if not all, of the refugees on Lesbos crossed the strait in inflatable dinghies overloaded with people. Some made it all the way to the Lesbos shore. Others only made it into Greek waters, where the coast guard picked them up from the leaky crafts.

Lifejacket graveyards on the island testify to the overwhelming number of people who passed through the waters to get there—and not everyone wore a lifejacket. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2015, 57 percent of those who arrived to Greece by sea passed through Lesbos. November of that year, the average daily arrivals to the island were 3,300.

For the refugees on Lesbos, Moria is the last stage before gaining passage to Athens, where they wait for assignment to a host country. They arrive to Moria after paying smugglers to get them out of Turkey and across the strait. There, they pursue official refugee status with the UNHCR and the European Union (EU).

The UNHCR is a vehicle of the UN that works with national governments to carry out the 1951 Convention, a document created in the aftermath of World War II to protect European refugees. In 1967, the Convention was expanded to deal with the global problem of displacement.

The Convention defines a refugee as someone who is outside of their country, has a well-founded fear of persecution in their country (due to race, religion, political opinion, etc.), and is “unable or unwilling to avail him- or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.” In other words, a refugee is under threat of persecution in their country and, because they lack their country's protection, is forced to flee.

Refugee status is not granted to individuals for whom there is well-grounded suspicion that “they have committed a crime against peace, a war crime, a crime against humanity or a serious non-political crime outside their country of refuge; or they are guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.”

According to the UNHCR, 65.3 million people in the world today have been forcibly displaced from their homes, and 21.3 million are refugees.

Before the current refugee crisis, the camp at Moria was a detainment center where individuals who did not qualify as refugees were held before deportation. Over the past several years, the camp has housed thousands of refugees from Middle Eastern and North African countries, including Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. The existing facilities have long been filled beyond capacity, requiring that tents be brought in for additional housing.

When the Lighthouse team entered the camp the following day, the rain had turned to snow and Moria was in all-out crisis mode. Students and leaders were given a rundown of the rules and divided between three jobs: Information, which amounted to problem solving, running around the camp helping refugees with fallen tents and haywire zippers; Clothing, which tackled a different area of camp each day of the week, checking to see what refugees needed and whether or not it was feasible to provide it to them; and Family Compound, where one or two volunteers guarded each gate into the housing compounds for women and children, checking IDs to make sure that those who entered belonged.

That first day Alex Burt, a senior marketing major, worked Family Compound. A refugee named Barum, who volunteered in the camp as a translator, made her hot tea and came to keep her company. As they were chatting, she asked him if he had any family.

“He said, ‘No, I only have my brother ... The rest of my family was killed in an explosion in Iraq!’”

She had no idea what to say.

As the week went on, the team was divided between three shifts: 8 am to 4 pm, 4 pm to midnight, and midnight to 8 am, also known as the graveyard shift.

Those who worked days didn't have time to slow down and catch their breath until the weather cleared up about a week into their time on Lesbos. Those working the graveyard shift, guarding the gates of the family compounds, had too much time to think. Sitting alone or in pairs in the frozen darkness, they battled feelings of uselessness while wrestling with the realities they were facing up close for the first time.

The longer they were there, the more the reality of the camp faded in the shadow of what most of its inhabitants had escaped.

One night, trip leader Katie Rousopoulos '07 guarded the gate at Family Compound.

"I [asked] this man, 'Can you show me pictures of your country?'" she said.

He pulled out his phone.

"He's swiping through, and they're beautiful pictures of the land," she said, "and then all the sudden for the next 20 minutes, it's about 50 pictures of all the dead people. 'My dad, dead ... That's my cousin, that's my cousin's kid, dead. That's my neighbor. That's my house—no longer.'"

Another translator had fled with his brothers from Afghanistan to Iran to Turkey:

"He and his brothers paid a few thousand dollars to get on a boat, this little dinghy with sixty other people," said Leah Crabb, a senior psychology major. "They were crossing at night and their boat started taking on water ... and he was talking to us about how he thought he was going to die in that moment ... and then the Greek Coast Guard saw their boat."

The Coast Guard took them to shore, but he lost his brothers in the confusion. It wasn't until he got to Moria that they reunited. There, they were waiting for their interviews to gain refugee status. "He was really scared, because his brothers had been journalists and that's considered a dangerous profession, so they're much more likely to be granted asylum," Leah said. "If his reasons for fleeing weren't considered valid enough then they could send him back [to Afghanistan]."

Every story brought the team one step closer to conflicts they'd known little about before the trip and confronted them with uncomfortable realities.

One day in the new arrival tent, Robbie was conversing with a man from Iraq and the man lifted his pant leg to reveal scars from bullet holes.

"I know that we can die at any moment at any day, but it made me realize how far away from death I am, because death is not something I ever think about," Robbie said. "I've never been in such an unsafe environment like these people are coming from. I don't know what it's like to be shot, let alone more than once. I don't know what it's like to have a family member die [from] a bomb, or to live through an explosion and have scars all over my body."

A little boy named Ahmad lived on Level 1 of Family Compound. He was about two or three years old with big, round eyes. The first time Alex Burt met him, she was coming to Level 1 to get something.

"He was by the front gate next to a chain link fence," she said, "and he was hunched over this little puddle and he was whacking a broken tent pole in it."

She bent down next to him and said hi. He greeted her with a grin and welcomed her into his game. A moment later, he stood up and she saw, when he walked, that one of his legs dragged behind him

as if it had been broken and never fixed.

What difference did the Lighthouse team make in their time at Moria? That's not really an answerable question. They didn't solve any big, surmounting problems. They certainly didn't solve the refugee crisis. They learned a lot. They listened a lot. They questioned a lot. They fixed a lot of tent zippers and handed out a lot of tarps and blankets (though not as many as they would have liked).

There were joyful moments.

A certain man came to the Euro Relief headquarters in the camp and approached Noah:

"He'd say, 'My friend! I need a rocket launcher!' And I'd just look at him and say, 'What?'"

"I just need a rocket launcher!"

"No, I can't give you a rocket launcher!"

"And then he'd ask me if he could have my hat, and I'd say no, and then he'd just ... laugh and leave."

One day, Alex was working 4 pm to midnight. At about 10:30, the translator Barum asked her if she'd had dinner. She hadn't.

"Okay, well, up at Level 1 they need extra people to work right now," she remembers him telling her.

She went up to Level 1, but no one there seemed to need her so she waited for Barum to come up and, as she waited, she played again with Ahmad. His game today featured a one-liter water bottle.

"He would screw the lid onto the front of it and then he would smash it with his good foot to see how far the lid would fly," she said.

They played until Barum came up and then she found out that he and his brother had made dinner for her, the shift leader, and two other volunteers.

"You're a refugee in a camp and you're going out of your way to take care of me," she said.

Since returning to the United States, the team has wrestled with reconciling God's goodness with the brokenness and seeming hopelessness they witnessed firsthand. Together, they had read *Can You Drink the Cup?* by Henry Nouwen, a book that talks about joy and sorrow being mingled in the cup of communion, a reminder of Christ's death and resurrection.

"There are 28 nationalities in Moria that we've been unable to reach as Christians, consistently, in the missionary field," Alex said. Euro Relief is run by Christians and keeps an ongoing presence in the camp.

"That's a great thing God is using. He's turning bad situations into semi-good ones," Madeleine Burkholder '19 said, "but at the same time, do people need to have hypothermia and live in a tent in order for this to happen?"

Why does God allow suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people? If God is in control, why

doesn't He stop this? Or as the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 10: *Why do you stand afar off, O Lord? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*

None of their questions are new, but that doesn't make them easy.

"I can give all the Sunday school answers and say, 'You've just got to trust in Him and He has a plan,'" Noah said, "but actually diving into that..."

"We like to focus on the happy, easy things, and the reality is that's a surface-level faith," Leah said.

Coming back to the comfort and security of home has forced them to dig deeper, to move from a flippant, lackadaisical faith to one that's trying to grasp who God is and what He's doing in the world. Because they have questions, they're seeking God in ways they never have before.

"Faith is to believe in something we cannot see or do not necessarily always understand," Katie said. "We've stretched our faith."

Earlier this semester, Alex was in the Campus Center working on homework.

"It was snowing outside and I just started sobbing," she said, "because I'm in this multi-million dollar facility, crabby that I have to do homework, and there are refugees that are in tents in the snow and there are kids like Ahmad that—with the equivalent of the value of my laptop—could have a surgery fix that changes the way he lives his life ... The Lord's blessed me with all of this, so what do I do with it?"

The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. Psalm 9:9



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