

## WELCOME THE STRANGER



*Note: One component of the JNRC's Welcome the Stranger Campaign is to offer education experiences to American university students studying in Rome. The reflection below comes from one of the hundred or so students who took part in these educational experiences. Jessica DiBugno is a rising sophomore at St. John's University in New York. Her reflection echoes the sentiments felt by students who visited the JNRC this summer.*

### **A Student's Reflection**

I didn't know what to expect from this. I thought maybe that it would be something like what I had done at Briarwood back home. I expected there to be homeless families, poor people, and isolation. I expected the Refugee Center to be placed somewhere far away

from Rome. Instead, I found out that it was only one metro stop short of Termini, where thousands of people travel every day to travel to different cities and regions within Italy. How is it possible that just one stop away, lies the stories of so many different people with so many different backgrounds, going through one of the most traumatic and difficult times in their lives?

I remember being surprised by the exterior of the building when we first arrived at the Refugee Center. It just seemed to all blend into the architecture of Rome. If I had been passing by as a normal pedestrian or tourist I never would have realized what lies behind those walls. Entering the inside of the building was not much different- it seemed to be clean, with pictures on the walls and posters for volunteering. I was confused - I didn't expect refugees to have a center like this. But I don't think I really understood what a refugee was at that point. Maybe that's why I had those thoughts.

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I immediately liked the administrator who guided the orientation, the time with the actual refugees, and the reflection. Will, who is from North Carolina, made me feel more comfortable. There was a large piece of paper laid out for us with markers. Will told us that we should write anything that came to mind when we thought of Rome - tourist attractions, pictures, words. I wrote about the popular things, ones that everyone will associate with Rome. But then he asked us to write down what came to mind when we thought of refugees. I wrote down things like homeless, journey, and hope. I still wasn't even sure what a refugee was at this point.

Then came the real point of the orientation- where we discussed things like who the refugees actually were, what the difference between a political and an economic refugee

was, which places they came from, the journey that they took to get to Italy, why they came to Italy, why they still stay in Italy if they're so poor and can't leave to another European country. Of course, I had heard the term refugees in America. But you don't really know a lot about their situation because it isn't covered on the media. Things that are focused on are ISIS, the economy, unemployment, and or social justice movements. I rarely heard about refugees, and when I did, I don't think I ever really gave it too much attention. It wasn't relevant to me.

What I learned from the orientation astounded me. I learned that there are hundreds of refugees living within the very same city of Rome that I had spent my entire week traveling within. I learned that the majority of these people come from Afghanistan who must come across Turkey, then take a boat to Greece, settle there, then take a boat to Italy, to finally escape the war and devastation within their country. And that's only those coming from Afghanistan. Those coming from North Africa, usually from places like Mali, must first make the long journey to Libya, which can require years to save enough money for. Once they get to Libya, which is generally about a two week journey from Mali. They can either go to Malta a small island near Sicily or to Italy. Italy is the closest country to places like North Africa, which is why so many refugees are escaping here. And they aren't allowed to leave Italy either.

Even once these refugees are granted protection rights and asylum within Italy, it is nearly impossible for them to find work. With an unemployment rate of 40% for young native Italians in Rome, it is a dire situation to be a refugee in search of work within Italy. Nobody will hire you, the natives are unwelcoming to you because you are 'invading' their country, and many of them know neither English nor Italian. So why don't these refugees just leave Italy and go to a place like Germany where the economy is better? The answer lies in the Dublin Regulation.

The Dublin Regulation prevents refugees from leaving their asylum country, or the country that they first enter upon escape. These refugees are forced to stay in a country where they are unwelcome, are unable to find work, and usually don't speak the language. What kind of hope do they have of bettering themselves in a new country when they are granted little to no resources to help them? That's where the Refugee Center tries to help.

What I felt when I went down to where the refugees were was something indescribable, but it was not what I expected. How can someone describe an experience to someone else when they were not present? I guess it's like the article that we read about not being able to describe the beautiful music to a person who cannot hear. One cannot understand the Refugee Center and their mission, nor the refugees themselves, unless they have witnessed, heard, and seen them. I am still struggling to understand all of their pain and hardships and how they were able to overcome this. How can one acquire so much resilience?

Will put out a long piece of paper with some markers. I thought to myself that I am not an artist, and that I can't draw. That would not work well for me. I met a few of the refugees, some of whom spoke a little bit of English. However, there was one that stands out to me particularly. He spoke no English at all, but he seemed so eager to want to talk to me. Having learned Italian in high school, I thought that maybe I could try to communicate to him through both of our second languages. When I tried to just talk to him verbally, however, I found it very difficult. For one, it was extremely noisy in the common area and neither of us had the best grammar in Italian. Then I saw the paper which I had disregarded at first and I had an idea - if I couldn't speak to him, I would write to him.

It was still hard at first. But I figured it out as I went along. I started with simple phrases, such as what is your name and where are you from. Although I am not sure I can pronounce nor spell his name, I found out that he was from Senegal which is on the

Western Coast of Africa. Although we did not talk about his circumstances at all I was curious to learn about Senegal specifically and the situation that he might have come from.

Gradually, the words started flowing. As I wrote in Italian and could take my time to write and read it, I realized that I could converse with someone through both of our second languages and through body language. And then more refugees started gathering around trying to see what we were doing. Soon there was a crowd of people, and other refugees were trying to write something to communicate and see if they could get a message across. The paper that I had been so afraid of drawing on had become one big translation for the refugees and I had to communicate with. It was a piece of art in and of itself- art that I had been afraid of been creating but had learned to make it in my own way.

I was surprised when I found out that I had been down there for nearly an hour. I felt like I had just started my conversation with some of the refugees and we were finally getting comfortable with one another. I had to explain to them in Italian that I had to return to my class. I saw the sadness in their eyes and I wanted to offer a comforting word. I told them, "*Buona fortuna e tanti auguri*," which means "Good luck and best wishes." Part of me wished that I could tell them that everything would be okay, that they would find a job and be able to find peace, that they would be reunited with their families. But I knew that that would be offering false hope to these people.

When I got back upstairs with the rest of the class I was overcome with sadness at the situation of the refugees. I also felt guilty- why did they live such a horrible life while other people, such as myself, are able to live without these sufferings in life? I also felt like it was my responsibility to help people such as these. Not only could I help them, but they could also help me and teach me how to be grateful for what I had. What I

learned in that hour with the refugees is one of the most important lessons that I have ever learned in my life.

**"To whom much is given, much is expected."**

Something else sticks out for me from that day. Will told us during the reflection, "To whom much is given, much is expected." I have always heard that quote. But I never thought of myself as having been given a lot. Seeing the dire situation of the refugees however, showed me just how lucky I am and just how much of a gift I have. The gifts that I have and the experiences that I have learned require me to share this with those who are less fortunate than I.



On our flight home to America, I remember everyone complaining, myself included. There were complaints that the food wasn't good, that the flight was too long, that people were tired. But I couldn't help thinking to myself about the refugees. What was their journey like to Italy? Did they even have food? Did they complain about being tired? No. They were willing to risk their lives just so that they wouldn't have the fear of being persecuted in the country that they came from.

The art that the refugees make together in order to earn money was something that I really appreciated. I remember learning this year about how people often make art in response to social justice issues in order to evoke change. I think that I finally understand just what that means. The refugees make their art as a symbol of where they have come from, where they are now, and where they hope to be in the future. They are a reminder to all of us that not everyone is as lucky as we are.

After visiting the Refugee Center I read Rakin's letter. The fact that someone who had everything has had it all taken away from him in the blink of an eye is astounding. And the fact that he is able to rebound from this and build a new life is inspiring. We can all learn lessons from the refugees- to be thankful for what we have in America, to not judge others or the circumstances that they come from, to welcome the stranger, and to always have faith.

It is now Memorial Day, an American holiday that I have always associated with barbecues, red white and blue, and parades. But now it seems to be so much more than that. Of course, it is a day to remember those who serve our country and the sacrifices that they make for us. But it is also a day to think about those who do not have these liberties. It is a day to think about people like the refugees, who can only dream of living in a place like America, where their voices will be heard, and they can live in peace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jessica DiBugno is 19 years old and lives on Long Island, NY. She just finished her freshman year at St. John's University studying accounting. She studied Italian throughout high school and may minor it because of how much she loved her time in Italy! She hopes to continue serving others at home as well as abroad, especially refugees.