

# Bridging the gap: United World College students' initiatives in work with refugees

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**'How can there be peace without people understanding each other, and how can this be if they don't know each other?'**

*Lester B. Pearson, supporter of Pearson College UWC: Nobel Peace Prize lecture, 1957.*

The refugee crisis is global. Many aspects of our daily lives are touched by this, especially those who work with people every day. Child care assumes a more important role than ever, being the institution where integration happens first for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people. We, students of one of 15 United World Colleges (UWCs), encounter the topic on a daily basis – be it through direct experiences of our friends, our work in service projects or discussions we have as a school community. So it appears quite logical for us to give this a bigger role in our daily lives, and learn about new ways to engage with and improve communication between various groups of people.

UWC Robert Bosch College is part of a movement founded by educator Kurt Hahn during the Cold War to give young adults from many different countries a space to meet and get to know and understand each other. It gives selected students from various backgrounds the opportunity to study with a scholarship, depending on their financial situation. Intercultural, interfaith and other kinds of understanding and dialogue become part of our daily lives here. It makes us think about privilege and how we can use it. An interesting thing we learned here is how, with a little bit of time spent with Rebecca from Romania, she became Rebecca who likes math or who played that prank on that one teacher.



Two hundred and six students from 88 countries bring many different perspectives into a place like UWC Robert Bosch College, which is located in Freiburg, Germany. Students teach each other about the political landscape in their own countries, about different ways the media reports about the current refugees coming from Iraq and Syria or what influence conflict and war have had on their lives. The news gets closer to our hearts here. On various different platforms, students from our college have had the chance to talk about their lives as refugees, and we realized how different all those stories were, as well as how they are similar. Suddenly, the news had a face. And also for a moment someone was Mustaffa, the refugee, but with a little space to meet and get to know each other he was just the person who did not clean up their dishes or who brought you some chocolate before your last chemistry test. This

connection between the refugees being our friends made us realise that the refugee crossing the border in this very moment is someone who could be your roommate or best friend, if given the chance.

While it is important to talk about refugees, we, the student body, are also driven by the longing to actually act and make a difference. This can be seen quite clearly in what we have created so far, using the possibilities which were given to us. An important part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) is the CAS-programme, where students engage in **creative, active and social** activities outside the academic curriculum. Some of the service activities here in Freiburg include working together with local organisations supporting refugees. Separately from the IB, the United World Colleges have another chance for students to get involved in social programs: the Project week is a student-organised event taking place twice a year, allowing single students or small groups to come up with ideas to do a project over the course of five days. The school provides 150€ for every participant and the groups need to stay within the limit of this budget when it comes to food, accommodation and transportation.

### **Katja della Liberia, 18, Germany**

Project Week and the CAS-programme were the framework within which I, Katja (18) from Germany, had my first encounter with refugees. Two of my weekly CAS-programmes are connected to refugees: My activity is learning how to play cricket, which is quite an exotic sport for a German. The coach, a refugee, had to flee from Pakistan, where he was a teacher. The Cricket CAS is a wild mix of RBC students, with members speaking German, Hindi, Urdu and English, all languages my coach could communicate in. What certainly did not matter was his status as refugee, but how nice he acted and how well he taught us how to bowl and bat. It was interesting to learn from him and he seemed to enjoy being able to teach again.

My own chance to teach came through my service. With three other students I make my way to the Romabüro in Freiburg every Wednesday, where we teach members of the ethnic minority community of Romani people the German language. It is definitely a new challenge every week. In the beginning, it was hard to figure out a system that worked for us. After we decided to pair up with students, there was a moment of uncertainty: Should girls be paired with a male student and vice versa? At UWC, we did not actually ever have any problems with that, but it was an interesting thing to deal with and to see how we could be culturally respectful, efficient and practical at the same time. There was also a lot of improvisation involved. Since the levels of German skills in written and spoken language were widely varied, the one-on-one classes were the most convenient thing we could engage in. Seeing how everyone improved during the half year – and considering that I had a share in that – was just amazing. Getting a thank you, an invitation to a party held in the Romabüro or just

ditching our German class to listen to the other teenagers' amazing talents as a traditional Roma band all contributed to this great experience. We learned some Serbian and Roma words and they learned how to read a little bit of sheet music. In the next months, we are hoping to invite the band of the Romabüro to our college to have a concert together, where everyone can share their music and culture.

When it was time to organise project week, I did not hesitate to take the initiative for undertaking another project with refugees. To split up the work, Fatma from Western Sahara, a refugee herself, helped me organise everything. My parents hosted four other UWC students and me, and we played with the kids in a local refugee camp which was set up in a school gym nearby. At the camp, it was much harder to communicate than in my encounters in Freiburg, as none of us spoke Albanian. We still managed and I am proud of my group and how everyone brought in their personality and talents. Bless from Liberia was rather crazy and played football with the older boys; Fatma enjoyed communicating with the mothers. I still do not know how she managed, but she did and it was fascinating. Once we played with the kids, we did not really need to talk; rolling in the dirt together seems to be a rather universal language, just as music or sports.



### **Ani, 17, Thailand**

Our project week group spent three days in Falkensee, a small part of Berlin, which is now a home of many refugees. The purpose of project week was to be engaged with the refugees in the refugee home as much as possible and to learn more about the refugee crisis which is going on at the moment. We were so

lucky that we were hosted by a very kind lady volunteering at the place. She was also hosting two refugees from Syria and we were told to live with them.

On the first day, we were asked to welcome the newly arrived refugees. All of them seemed to be very grateful to be there, because they knew that they were safe now and did not have to wake up to the sound of bombs in the middle of the night. Partly, this relief also came from knowing that they all got an enormous support from the government and all the people nearby. One of the refugees was Nasser. He is only 14, sweet and innocent. Since none of us could speak Arabic, we communicated in body language instead. To be honest, hand gestures and facial expressions worked pretty well.

We took them to a Halloween party one evening. Nasser looked scared and almost started crying. I could only imagine how hard it was for him to live in a big city like Berlin when he was used to living in a small village. At the party, we carved pumpkins. He turned out to be the best at it. He even helped me with mine.

Our goal for the second day was to teach Nasser and other two refugees how to survive in Germany. We wanted to teach them how to buy train tickets but on the way, we found something even more interesting. It was a fancy, empty football field. Just like for many other Syrians, football was their favorite sport, too. They all ran with joy to the football field searching for an object that could be used as a ball. Nasser found a Coke bottle. On the field, we saw them smile for the first time; it seemed to come from the bottom of their hearts. This made us smile, too.

On the last day, we started the day with German lessons. In just one hour, Nasser could count from one to 200 and introduce himself without making any mistakes. After that class, he kept asking me every 10 minutes, 'Wie geht es dir?', which means, 'How are you?'. It was amazing to see how fast he learned. We had to admit that he was even smarter than us.

In the evening, Ahed and Wael, the two refugees who shared the house with us, volunteered to take us and Nasser to an Arabic restaurant. Though the restaurant was far from where they lived, they were willing to spend more than one hour on a tram just to speak their mother tongue and have a feeling of home. We talked and talked and talked about their home, my country, how much they miss their families, how much I miss my friends, etc. Little by little we started building our special relationship with them.

When we finally became good friends, our time together was over. They biked for 30 minutes to send us off at the train station with sad faces. Wael said to me that the night we spent with them was the best night they had ever had in Germany. They felt like they had found true friends. His words remain in my heart, reminding me of the most wonderful time I spent with someone I had

known for only three days but who would be in my heart forever. Knowing that what we did was meaningful to someone cheered me up and encouraged me to do more volunteer work. It was hard to say goodbye after those three days of memorable nights, laughter, fun and joy. Overcoming the language barrier and cultural differences, we bonded. They gave us love that could sustain us for several months.

### **Dini, 16, Netherlands**

During project week, I went to Berlin to work with an organisation called Karuna, which works with young refugees who ended up in Germany by themselves, providing a home for them. The group consisted only of boys around the age of 15-20. When we arrived at the building where they lived and went up to the main floor to meet them, I was quite nervous because it was my first time working there and I had no idea what to expect or how it was going to go. In this precise moment, all the perceived stereotypical views of teenage refugee boys came to mind; as much as I knew that there was so much more to these people than just the negative image that is so easily portrayed of them, I could not help but keeping it in the back of my mind.



Before going to visit them, we planned out what we were going to do with them for the coming three days. The group decided that it was our goal to get them

out of their monotonous daily routine and entertain them while we were there. We wanted them to forget about their lives for a little bit and to just have fun, while at the same time indulging in German culture. That is why we decided to go ice skating with them on the first day. This activity, we thought, would break the ice and make us more comfortable around each other while at the same time having fun; and indeed it was! None of the boys had ever ice-skated; at first it was quite comical to see them laughing at each other. Then we decided to teach them. Everyone ended up helping each other out and it was a wonderful afternoon.



We were also told by the organisation that the boys had a tendency to stay around the neighborhood and that most of them had not seen much of Berlin yet. On this note, we decided to explore the city and have a nice day out. We got to see a lot of landmarks of Berlin and took lots of pictures together. On the last day we decided to chill with them at their residence. We brought along ingredients to make pizza so that we could have a nice dinner.

After spending three days with refugee boys, we connected and had a lot of fun together. We were all sad that we had to leave. During these days, I learned a lot about how easy it is to label people when you do not know them and that everyone deserves to be who they are without being pushed into a certain category. Obviously, we will always have a lens through which we see the world

that has been influenced by our upbringing and surroundings; however, I think it is always important to be aware of this and at the same time be more open-minded to people and cultures we don't know.

When reflecting on our experience and in preparation of writing this article, we realised that, despite working in three different projects, all three of us experienced similar difficulties. One of the main difficulties we faced was a language barrier. In the beginning it was hard to communicate at all as we did not know each other; however, as we spent more time with them, we felt more comfortable and communication came more naturally. This was mostly done through the use of our hands, attempting to speak German, and learning their languages from them. Another common thing we all noticed was that the groups of refugees we worked with did not integrate particularly well into their neighborhoods. Although they did have a lifestyle comparable to an average teenager, the majority of their friends were from the same cultural background and they were surrounded by other people speaking their mother tongues most of the time.

What can be learned from this, especially for people working in the field of child care? One thing we have all learnt – and were maybe surprised by – is that simply being present can go a long way. Even though we felt, at times, that we could not help as much as we intended to (or helped in very different ways than envisioned), our effort alone was appreciated. We realised that for communication to work, it takes time, which can be bridged by activities such as sports, music, games and art. But once the barrier is overcome, these interactions are a very rewarding experience for both parties. These insights helped shape a better understanding of what is needed for us to contribute to solving this global challenge.

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