

“I HOPE PEOPLE LIVING HERE NEVER HAVE TO EXPERIENCE WHAT I’VE BEEN THROUGH” – Student, age 19

22.02.2018 – “Just like other children”, by Shamina de Gonzaga*

A brisk Monday morning at HLA Gernsbach—a public high school in the town of Gernsbach, in Germany’s affluent, industrial Baden-Württemberg region. This day would conclude a visit organized around a youth leadership seminar that HLA had organized over the weekend, in the nearby retreat facilities of the Daimler Corporation.

Classroom windows offered a view of the Black Forest’s hills. The picturesque setting could be a refuge for anyone accustomed to urban life. However, in Gernsbach, the term “refuge” takes on a much more literal meaning, as the city has become home to individuals fleeing countries mired in conflict and poverty, such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Eritrea.

On the last day of my trip, I sat in on the HLA class designated for refugee and recently immigrated teens. At the end of the class, the teacher invited the students to stay, if they wished to participate in a group interview I would conduct to learn more about their experience.

Some of those who remained and shared their story later on decided to not be quoted, nor appear in a photo, for fear they might be found on the Internet.

At first glance, the class was not unlike any other. Within a few minutes, one understood that the students’ life experiences have taught them aspects of global realities that one cannot learn in a classroom:

“I left Somalia when I was 10 years old. The situation there is very bad. I saw a lot of things that I wish I had never seen. It’s very hard to explain the lack of safety. There’s no peace. People treat each other like animals. If you get kidnapped, there’s no one to help. I’ve met people from the UN, the African Union, Ethiopian soldiers, but the only groups I’ve seen do good work are UNICEF and Save the Children. I hope they’ll continue to help.... When I left, I was by myself, going from one country to another. People helped me along the way because I was young and they knew there was a lot of kidnapping. I would carry things for them in exchange.”

Some students, at age 16, were learning to read for the first time, having been impeded from going to school in their country of origin. Elisa Cabo, the teacher, now in her fourth year, noted:

“It can be exhausting, because of the different cultures and religions and, for some of the students, it’s the first time in their lives that they go to school. They have to learn the basic rules, to be punctual, not interrupt teachers, not speak during the lessons... It’s a different relation than that which we have with the German students. With the German students, we teach them and then say goodbye. With the immigrant students, it’s a much closer relationship, because

we're not just teachers, we also talk to them when they have problems and we help them find jobs...."

Asked about the how the societal attitude towards immigrants and refugees affects her work, Elisa added:

"When I talk about my work with friends, many say: 'Oh how do you this? You can't teach these people, I couldn't do that.... They should go back to their country.' I say: 'No, they are not criminals, or people who are here to take our jobs. I see them as individuals. I see their stories, their lives. The negative things they say in the media are not true'."

The contrast between the welcoming environment of the high school and the negativity of public opinion was clear for many of the young people. Aziz, a 19-year old from Afghanistan reflected:

"I've been in Germany for two years, learning German and my hobby is guitar. I'm very happy to be here, there are many good people who want to help us. But there are also people who think we just come here for work, and who want to send us back to Afghanistan. They think it's better there now. They don't realize how much is destroyed. On television, they don't really show the truth of what's happening in Afghanistan. You don't see the babies that are two or three years old getting killed, or people whose bodies have been severed, bodies with no hand, no head. My country has had war for 30 years. I still don't know what happened to my family."

For Carola, the social worker designated to accompany the class, working with the students has been an eye-opening experience:

"I had no training to work specifically with immigration issues. I came here straight from university and I try my best. I think the students want to forget everything. They don't talk much about their past. If they want to, they can, but I never put them under pressure to do so. There are psychological support groups in the area. It's my second year working here. It can be hard, but I enjoy working with them very much. They are thankful for what we're doing; they like us and need us. My friends think this work is too hard, but I'm happy to be here and I think it's an important perspective for Germany."

While the teens may want to forget their past, and live like other people their age, for many, the indelible images of suffering they witnessed instilled in them the desire to help in some way. Kazal, a 17-year old from Aleppo, Syria, spoke with bright-eyed determination. She wants to raise money for the children in hospitals back home:

"Because of the war in Syria, we came to Germany. I've been here for three years, learning German. My heart hurts when I see news about Syria. Those who want to destroy our land aren't accountable to anyone. There are so many children dying, or orphaned. 480 children are dying every day. You can't see on television what happens to a child who finds out his or her parents are dead. I'm grateful to be safe and feel that I must help my country."

Speaking with Martin Strauss, a teacher at HLA who frequently aims to find part-time jobs for the students to expose them to life in Germany outside the school, he expressed concern:

“The school can serve as a bubble, a safe haven after all they have been through. I want to ensure they are prepared to function in society and understand the different sorts of challenges they will face here.”

Among the ideas being developed is school participation at a farmers’ market to enable regular interface between the students and the local community. Martin and his colleagues believe that the human connection on the most local level, combined with global awareness, can permeate the general resentment towards migrants and refugees who, like this teen, simply wish to have what many of us in Europe or the US would consider a “normal” life:

“I came here to Germany to have the opportunity to go to school, but also just to live peacefully, just like other children. There are so many problems where I’m from. So people leave, and go to another country, but then we’re not welcome. I hope people living here in Germany, or in America, never have to experience what I’ve been through.”

*Shamina de Gonzaga is Executive Director of WCPUN, a non-governmental organization and Editor-in-Chief of the WCPUN publication *Centerpoint Now*. Wcpun.org