

The experiences of Emma Shaw and Rachel Manssur

Emma Shaw and Rachel Manssur are two MSU students who participated in last summer's Study Abroad to the Greek Island of Lesvos with Sophia Koufopoulou. What follows are responses to email questions I asked both women:

Year and major at MSU:

RM: I am a senior this year, graduating in May. My major is Interdisciplinary Studies, with a concentration in Human Capital and Society, and a cognate in Sociology. My major is within the College of Social Science, and I hope to pursue a career of either human resources or social justice with it... ideally both.

ES: I am a senior at Michigan State and I am a Geography major.

Was this your first time on Lesvos?

RM: Yes, this was my first time on Lesvos. It was my first time ever in Greece as well. To put it simply: it exceeded all expectations in every way possible.

ES: Last summer was my first time on Lesvos, and first time in Greece.

Were you aware of / prepared for what was happening on Lesvos.

RM: I was only somewhat aware of the situation on Lesvos, but was by no means prepared for it. We had heard of the economic crisis that was happening in Greece as we were preparing to leave, and so I made sure I took out enough cash in advance, in case there would be issues at the ATMs or banks while there. However, in terms of the refugee crisis, I had no idea of the sheer magnitude. I had only heard bits and pieces, whether from online articles, or from Sofia and Brendan. I didn't really keep up with the news at that point in time, so I was completely blown away by perhaps what was (and still is) one of the greatest humanitarian crises of all time.

ES: I spent time in Italy before I went to Lesvos and while I was there my dad contacted me about what was happening, involving refugees, on the island. He did not know much, just brought up the fact that many people were using the island as a gateway into Europe and that he wanted me to be safe. Prior to this, all I knew going in that Greece was in the middle of a fiscal crisis and would be having a huge vote on the day that I arrived, but I did not know the magnitude of the refugee issue. I think that this was good for me in my development of a stance on this issue. I was able to formulate my first thoughts about the refugee crisis while on the island, first hand, and not through foreign media.

What was your reaction when faced with the magnitude of the crisis?

RM: I was shocked, and felt helpless. The sheer magnitude is unfathomable, until you see it for yourself. Hundreds of thousands of people were coming to the island, and we only experienced a few weeks. Dozens, soon to become hundreds of refugees were arriving on the island, crossing the Aegean sea on cheap, perilous, inflatable rafts every day. We would see them daily as they walked miles under the hot Greek sun to reach the closest refugee camp to them, which was often, on average, about 3-5 miles from where they landed. As I continue to tell people now that I've returned, there has been a dehumanizing effect in the media. Simply by reading articles or watching videos depicting the crisis is not enough. To hear about the 300 some people that drowned back in October, or the 5 that died just last week... We keep speaking of these people as if they are statistics, numbers, and I think many people are forgetting that they are people too. The refugees are still people with hopes, dreams, aspirations; and for some now, families that are mourning their great losses.

ES: My reaction when faced with the magnitude of the crisis was shock and sadness. I had never seen anything like it in my life. One moment that really stands out for me is in the first few days on the island when we took an island tour. Much of Lesbos is very bare, and as we drove along winding roads we saw over one hundred people, women, children, ect., walking along these roads with an out of sight destination. It was about 100 degrees fahrenheit on the island at this time. We were accompanied by Greeks and locals on this island tour and near the end they all began crying and talking amongst each other in Greek. Us students were confused at the time what was going on, but then found out later that they were talking about a way that they could help these people and help them to their destination in Mytilini, despite the fact that helping refugees at this time was illegal. After this day, this experience, I really saw how large the hearts were of these Greek people and I knew that I should aspire to be like them and help in any way possible. The fact that these refugees left their homes to embark on this terribly long and life threatening journey says so much about the enormity of the issue at hand.

How did you help while on the Island?

RM: While on the island, we had the unique opportunity to volunteer at one of the main refugee camps, Moria. We were able to go around the local community ahead of time, collecting donations of toiletries, toys, and clothing. When we first arrived, I think I was in shock. To look around and see so many people living in squalor - living under the hot sun, with only a plastic tarp tied between two olive trees as their shelter, with garbage strewn everywhere you looked... it was so sad to see people living this way. And to see that these people really had nothing more than the clothing on their backs, and the few backpacks they could carry on their journey... it was heartbreaking. I could only imagine all that they had left behind. As we stood around listening to our professor speak for the first 30 minutes or so, it was definitely awkward. The tension was palpable - we were outsiders, seemingly just standing around, staring at them. I found myself thinking, "Did these people resent us for being there? Did they see us as simply exhibiting the so-called "White savior complex," coming there to help them, but thinking we were racked with pity and our own self-interest? How could we convey that that wasn't what we were, that's not what we felt, and that we sincerely wanted to help in any way possible?"

After a while, the tension and awkwardness seemed to melt away. The people went back to their business, and we weren't stared at as often. As we glanced around and shared smiles here and there, I believe we all become more comfortable with each other. As Sofia explained to us later, we developed a rapport with the people there, simply by standing under the sun and sharing occasional smiles and

caring eyes. Eventually, we began to hand out the toys that we had brought with us. Soon enough, children were coming up to us to see what else we had brought. Despite the language barrier, we were even able to get a few games of 'duck, duck, goose, going! Our encouraging and non-threatening motions had a huge part in that; it was clear that body language is universal, and most everyone knows that a smile and a wave of your hand is a friendly act.

Soon enough, we had dozens of children playing with us, and perhaps even more bystanders and parents watching from the sidelines - it looked like even some of them wanted to play too! It was an incredible experience that I will never forget, and one that I think of almost daily.

ES: Helping refugees while on the island was initially very difficult because of the fact that picking them up off the street could result in an arrest. We had to think of new ways to help out how we could. As a group of students, we donated any excess toiletries and clothes that we could find. We also bought toys and went to one of the refugee camps and handed them out to the children at the camp. We played a game of duck, duck, goose with about 20 young refugees and many of their parents told us that it was the first time that they had seen their children smile since they left home.

What have you done for the aid effort since you've been back? Why?

RM: After all that I experienced on the island of Lesbos this summer, the refugee crisis has become very close to my heart. Since returning to the US, and more specifically the Lansing area, I have made efforts to become more involved in my local community, in order to help "be the change" for this social issue. I've always enjoyed volunteering, and eventually I stumbled on the Refugee Development Center, based in Lansing. They offer many programs to assist refugees, but the one that I've been involved with throughout this year has been an after-school program, where I help tutor many children from refugee families to improve their English abilities. In addition, I participated in a week-long service trip through my student organization, Alternative Spartan Breaks, in which I traveled to Atlanta, GA with 11 other Spartans where we volunteered with the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The IRC assists incoming refugees with resettlement assistance, English lessons, employment and immigration services, child care, and more. It was incredible to meet refugees from all over the world, hear their stories, and watch and assist in their daily progress. Finally, I am *constantly* talking about my study abroad, and advocating for this social issue. Haha just ask my friends! They are probably sick of my never-ending Facebook posts, with educational articles, videos, and more. But it's important! I think educating ourselves and others is one of the most important things we can do. Besides using social media to advocate for the refugees, I have also participated in numerous speaking opportunities to share my experiences with the local Lansing/East Lansing and MSU community.

ES: Since my arrival back home I have tried to stay involved in this crisis as much as possible. I have participated in and gone to lectures, such as Sophia's lecture last week, in order to get the word out and share my personal experiences. I want people to know that these refugees are people, just like you and me. The racism in our country has overshadowed this truth, and I have tried my best to engage in intellectual conversation with people who may feel differently about this issue than I do. As a study abroad, we have also created a GoFundme, to send money directly to the island, and we have raised upwards of 4,000 dollars. We also conducted a coat, scarf, and mitten drive.

How do think the experience will impact what you do after graduation?

RM: This experience has definitely impacted what I will do after graduation. I've always known that I love helping people, and that I love to travel. But to experience this humanitarian issue in such a hands-on way has really confirmed that within me. Joining the Peace Corps was always in the back of the mind, but I was never completely set. After these experiences, I plan to apply for the Peace Corps within the next few years after graduation, and if possible, travel back to Greece to volunteer my efforts. If for some reason I am not meant to do that, I can completely see myself working in a non-profit organization, or perhaps local NGOs to help solve this social issue.

ES: I will be going back to Lesvos this summer and interning with a local NGO in order to help further with this refugee crisis. I am not sure exactly what I will be doing on the island but I will make myself available to help others in many capacities. I know that this internship opportunity as well as my study abroad last summer will impact me after graduation, and throughout my whole life. Our culture tends to be egocentric, focusing on only what is best for ourselves. This experience has taught me that it is very important to help those in need, and in less fortunate situations than I. It also makes me more interested in the news and what is going on in our world.