



4/29/2020

I'm working at a table in the middle of a hall. The clicks of my computer match a distant echo of my co-worker across from me. We are diligent. We are working. The hall is sunny and warm. It has clean floors, a nice youth center. If I were to walk up the street, I would pass a pastry shop, a cell phone place, an orthodox church, a grocery store, an elementary school, a cemetery, and then just up from the cemetery, I would find 500 people living in tents. Briskly moving around in daylight; some building tents. Some cleaning tents. Some babies crying. A little girl who has her feet in filthy rubber sandals that are four times too big for her. A woman with a hijab and two bags of groceries who won't make eye contact with you. Four young men who make direct eye contact for too long until you look away first. Above the tents, 6000 more live in shelters, tents, containers, whatever is available. No running water. Electricity reaching only a fraction of the jungle by questionable cables. They are walking up and down the hill. Up and down. Up and down. It is like a strange ant colony I have watched as a child. The same path, the same. And everyone seems to know where they are going. There is a woman with three tiny children sitting on the edge of the road. She holds one by the hand and another seems constantly four steps away from extreme danger. She does not appear to notice but at the last moment she is always there.

I am still sitting in the hall. I can tell you what is up the hill because I know it is there. It continues to be there, despite all this time. It is incomprehensible but happening. Daily. Always. I think of all the people moved in trucks and on trains during World War II. Wearing the same clothes for weeks. Having rocks and trash thrown at the vehicle as it goes through a small village. Every other generation it seems we become convinced yet again of them and us. We wouldn't ever be in that situation. We make sure we have jobs. We are good. We don't have those strange customs and we don't have religious laws that could be dangerous. And then, in a blink, we don't seem to mind them limited to tents on a hillside. Them refused entry to shops. Them being children sorting through dumpsters for anything to fortify their crafted shelter. It's really too bad, we say, they should have stayed in the other place. They should have stayed in the other place where their children not only searched in dumpsters but also worked long hours in factories and hidden hot shops. The other other place destroyed by war. The other other other place with schools and hospitals bombed. The other other other other place they truly loved right through the point when it became unlivable.

I am here and I am telling you what I have seen. What I have witnessed. It is not unknown, it is intentionally ignored. My work right now is to call children and ask them what they have lost. Three fires in quick succession burned these tents and shelters. I am working through a list of about 100 students who attend the youth center. I call them: Hello, yes it's Sarah from Mazi. Yes, I miss you so much! Are you okay?..... And mama baba? ...What do you need? ... Okay how many sleeping bags? .... small brother is how old? 4 years.... Okay... And the backpack is burned too, okay we can get you one. No problem. ... Yes, shirt and notebook too. Of course. We will try, very soon. I'm glad you are okay. Talk soon.

I want to do more. To share that I am opening hotel rooms, finding showering facilities, replacing absolutely every tiny item that was lost. I want to say that I am convincing governments and breaking open humanitarian corridors and finding welcoming cities. And I am doing these things bit by bit with my organization. But I am still convinced that history will say more could have been done. Should have been done. Them and us is a false dichotomy, it is only we.

Sarah Ruzek  
*Education Manager Samos*