

# VOLUNTEER REPORT

**Stephanie**

*Athens – November until March 2022*

My experience of being a volunteer for RFG is something I can't even put into words.

I came with no expectation and left with an experience of a lifetime.

I came with little teaching background and left as a confident tutor.

I came as a solo traveler and left with a family abroad.

The past 4 months have shaped me in so many ways, so I want to tell you more about my experience:

## MY WORK AS A VOLUNTEER

**CULTURE LAB:** (children between 5-12 years)

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### English homework support

#### English classes

- ➔ with focus on an interactive, playful way of teaching with elements of theatre, body engagement, music etc.)

#### Music classes

- ➔ including elements of body percussion, rhythm exercises, introduction of instruments, dancing & body movement, singing, story telling etc.

**TRAIBER:** (children between 5-12 years)

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#### English classes

- ➔ with focus on open, playful learning

### **Geography classes**

- ➔ playful introduction into the world map, continents, countries, means of transportation, landmarks, cultures

### **YOUTH CENTER:** (teenagers between 13-24 years)

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#### **Migratory birds**

- ➔ distribution of latest issue of this newspaper which is written by refugees and young people with immigrational background
- ➔ interviewing different NGOs about their work and reporting about it

#### **Sports activity**

- ➔ basketball and football classes

#### **Social media group**

- ➔ teaching about content creation, useful tools etc. as well as raising awareness for important topics like fake news , catfishing, discrimination etc.

### **URBAN GARDENING PROJECT**

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- ➔ planning an urban garden in the courtyard of an emergency shelter for unaccompanied minors; we first gathered ideas, drew drafts, had a meeting with the management of the facility and then had a workshop with the teenagers themselves, where they could express themselves and bring in their own ideas

### **KHORA FREESHOP**

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- ➔ cloth store where donations from all over Europe arrive and are distributed to people in need; volunteers have various tasks like registering people, booking appointments, handing out items etc.

### **KHORA SOCIAL KITCHEN**

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- ➔ cooking 200-400 meals per day for homeless people and families in need

### **ECHO REFUGEE LIBRARY**

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- ➔ going with a van, whose interior was converted into a library, to different refugee camps outside of Athens; On spot as a volunteer, you support the people with borrowing books, have short language sessions with them (German & English) and provide a colorful kids program

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Thinking back of my time in Athens, I realize more and more how many learnings I got out of it – on a personal and professional level.

### PROFESSIONAL LEARNINGS:

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I wasn't too much experienced in teaching. I have been tutoring children with immigrational background before in learning German – but on a very basic level. Being responsible for your own workshops is something completely else. In the beginning you feel a little bit overwhelmed, especially if you have never been in the position of a teacher, that is holding a lesson, before. In the beginning you can't even imagine that soon you should be the person holding this English class, leading the group, teach children – but you grow. You learn with every day and after a short while it is the most normal thing for you and you feel confident about doing it.

What helped a lot in my first weeks was to “follow” the other volunteers and slowly get into everything. Also, the team in Culture Lab and Traiber have been a huge help, especially Eleni, Lizeta and Alkistis. They really made the start easier, but also afterwards they constantly helped, gave tips, provided feedback, and shared their knowledge – this was very beneficial.

So obviously skills you gain are teaching and leadership skills. Furthermore, I learned how to be flexible.

For a very structured person as I am it is quite hard to be spontaneous, but I really learned how to be spontaneous during my time here. Working with children requires you to sometimes change your plans and do completely other things that you have thought about. In the beginning, I was a bit upset if parts of my prepared lessons didn't work out or the kids were not as much into it than I expected. But with the time I realized that it is all about being flexible and adapting to the children's needs. If they are not feeling like doing this vocabulary exercise now and want to play a game, then try to combine these things and create a new lesson that is adapting to their needs in this moment and your goal.

Once me and Ruben (another volunteer) have prepared a (in our eyes) cool lesson and put quite some effort into it. Unfortunately, on this day the kids were not at all in the mood to do anything else then building “houses” with their gym mats. After trying in the beginning to convince them for our lesson plan, we realized that “enforcing” it is wrong – adapting is the solution. So, we understood that the kids needs are something else at this moment – it was all about building the houses. So, we started to build the houses with them and made a story out of it. We went on a camping trip and first needed to write down a “need list” for the trip. So, the

kids first had to brainstorm and then wrote down the correct English words (e.g. blankets, lighter, sun glasses). That's how they learned and practiced English vocabulary. Later on, the story continued that we went to a small grocery shop on the camping ground. The kids were reading each other's shopping list and then played customers & cashier. That's when they again practiced reading and writing in English, as well as speaking. With the dialog at the cashier, they practiced also vocabulary we have learned weeks ago and repeated basics like numbers, food items. Etc.

When the kids got picked up, they thanked us for this amazing lesson – they had so much fun. At the same time, I am sure they learned a lot about speaking freely English, the use of different vocabulary, how to express themselves, how to use their imagination etc. This was a very formative moment for me as I then fully understood, how important it is to adapt to the kids and how much you still can give to them, even though you are not following your initial plan.

## PERSONAL LEARNINGS:

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I think Athens made me grow a lot. I actually was a bit afraid, as I have never done such a long stay abroad before. I have been doing many short term projects before, but never longer than two months. Indeed, I was pretty much sure, that I will be homesick after a short while – but that wasn't the case. From the moment I arrived, I felt very comfortable being in this city and with this team. Within these months I started to have a life abroad with making new friends, finding new hobbies, going on adventures – so in the end I had a very hard time to say goodbye to all of this. The surprising thing: I have never been homesick. This made me realize that once you feel comfortable at a place and have people around you that become like a family to you, you don't feel the need of being at home. You have your life here. This has been very important for me and reassuring that I will be able to live abroad in the future (as in a couple of months I will actually move to Sweden and live abroad for the coming years).

I really appreciate what I learned from all the encounters with different people I met throughout my journey. For example, Ruben, who taught me a lot about the political situation in Greece and Germany. Eleni, for example, explained me the financial crisis of Greece with the perspective of a young greek resident. Or Chris who showed me what true passion is and also taught me about mindfulness, self-awareness and the importance of "me-time". All the conversations and discussions I had with many divers personalities and mindsets, made me actually gain knowledge in different areas of life. That's something you can just experience, when you are leaving your comfort zone of your life at home and do volunteering abroad.

## EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPED ME

What really touched me was the encounters I had with people living in the refugee camps that I met during my time with the Echo refugee library. Many families are “stuck” in the camps for years and wait for their asylum decision. Meanwhile they can actually do nothing than waiting, which has even more impact on children. They are missing out on important years of education, while not being able to attend any school. In some camps children can go to schools, but often they have to wait for a very long time. I met for example Mohammad who is 16 years old and is in the camp since 3 years with his parents and younger sisters. Due to the difficult situation in Iran, he never attended school in his life as it was too dangerous to go there. His family then fled to Afghanistan, where the situation wasn’t better and school wasn’t an option either. In Greece he waited for another 3 years to go to school – luckily a couple of weeks ago he finally attended his first school lesson ever. Many of the families in the camps are going through similar situations. They wait for months, for years for maybe then in the end receiving a negative asylum decision and have to go back to their countries.

Really touching and eye-opening was also my time helping out at Khora free shop. Seeing mothers fighting for clothes for their children, seeing grandfathers begging for one more bar of soap etc. really made me realize how severe the situation for these people is. No one would fight over used clothes if it isn’t absolutely necessary. This desperation in their eyes is something I will never forget. It also made me more aware of how grateful we can be for simple everyday life things (we probably take for granted) like a bar of soap, a pair of socks and women’s hygiene products.

## CONCLUDING WORDS

In the end, I can just thank you on making this experience possible. I can’t even describe how much this volunteering means to me, how much it gave me in every respect. In my eyes, the volunteering program of Respect for Greece is a very valuable exchange that is beneficial in so many ways for both sides – the volunteers and the organizations & people in Athens. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here.

## PHOTO ALBUM

*A few impressions of my volunteering*

### MUSIC CLASS



For making music it doesn't matter if you don't speak the same language – together we can express ourselves without any words





## ENGLISH CLASS



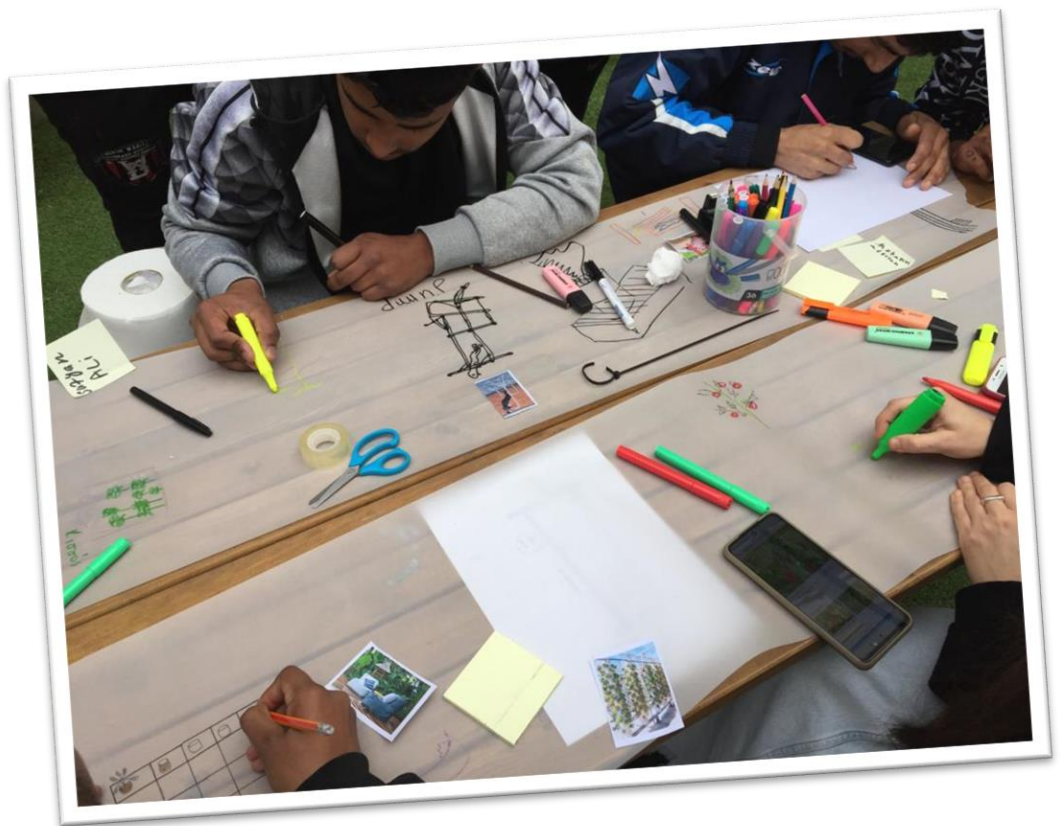
Our own fashion show →  
Introducing the topic  
„clothes“ in an interactive,  
drama-approached way



Theatre plays, quizzes, treasure  
hunts etc. are elements we used to  
enable a playful, efficient way of  
teaching



## URBAN GARDEN PROJECT



Together with the teenagers living in the shelter for homeless unaccompanied minors we want to create a green space, where they can feel comfortable. A place to relax, hang out with friends and get some privacy.





## ECHO REFUGEE LIBRARY



One reason why we drive with the van hundreds of kilometers to refugee camps outside of Athens: Books give hope, education and are a useful way to spend the months or, unfortunately, even years of waiting.



*Thank you Team Athens!*

*Thank you RFG for this experience!*