

The Midas T Project

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From the second my plane touched down; I was in an entirely different world. When I stepped out of the airport, the dry heat overwhelmed me. I looked up at the sky, a perfect shade of blue, without a cloud in sight. Driving from the airport, I looked out the window at the bare, rocky landscape, scattered with olive trees. The narrow roads were filled with tiny hatchback cars and noisy mopeds zooming around, paying little attention to the rules of the road. As we approached the city, the streets were lined with white apartment buildings; almost every apartment was lucky enough to have its own balcony. Without any warning, there was a massive thunderstorm, followed by the worst traffic jam you could imagine. There was a lot of honking, shouting, and fanatic arm gestures out of car windows. Athens is a unique place in one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Even though I was born in Greece and lived there for nine years, every time I come back to spend my summer there, it feels foreign to me.

The next day, I found myself walking up the stairs of a small office building in the center of Athens. My heart was beating and I was sweating profusely. Granted, it was almost 100 degrees in Athens in the summer. This was my first day volunteering at the Home Project, an organization that helps unaccompanied refugee children in Greece. I had met with one of the directors and had read the website, so I knew the basics. The Home Project provides shelters for 220 unaccompanied minor refugees to keep them out of refugee camps and off the streets. I knew that Greece, a small country of 10 million people suffering from an economic crisis, had received over a million refugees since 2015. Despite knowing these facts and figures, I still felt clueless. How traumatized would these children be from their experiences? What would they think of me, a preppy kid from New York? How could I possibly relate to them? After all, my biggest obstacle in life so far had been 9th-grade biology.

When I entered the cramped office, I was introduced to two 17-year-old boys. W from Pakistan was tall and outgoing. S from Iran was small and quiet. The second I met them their friendly smiles put me at ease. They were just normal teenagers. Even though their English wasn't perfect, we talked about soccer and our favorite teams. I was there to help them write their narratives about Athens and how life there made them feel. The

Home Project would publish a compilation of stories refugee stories called "My Athens Project" in various publications to raise awareness of refugee youth. I helped them with their English and with the computers. As they wrote, I read over their shoulders. They often spoke about being lonely and feeling out of place in such a different environment. I thought about how I felt when I moved to Long Island two years ago and then multiplied it by a million. How could I have faced that without the love and support of my family? They also spoke about standard teenage stuff like playing sports, making friends and getting girlfriends. They wrote about how much they wanted to start school in Greece. Imagine that! While I can't wait to leave school when I graduate, these kids are doing whatever they can to go to school.

During the next few weeks, I met more refugee teens from Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other countries. Their stories were astounding. They talked about fleeing the Taliban, hearing bombs explode being smuggled across borders, having their families killed, and being put in prison. Some were happy to meet me while others didn't the whole time. They were teenagers after all. Many were trying to make their lives in Greece, while others were eager to reach other European countries where they had some family. All of them were desperate not to be sent back to their countries.

I helped the Home Project wherever I could. I spent a couple of days helping paint one of the shelters with a group of volunteers who came from all over the world. Another day, I went to a farmers' market on the street with other volunteers to ask for whatever the vendors could give to us. We saw incredible generosity when some vendors, who were struggling to make ends meet, kept piling on fruits and vegetables. Others just clicked their tongues and lifted their chin in the Greek gesture meaning "no." Nonetheless, we brought back a massive haul that filled the entire rear of a van. The Home Project kids were dependent on these donations. I even celebrated my 15th birthday with them. Before I started, I had thought about skipping that day volunteering to do something "fun" to celebrate my birthday. However, seeing their faces light up when they tried an American-style cake my mom had baked made my birthday was well worth it.

When I returned to New York, I couldn't stop thinking about of S and W alone in a new country trying to make a life for themselves, yet always with smiles on their faces. I brainstormed with Liliana Papachristos who was a junior in the same high school where I was a sophomore. Before working on the Home Project, we were active at the GOYA organization at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of St. Paul. We helped feed the homeless in New York and visited hospitals. We came up with an idea of how to continue such activities here and in Greece. We would design and sell Greek-inspired apparel and sell them at Greek festivals and on-line. One hundred percent of all our profits would go to support charities with which we have been actively involved.

We decided to call our effort The Midas T project. Midas of course was a king famous for hoarding funds. So, our name is satirical. Over the next few months, we managed to raise thousands of dollars and presented several local charities with gifts. When I returned to Greece the summer after my sophomore year, I was able to use the money that Liliana and I had raised through Midas sales to install air-conditioning at the Home Project Shelter in Kalithea.

Now in our senior and junior years, Liliana and I hope to create a network of teens to sell Midas merchandise in their communities around the United States to raise money for the causes of their choice. Anyone interested in this prospective can contact us at info@TheMidasT.com.

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