Vancouver volunteer uses past skills as a cook to assist refugees



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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 Lesvos, 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 los. It was 1971, and I was a teenager hitchhiking my way across Europe. I remember hanging octopus

refugee camp, I didn't hesitate. I wanted to do something for the



COMMENT

tentacles to dry in the sun and serving souvlaki to my hippie friends. Later, I ran a large a filmcatering 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 Lesvos 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 Lesvos. "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."

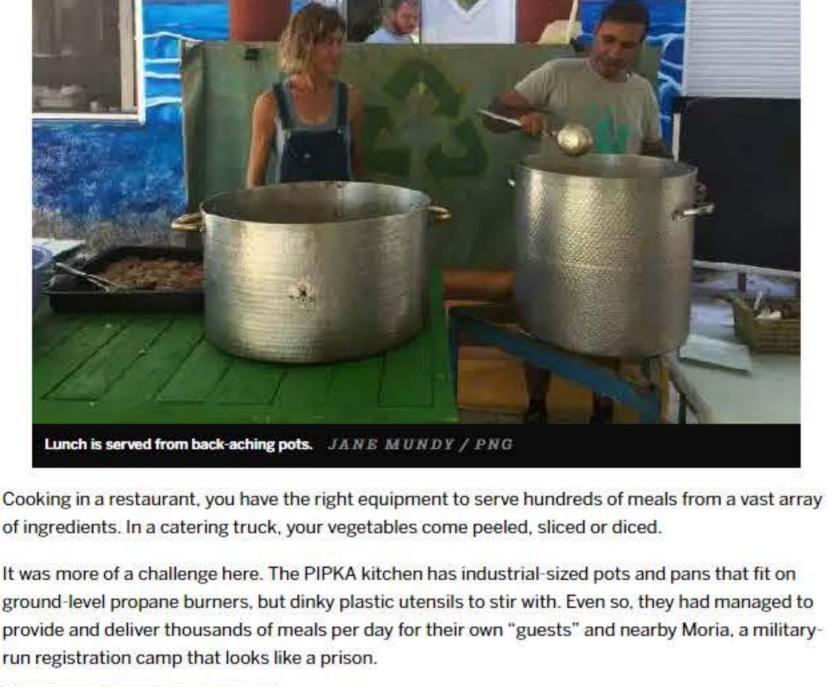
Even though very few boats continue to make the perilous journey, thousands of refugees are still in

camps waiting for asylum. We were volunteering at PIKPA Solidarity Camp, a former childrens'

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.

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



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

Day 1

Day 2

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

That evening we take Iqbal, Sultan and Mraza, two other Pakistani

men, to Myteline, the capital city of Lesvos. Iqbal wants to make 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

entrée for most of the 15 volunteers.

to be served in less than an hour and I had to make a vegetarian

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,

PINNIGER / PNG

Sabir Iqbal preparing lunch. JANE MUNDY / PNG 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

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 Jane starting her kitchen and distribute sacks of beans and rice into little plastic bags. shift. VANESSA

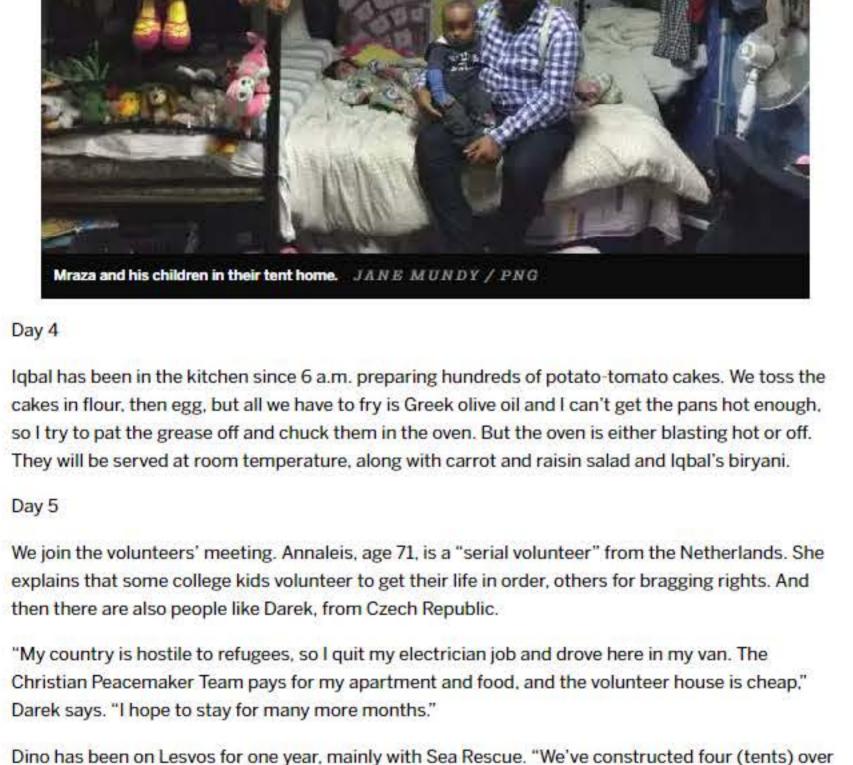
special lunch tomorrow so we drive to the supermarket and buy 15 kg bags of basmati rice, dozens

dreams of Europe", but no longer. Now they worry about getting deported back to Turkey. Back at

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

the camp, Mraza invites us to his tent for dinner. His wife seems proud to have us as guests and it's heartbreaking.



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

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

VANCOUVER

the last month that need to be winterized, doors added and stones spread for drainage," he says.

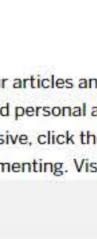
I ask Lena, one of the co-founders, if "voluntourism" is a problem, with people like us helping for

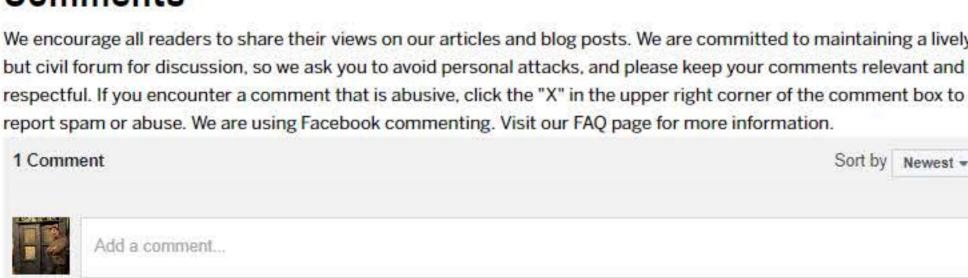
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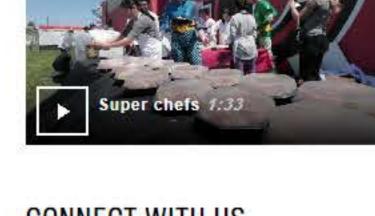
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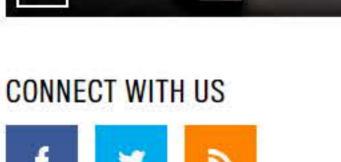
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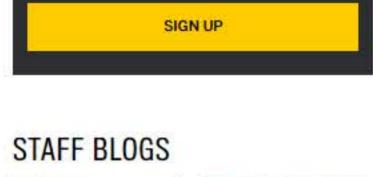
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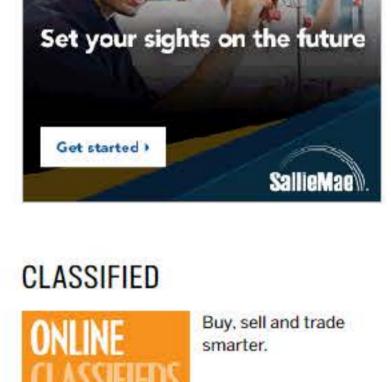
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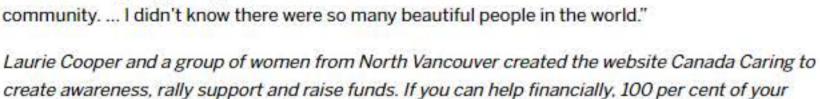
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