

July 2016

The Drum Family

**SPECIAL EDITION:
REFUGEE CAMPS
IN GREECE**



(please excuse the lack of photos in this issue... for the safety, protection and dignity of all involved, we were only allowed this one photo for publication purposes)

A Day in a Refugee Camp

It's 90 degrees and still morning as we plug in the coordinates for the Malakasa Refugee Camp and start our drive north of Athens, Greece. I'm not sure what to expect. Billy has been serving for the past 10 days in the Moria camp on Lesbos island and his stories are discouraging and traumatic. I hear that the Malakasa camp has many more children than the Moria camp, many of them unaccompanied minors. I'm trying to mentally and emotionally prepare myself for this day of fact-finding, but I'm also asking God to break my heart for what breaks His and to give me eyes to see what it is that He is bringing me here to see. I don't believe that anything happens by chance, and I believe that our invitation to come and see Malakasa is for a purpose.

We arrive in the tiny town of Malakasa, Greece – a sleepy little haven with a couple of outdoor cafes and a small corner market store. But where is this sprawling refugee camp? We drive in ever increasing circles until we finally decide to stop and attempt to ask for directions at the store. Sarah and I stay in the car and watch as Billy approaches the two women in the store. After a very animated conversation that included lots of laughing and waving of arms and even a pantomime that consisted of running part way up the street as though the woman was a car and showing the way, Billy returned to the car laughing hysterically and positive that he now had proper directions. The women only spoke Greek and her daughter spoke 'a little English' (which totaled up to two words – "sorry" and "yes").

It turns out that pantomime directions with Greek laughter is a better map than our GPS system, and much more friendly and entertaining to boot!

The Malakasa refugee camp is housed on an old Greek military base, surrounded by high fences and razor wire, gates and guard houses and posted soldiers. There are signs that prohibit the use of cameras on military property. We are met at the gate by two REMAR directors who give us our official vests and usher us in. After a small confrontation with military guards regarding food supplies and a tank of propane that REMAR is trying to deliver to the camp, we are forced to leave the supplies and propane outside the gates and proceed on foot until other officials can come and straighten out the supply issues.

I don't think we walked 20 feet before the first man approached us, a young adult male from Afghanistan. He was all smiles, stuck out his hand for a handshake, and said, "Hello, My Friends! Good to see you today." Okay... I can't lie... THAT was NOT what I expected! This guy was happy, he was friendly, and he spoke perfect English with almost zero accent. This scene was repeated over and over again as people smiled and greeted us while we walked through the camp.

The camp itself is bleak. Rows and rows and rows of tents sitting in the scorching sun, no breeze, little to no shade, and every dumpster is filled to overflowing with the remains of meal containers and other trash. What little shade that exists is completely occupied by women, fully dressed in headscarves and full covering dresses and sitting on blankets in the dirt, trying to take advantage of the small amount of protection the trees offered from the heat. But they appear content, doing what small groups of people do when together... talking, laughing, some are playing cards. Children run around playing with anything they can and inventing games on the fly.

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...A Day in a Refugee Camp

We are ushered past rows and rows of tents, occupied by 6-10 people in each. There are more than 1600 people housed here right now. Then we pass the kitchen area, where the military is providing meals. At each camp there is a different set up. In Moria, Billy and the crew with REMAR were providing meals and helping to feed the refugee population (3500 people in the Moria camp). In this camp, the military is responsible for the feeding and REMAR is providing other services – snacks of crackers and cookies, hot tea, a community room, and a large tent space for providing children's services. We enter in to the community room that REMAR is running and it is full of people sitting at picnic-style tables, taking advantage of another place out of the heat. There are electrical outlets on the walls and many are taking advantage of this for charging cell phones and trying to keep in touch with relatives who are still in transit as refugees.

That is when I see her. She is captivating. Her face draws me in. Her eyes are so deep and her smile so kind, her face is enchanting. "Hello!" she says to me. "Come and sit." She slides over on the bench and pats the seat next to her.

For the next hour, I sit with this fascinating young girl and I am forever changed.

Hosai is 14 years old, the oldest child in her family. She wants me to know that her name means "deer" in her language. She is from Afghanistan. I also meet her younger sister, Sidiqa. Sidiqa is 8, but she wishes to be 9, and she keeps telling me that she will soon be 9, so I should just think of her as 9. I smile and say that she looks like a 9 year old to me, and she shakes her head and smiles. They then tell me a very animated story about the youngest brother (6 years old) and how he is wearing a cast on his whole arm because he fell and broke it in 3 places. They are very excited that the doctor says that the cast will be removed in one more week and he will be well again.

I ask about the rest of the family, and Hosai tells me that there are 4 children total (she is the oldest) and their father. She then looks out the door in to the distance and says that her mother 'is no more', she died on the journey. So Hosai is now the 'mother' for her brothers and sister. They have been traveling for 7 months – 5 months of walking and escape to this point, and two months so far in the refugee camp. They left Afghanistan in January. "I miss the snow. My part of Afghanistan is beautiful, and cooler than here. This is so hot! It can be hot there too, but not like here!"

"What is your favorite thing to do in camp?" I ask.

"There is no favorite thing in camp. It is the same every day. Nothing. Nothing to do. In Afghanistan, I had a lot to do. Too much! (she laughs) Every day was different. It wasn't a good life, but every day was different. All we do here is get up, eat, sit around, eat, sit around, eat... the same every day. I want to study and to read. I miss my books. I love to study!"

"What do you love to study?"

"Math! Math is my favorite subject. Oh, I wish for a math book, or a class, or a teacher to sit with me! I wish to study again."

My teacher heart is melting and breaking all at the same time. I want to cry, but I hold it for later. I have already had this conversation with the REMAR directors. They say that one of their biggest issues right now is fighting boredom for the people, especially the women and children. The women would like something to do, hand work or workshops or something to learn. And the children want to study. They have the right to go to school and study, but there is no school close to the camp, no transportation, and no way to provide the school supplies and books that they need. So they cannot go. The volunteers with REMAR are trying to do crafts and play games with the children, but they have limited resources and limited man-power. This is one of the areas that they need help with and are asking us to try to help provide via volunteers and supplies.

Hosai tells me, for the millionth time, that my daughter is so beautiful. She is captivated by her hair. She says so to Sarah and Sarah giggles and says, 'no, your hair is much more beautiful than mine', to which they have a discussion regarding hair. I am struck by the fact that my 7th grade daughter who is USA born and Latina/Española raised is sitting here talking about hair with a young girl from Afghanistan. How different and how similar they are! Completely different cultures and backgrounds, yet both immigrants trying to find their place in a different world from their parent's. And here they sit, being fully and completely girly, discussing hair.

The entire time we are talking, another young woman has been sitting across from us, watching. Her name is Ameneh, 22 years old, and she is holding her baby boy, Ali Azgar. She speaks no English. I have asked her a few questions, and Hosai has been translating for us. Ameneh has been in transit for 10 months. She traveled for 6 months from Afghanistan, mostly walking. She spent 2 months in a refugee camp on the coast before being transferred here to Malakasa 2 months ago. She doesn't offer any extra information and does not seem eager to carry on conversation. Her face is hauntingly sad and I can't help but feel that she is surrounded by people, yet she seems completely alone and tiny in this sea of wanderers. Desperately alone.

Another boy has come over to listen in on several occasions, to interject in to the conversation, and to try out his English. He is 13 years old and is carrying the most precious little fairy of a baby girl, his one year old sister, Aisha. He is bubbly and happy and has near-perfect English. He tells me that his favorite thing at camp is the children's tent. "It is the happy place. It is my favorite place when it is open. Singing and playing and happiness, making drawings, the nice people – it is the best place in camp!" We go over to see the children's tent, which is closed now and two volunteers are sweeping and picking up stools and papers.

REMAR's volunteers are almost all Spanish-speakers, with a few Northern Europeans thrown in. Almost all speak English as a second language. Today, the children's tent is being manned by a Swiss guy and a twenty-year old girl from Argentina. The guy has been here for 2 weeks and will continue to serve for two more. He is trying to decide whether or not to stay in Malakasa or go to Moria for a bit, so he and Billy chat about options and perspective. The Argentine is a bubbly young nurse who has a heart for service and missions. She is constantly surrounded by children. This camp has many unaccompanied minors – children whose parents have died in transit, or parents only had enough money to get one or two people in the family across a border, or children who were literally thrown on to boats or buses or across borders to strangers in the hopes that they could find freedom when the parents could not. These children now have no one but each other and the kindness of strangers and volunteers, so 'Lucy' becomes a big sister-figure or a surrogate mom to many. "These kids sit close to me, so close. They can't get close enough. They just want me to touch them, to caress their arms or their heads."

There is another presence in the room, always watching, always reaching for someone or trying to engage someone in conversation. It is Mohammed Farhad, a 22 year old in a wheelchair due to some form of cerebral palsy. He does speak English, although difficult to understand. And he has been learning Spanish from the REMAR volunteers. He has a fond place in his heart for Spain and has a Spanish flag attached to his wheelchair with many signatures on it. When he hears that we are from Spain, he shouts "Viva España!" and dissolves in to laughter.

Mohammed did not always have this wheelchair. The wheelchair was a gift from REMAR. His father carried him here on his back from Afghanistan. We met his father, who is not a big man – he is about my height (5'2") and probably in his late 40s or early 50s. To think of this man physically carrying his son from Afghanistan. I'm instantly in awe of his dedication and love.

Mohammed keeps calling me his sister. He keeps saying that I am a sister to him. I agree to be his sister and his friend. He sits next to me in his wheelchair and holds my hand while Hosai and I continue to talk.

Soon, lunch time rolls around. Refugees leave the common room to go to the dining room to pick up meals and eat with their families and have an afternoon rest time. REMAR volunteers stay in the common room and sweep and clean up and prepare the room for our lunch. A group in the kitchen has prepared spaghetti and salad and juice for us, and the volunteers all sit together, family style. It is a table full of nationalities – Spaniards, Italians, Swiss, Germans, and a few Afghan and Iraqi refugees who volunteer to help REMAR in camp every day. It is a beautiful mix at the table, a family, and I think that this is what the Kingdom of God is supposed to look like. Mohammed has stayed behind when the others left for their families to have lunch, and no one even bats an eyelash, they just wheel him up to the end of the table and he sits with the volunteer family. Billy is asked to pray for the lunch and the group, and he prays over this mix of people and religions and traditions like it's just any other day.

Mohammed is seated at the end, between Billy on one side and Sarah on the other. A few minutes in to lunch, Billy realizes that Mohammed needs help and offers to help him, to which 'Lucy' the Argentine assumes her mother role and scoots Sarah to the side so she can switch places. Effortlessly, like someone who has done this her whole life, she feeds spaghetti to both herself and Mohammed while she carries on a deep conversation with me about places she has served and her call to missions on her life. Her heart and actions speak so much louder than her words and I am convinced that she has a calling. She is destined for great things in the Kingdom!

After more conversations with REMAR directors, more fact-finding, more investigation of needs assessment and the future of this situation, we leave the camp that afternoon with a better understanding and a clearer vision for how our community and the Church in Europe and the world can rise to the occasion and help. We will return soon, with volunteers and help and supplies, and we now better understand how to pray.

As we are leaving, we are blessed with Peace (Salaam) by many, and we are asked when we might return. Hosai sees us just before we leave the military base gate and she comes over to wish us well and say goodbye. She is visibly sad that we are not staying, as are we. We exchange a hug that lasts a little too long for me to be able to contain my tears anymore and I have to smile and turn away before I lose it.

What lies ahead for Hosai? Will she be here when I return? I hope so, and I hope not.

To learn about Billy's perspective from the Moria refugee camp in Greece, go to our blog site at <http://www.drumsforchrist.org/blog> to see his videos.



DEAR BILLY AND LAURIE,

I will pray for you.

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- Sharing the Love of Christ with the least, the lost, and the left out... immigrants, displaced peoples, the lonely, the abandoned, those who need a friend.
- Nurturing and developing people to be healthy spiritually, physically, emotionally, and relationally - because "care" is not just an emotional feeling word, "care" is a verb - an action. That's who we are... the care-givers!



Call to Action:

If you read this edition and feel a call on your heart to help, there are several ways to do that:

- We will be returning to work in refugee camps in Greece in October. If you feel led to join a volunteer team, please contact us at billy@drumsforchrist.org or call us on our USA-based phone number (979) 985.5238.
- If you cannot join a volunteer team but feel led to help, you can donate funds to help our team with supplies and necessities for refugees. All donations are tax-deductible. Go to <http://www.themissionsociety.org/give> Scroll down to Give to a missionary and put Drum in the name space and our number 0321 in the account number.
- If you are interested in helping the organization we work with in Spain and Greece (REMAR), you can donate to them by going to <http://en.remar.org/> and donate to the SOS program to help refugees all over Europe.
- Please alert your friends and family to the issues of refugees. Share this newsletter, share our stories, go to our blog at www.drumsforchrist.org and watch the videos, and please lead others to pray for and help our work with refugee populations.