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## Student journalists chronicle refugee crisis in Greece

This summer, 13 Oakland University student journalists traveled to Greece to chronicle the plight of more than 60,000 refugees who've fled their homelands in search of a life free from violence and oppression.

The month-long study abroad experience was facilitated through a special topics course led by journalism instructor Cathy Shafran. Preparation for the trip began months in advance as students studied Greek history, language and culture, researched the refugee crisis and learned the fundamentals of news reporting.

"The goal was for students to see world events objectively through the eyes of a journalist," said Shafran. "They did mock interviews, read the latest news articles on the refugee crisis and learned technical skills – podcasting, video and photography – so they would be able to hit the ground running when they arrived in Greece."

Shafran, who's worked as a professional journalist overseas, hired Greek journalists John Psaropolous and Helen Skopis, and Israeli American photojournalist Ricki Rosen, to mentor the students on the trip. For most students, this was their first in-depth exposure to professional-level journalism. For others, like journalism major Simon Albaugh, it was a chance to take their craft to a new level.

"I've always had an interest in human rights and understanding the world's problems," he said. "I wanted to see beyond what the news was telling us and get a better sense of what the refugees were going through."

While visiting the Skaramagas refugee camp in Athens, Albaugh interviewed members of the Yazidi religious group who were driven from their homeland in northern Iraq after being targeted by ISIS militants.

"The Yazidis have an intensely unique culture, and because of their isolation, they've been able to cultivate a way of life that hasn't changed," Albaugh explained. "Now their culture is being threatened."

Albaugh's research into the Yazidis revealed that about half a million are living as refugees worldwide. About 4,000 are in Greece, waiting to find out if they will be granted asylum. Life in the camps is difficult and there are no guarantees, as Albaugh noted in an [article](#) published at [OURefugeeReport.com](#), a website students created to showcase their work.

"They're putting their faith in a system they have no control over," Albaugh said of the refugees. "They're trusting that if they follow the rules and go through the process, they'll be given asylum. But they're denied, they could end up in a place where they might be killed. There's so much despair."

Communication major Allyson Szydlowski gave voice to that despair while reporting on the mental health challenges refugees face.

"Mental health is a serious problem within the camps," Szydlowski said. "People have seen wars, bombings and killings at such young ages. Women and



*A team of OU student journalists reported on the refugee crisis in Greece this summer as part of a special topics journalism course. Back row from left: Jessica Duronio, John Bozik, Christina Salem, Mallary Becker, John Psaropolous (Greek journalist), Melissa Deatsch (recent OU graduate), Haley Argeros and Michael Blackburn. Front row from left: Simon Albaugh, Jennifer Gerlando, Morgan Brouillet, Abigaile Koot, Allyson Szydlowski, Mary Siring and Jessa Vivio.*



*Simon Albaugh speaks with a refugee near the entrance of the asylum services building in Athens.*

This was Szydlowski's first time studying abroad and her first foray into the journalism field. She created a **podcast** featuring interview clips and a report of mental health related incidents among refugees. She was careful to respect the refugees' privacy and earn trust from those she interviewed.

"I would simply greet them and make small talk," she said. "As we grew closer and could trust one another, I would ask deeper questions, but at the same time respect anything that triggered something they couldn't handle."

Despite the bleakness of the camps, there are signs of hope. One of them is Melissa Day Center, a place that offers support to migrant women through language classes and recreational activities, such as art, music and drama therapy. International Relations major Jessica Duronio highlighted the center's work in a **video** interview with its founder, Nina Christopolou.

Duronio, a member of OU's Honors College, plans to use her experiences in Greece as the basis for her honors thesis, a capstone project required of Honors College students. Like her colleagues, Duronio took to heart the lessons she learned while reporting on the refugee crisis.

"This situation is affecting real people in real ways," she said. "Some people we met were around our age, and they've been through so much that we can't even imagine. It really makes you think about what it's like to be in their shoes."

During their time abroad, students also interviewed leaders of non-governmental organizations, attended a briefing at the Greek Parliament with members of Greece's ultra-nationalist party, Golden Dawn, and accompanied the coast guard on a search for missing migrants off the coast of Lesbos, the Greek island that is often the first stop for refugees seeking asylum in Europe.



*Jessica Duronio is pictured at the Greek Parliament in Athens.*

"These weren't everyday experiences," Shafran said. "The reporters we talked to in Greece were very surprised that we had gotten that kind of access."

Aside from watching her students develop into capable journalists, Shafran said she most enjoyed seeing the group work as a cohesive unit.

"If a student struggled putting a story together, others would step up and help," she said. "They really grew not only as journalists, but also as young adults, and that's something they'll take with them wherever they go."

Through the Office of International Education, Oakland offers students the opportunity to study abroad in more than 40 countries and study away at nearly 200 universities in North America.

For more information, visit [oakland.edu/ie/studyabroad](http://oakland.edu/ie/studyabroad).



*Allyson Szydlowski speaks with Abreha Shahar, a Syrian refugee she met at the Ritsona refugee camp.*