Lydia Murray 9BAS – Empathy Program Year 9

Currently there are over 59.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, half of whom are women and children. They flee their home countries in fear of persecution and, as a consequence, endure countless months or years of uncertainty, hardship and vulnerability in the quest for safety and security. Year 9 got a small taste of what it would be like to walk in the shoes of one of these people.

_Tent set-up for overnight experience_

Overall, I'm sure everybody who was involved in the fortnight-long program would agree it was an eye-opening and at times confronting experience and very beneficial. I would like to thank the teachers, staff and guest speakers who made last week possible, especially Mrs Woods for coordinating the whole experience.

Throughout the course we were reminded that everyone has the right to seek asylum, whether it be in Australia or anywhere else in the world.
Chloe Rogers 9BAS – Overnight Experience

At the end of term 2, 64 Year 9 students were taken on an overnight experience. This trip simulated a refugee's journey and the kinds of experiences they would face when entering and living in refugee camps. Once we got onto the bus we were taken to a foreign place and then herded off the buses with our garbage bags slung over our backs. We waited for what seemed like an hour before we were finally taken up and over a hill to our examination point.

Here we were given sheets (written in gibberish language) to fill in about ourselves and why we thought we should be allowed into the camp. While all this was happening we were not told a single word – all volunteer workers and administrators either refused to talk to us or spoke in another language. If we were lucky, which a few of us weren't, the administrators would allow us through to the searching stage. We were given a full body search then forced to empty our bags onto the ground as they searched for any illegal objects. Some of the things that they believed 'illegal' were deodorant, food, a lunch box and additional pairs of socks. They split us into groups and we were taken to our camps for the night. The leaders gave each group large plastic tubs full of supplies to make our shelters. Most groups found this task a pretty easy thing to do, although in my group we decided to be creative with the tools we were given and strapped rope to poles and hung bivis between them. Each group was also given two large tarps for under the tents so that water could not get in. Unfortunately my group decided that they were for extra protection and used them as walls.

That night we were left to the elements, it poured with rain and every group got completely flooded. By the morning we were all cold, wet and tired. Food was basic and consisted of couscous and vegies for dinner, and muesli and powdered milk for breakfast. In order to trade for food our ‘family’ group had to complete different tasks and bring these to the market.
On behalf of all the students that went on the refugee trip, I would like to say that it was a very eye-opening experience that changed the way that I viewed refugees in the world and how others are treating them. These people have had to go through things that no person should ever see, and 50% of the people that are fleeing are under 18. I could never imagine having to leave my family, not certain that I would ever get to see them again, travel to an unknown country in a crammed boat for a week or more and then live in camps packed full of desperate people for between two months and the rest of my life. I would definitely encourage all the younger year groups to get involved with this experience. It will definitely change the way you see the world and how you view the people around you.

Rosie Williams 9DMD – SIEV X Memorial

The most powerful thing that I experienced on this adventure was observing the SIEV X memorial at Western Park. SIEV is the acronym for Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel, which I find extremely wrong because it is NOT illegal to get on a boat and seek asylum in a different country – in fact it's a human right! This vessel was en route from Sumatra to Christmas Island, and carried around 400 asylum seekers in a tiny, unseaworthy fishing boat measuring only 20m in length. That number of people is equivalent to almost two-and-a-half Radford year groups. The boat tragically sank in international waters just south of Java on 19 October 2001. Of the 400 passengers, 353 people drowned.

Father Richard met us at Weston Park where we learnt about this devastating disaster. The memorial consists of 353 white posts that lead from the edge of the lake all the way up the hill. Each pole, representing one life is painted white and has a small artwork on it. Each pole also has a plaque featuring the victim’s name and age. However, only 100 victims were identified. Large poles represent adults, while small poles represent children. Everyone was walking around the memorial, in the pouring rain, silent and memorized by the sight. It was an amazing experience to see how many people were on that tiny little boat.
Students visit the SIEV X memorial site

The thing that most stood out to me was that a large majority of the victims were women and young children. I felt particularly emotional when I came across a small pole with a name and an age of six months. Six months is so young and reading this plaque made me think about the terrible things that would have been happening to make a mother and her six-month-old baby get on a tiny, crammed and unsafe boat. It also made me feel so empathetic towards all the victims on SIEV X boat, and all refugees around the world who would all have stories like these.

I also noticed by reading the last names on the plaques that many families of four people or more had died in this tragedy. Whole families dying at sea because they have been forced to flee their home country and get on a boat, putting their lives on the line, just to find a place where they can feel safe. Do you think that is okay?

Whatever their story may be, wherever they come from, whatever their religion, I believe more refugees should be accepted into developed countries, like Australia, that are capable of supporting these people, who are in desperate and sometimes unavoidable situations.
Steph Trinh 9BAS – Workshops & Model United Nations Assembly

The Red Cross and the Youth UN kept us very busy over a two-day period with workshops tailored specifically for us. The Red Cross workshops, *In Search of Safety: Seeking Humanity*, looked at the varied dynamics of forced migration and vulnerabilities that can cause them.

The Youth UN workshop gave us an inside look into the politics and debates behind the topic of refugees, and I really enjoyed these. The Friday was spent simulating a mock general assembly. This was a fun and interesting experience. Matt Trigge and I represented Lithuania. Topics included the morality behind torture, the use of drones for targeted killings, and the nuclear weapons in Israel and Iran. The topics were fascinating and in my group arguments became pretty heated, especially between Russia (Bec and Campbell) and Iran (Jackie and Liam). Meanwhile, China (Andy and Matt) found itself particularly victimised when all the other countries decided to form alliances against it. This simulation really gave us the opportunity to see what it's like in the UN's general assemblies as it followed the strict format of a real debate. I think we all really enjoyed the note-passing – it helped us develop our arguments, gather intelligence and form alliances against each other. Some messages were more entertaining than others, especially the ones that included a bit of flair and creativity. Overall it was a really great couple of days which developed our insight, knowledge and empathy towards refugees and asylum seekers.
Matt Overton-Claire – Guest Speakers

Throughout the week we heard from seven guest speakers and each of them told us of their personal experiences.

One of the most captivating and confronting speeches was from one of our very own in the Radford community, Mr Chernor Bah. Mr Bah settled in Australia from Sierra Leone after the civil war in the late 1990s. He told us of his journey from Freetown into the neighbouring country of Guinea after spending several months in a refugee camp. Aged 18, he had to leave his family behind and resettle in an unknown foreign place. Once in Australia, he studied and earned his qualifications and has now gone on to have his own family here.

By welcoming Mr Bah, future generations will benefit from his contribution to society, and clearly we all benefit personally by having him here, working at our school.

We also heard from Mr Felix Machiridza, who has settled in Canberra and was a refugee from Zimbabwe. He shared his desire to give back to Australian society, to work to make his own way for himself and his children and not receive handouts from the Australian Government. He also had a powerful message that he had learned to forgive and encouraged us all to do the same, which was incredible given what he had experienced in his life. He also shared his incredible musical talents by playing traditional instruments and singing for us, which was very powerful.

We were also fortunate to hear from many other people that have strong links to Radford. Mr Scott Pearsall (Associate Dean of Education and Associate Professor in Law, University of Canberra) talked about the importance of understanding international law in working with other countries and negotiating improved humanitarian outcomes. He also helped us understand the language and legal terms used with regards to refugees. Air Commodore Anker Broderson (Australian Defence Programme Manager, US Force Postures Initiatives) and Mr Simon Duke (Director of Protection Policy, Department of Immigration and Border Protection) shared their experiences of dealing with different cultures, the importance of viewing what we say and do from another person’s cultural perspectives, and the broader political imperatives that can drive one country’s policy directions. Mrs Julie Stalker (Senior Logistics Officer, Humanitarian Response Branch DFAT) shared with us what humanitarian responses involve. Mrs Fiona Lynch-Magor (Australian Refugee and Humanitarian Program, Department of Immigration and Border Protection) shared her experiences with the current refugee crisis in Syria, the settling of Bhutanese refugees in Australia and the role of UNHCR.
Another presentation was by Mr Marcus Lumb, who intrigued us with stories of his time as a peacekeeper in Timor Leste. On behalf of Year 9, I can confidently say that his inspirational words about keeping the peace and getting to know the stories behind each and every refugee has a positive effect on all of us. A part of his message was to not forget that each refugee, each human being, has the right to seek asylum.

Guest speaker Marcus Lumb places a UN peacekeeper beret on a student