

Vancouver volunteer uses past skills as a cook to assist refugees

JANE MUNDY
More from Jane Mundy

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When my friend Laurie Cooper asked if I'd consider volunteering at a refugee camp, I didn't hesitate. I wanted to do something for the Syrian refugees coming to Vancouver, but I couldn't offer accommodation or much money. It never occurred to me that I could help at a camp on Lesbos, Greece.

I'm not a medical professional, translator or house builder, but I had plenty of experience cooking in restaurants and had started my career, coincidentally, at Yanni's Taverna on the Greek island of Ios. It was 1971, and I was a teenager hitchhiking my way across Europe. I remember hanging octopus tentacles to dry in the sun and serving souchiaki to my hippie friends. Later, I ran a large a film-catering company for a decade, so Cooper figured I could help.

A friend volunteered to join me. I was relieved not to go alone — I had no idea what to expect or what was expected from me. We set up an online fundraiser, and Air Canada graciously agreed to waive my air fare and extra baggage fees, so I set about stuffing three suitcases with books and art supplies donated from neighbours.

When Cooper went to Lesbos in September 2015 she helped refugees as they came ashore from Turkey and provided emergency blankets (brought from Mount Seymour), dry clothes and food. She met Aphrodite, a hotelier on Lesbos.

"The first boat arrived in Molyvos on our hotel beach in April 2015. At one point, 350 people were landing here each day," Aphrodite said. "If not for our guests, we wouldn't have been able to help so many."

And help they did — half a million refugees passed through Lesbos last year alone.

Even though very few boats continue to make the perilous journey, thousands of refugees are still in camps waiting for asylum. We were volunteering at PIKPA Solidarity Camp, a former children's camp and now home to hundreds of the most vulnerable of those refugees. This Greek-run organization provides housing, food, legal and medical support to families, the elderly, pregnant women and people with disabilities — including depression and PTSD.



Cooking in a restaurant, you have the right equipment to serve hundreds of meals from a vast array of ingredients. In a catering truck, your vegetables come peeled, sliced or diced.

It was more of a challenge here. The PIKPA kitchen has industrial-sized pots and pans that fit on ground-level propane burners, but dinky plastic utensils to stir with. Even so, they had managed to provide and deliver thousands of meals per day for their own "guests" and nearby Moria, a military-run registration camp that looks like a prison.



Day 1

After registering at the PIKPA office, we start by peeling 200 lbs of potatoes. Along with my chef knife, I should have packed a vegetable peeler — just about every tool in the kitchen is dull as a butter knife. I'm already frustrated. Celina, a lovely Greek woman in charge of the kitchen, was bent over a sink removing guts and nasty bits from chickens. I volunteered to take over and her eyes lit up. But there was no time to pluck stray feathers — lunch was to be served in less than an hour and I had to make a vegetarian entrée for most of the 15 volunteers.

Day 2

The only can opener mysteriously disappeared, so Massoud, a volunteer, deftly opens a four-litre can of tomato paste with a knife. I'm tasked with making tomato sauce without tomatoes, just paste. But there's lots of onions and dried herbs. Six chickens are left over from yesterday, so I chuck them in a huge pot for soup tomorrow. After four hours of chopping and slicing and draining huge pots of pasta in this sweltering kitchen, my back hurts and I'm exhausted.

Day 3

Celina takes a few days off and instructs me to place an order. Tomatoes and fruit are too expensive, no squash left, but maybe aubergine. Along with the soup, Shabir Iqbal, a Pakistani refugee and former engineer at the Karachi airport, makes lentils and rice. I realize that my frustration is petty. All his family were killed by the Taliban, and a psychologist helps treat his depression every Friday. I think he wants to keep busy.

It's even hotter today and we have to keep the door closed, otherwise things go missing, like the can opener. The food distribution area is located next door and families are back and forth picking up supplies so they can cook rudimentary meals in their tents. Volunteers divide and distribute sacks of beans and rice into little plastic bags.

That evening we take Iqbal, Sultan and Mraza, two other Pakistani men, to Myteline, the capital city of Lesbos. Iqbal wants to make a special lunch tomorrow so we drive to the supermarket and buy 15 kg bags of basmati rice, dozens of tomatoes and a bushel of parsley. Iqbal smiles, he wants to show off his cooking skills. And I believe it keeps his mind off the past, however briefly. Sultan, age 19, said they all had "sweet dreams of Europe", but no longer. Now they worry about getting deported back to Turkey. Back at the camp, Mraza invites us to his tent for dinner. His wife seems proud to have us as guests and it's heartbreaking.



Day 4

Iqbal has been in the kitchen since 6 a.m., preparing hundreds of potato-tomato cakes. We toss the cakes in flour, then egg, but all we have to fry is Greek olive oil and I can't get the pans hot enough, so I try to pat the grease off and chuck them in the oven. But the oven is either blasting hot or off. They will be served at room temperature, along with carrot and raisin salad and Iqbal's biryani.

Day 5

We join the volunteers' meeting. Annaleis, age 71, is a "serial volunteer" from the Netherlands. She explains that some college kids volunteer to get their life in order, others for bragging rights. And then there are also people like Darek, from Czech Republic.

"My country is hostile to refugees, so I quit my electrician job and drove here in my van. The Christian Peacemaker Team pays for my apartment and food, and the volunteer house is cheap," Darek says. "I hope to stay for many more months."

Dino has been on Lesbos for one year, mainly with Sea Rescue. "We've constructed four (tents) over the last month that need to be winterized, doors added and stones spread for drainage," he says. "The tents take a beating, so we need to secure them before the storms come."

I ask Lena, one of the co-founders, if "voluntourism" is a problem, with people like us helping for only a week or two. "If you have something positive to contribute, you are welcome," she explains. "At one time, we had 60 volunteers and at lunch time they were popping up like mushrooms after the rain — I didn't know where they all came from. Now we have protocols for the volunteers, and that has brought big change. We have teachers and a medical team and we have more of a community. ... I didn't know there were so many beautiful people in the world."

Laurie Cooper and a group of women from North Vancouver created the website Canada Caring to create awareness, rally support and raise funds. If you can help financially, 100 per cent of your donation will go directly to refugees or to organizations in Greece that are working directly with the refugees. If you are interested in volunteering, they can help you get started. www.canadacaring.ca

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