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The Meaning of Home

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The Meaning of Home

An investigation into the lives of refugees, immigrants, and minorities in Athens.

Inside Cover

1

Home

Home. For hundreds of thousands of people in Greece, a country trying to manage an influx of immigrants and refugees, the meaning of home is not immediately apparent. These populations in transition were torn from their lives by persecution, violence, poverty, and discrimination. They now seek not only a place to rest their heads but also a place to rest their hearts. The following photographs, text, and quotes were gathered during our time in Athens and seek to represent how these people - immigrants, refugees, and underserved populations - define "home."

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The Stories

The photos, quotes, and experiences we will share in hopes of defining home were gathered from the following sources:

Giannis Artekakoumpos was one of the lucky ones. He is among the very few undocumented immigrants (himself second generation) to receive full Greek citizenship. He went from living on the streets of Sepolia to a mansion in Milwaukee. He went from being abused and discriminated against because of his Nigerian ancestry to a globally beloved athlete. On our visit to Sepolia, we met one of his closest friends Yannis Takas. Takas treated Giannis like a son during his teen years - sharing meals, clothing, and his own home with the future NBA star. Stories like the one he recounted to us are not only rare and inspirational, but they can tell us a lot about the search to find home.

"The government, for us, they are fascists," said Khorra free shop coordinator Alex. He has been with the organization, which also runs a soup kitchen and community center, since its founding in 2016, the worst year of the Greek refugee crisis. Its mission is to improve the lives of displaced people living throughout Athens and pick up the slack that government officials are leaving in their management of the situation. "We do not check passports, anything," explained another volunteer. "Anyone is welcome." This policy of acceptance is why spending time volunteering at Khorra was so important to our understanding of the people and the conditions that make a place Home.

"After coming to us, they start dreaming again." Working with the Youth to Youth program made it clear why organization leader Annie would make such a statement. Every Saturday, YZ allows unaccompanied minor refugees to receive tutoring from other students their age. These sessions spark friendships and foster an environment where dreams come true: in 2022, two YZ members will graduate with an American high school diploma. Seeing sparks of hope in the eyes of refugees whose stories warrant anything but showed us that we have just as much to learn from them as they have to learn from us. Among these lessons is how displaced populations can make a home in a place they never meant it to be.

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Entering Victoria is like stepping into another country. The neighborhood holds the most refugees and immigrants in Athens, and its residents don't try to mask it. Smells of spices, curries, and sweet fill the air. A muddled mix of Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali foods onto the streets from the scores of mobile stores, mini markets, and South Asian restaurants. Yet this

is Greece and the people who live here are Greek, aren't they? Some don't have papers. Others don't have houses. All are living in a place separated from the rest of Athens by the way it looks, the attention it receives, and the stories of the people who live there.



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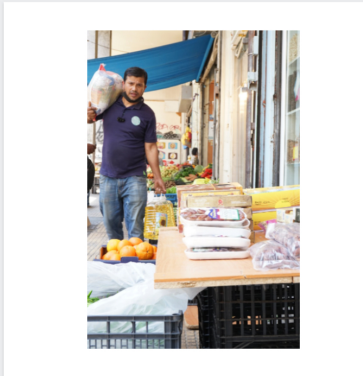
"Greece cannot take care of their own people, so how can they take care of me?"

Twenty years ago, economic problems forced Haidi to leave Bangladesh. He never expected his financial struggles to follow him to Victoria, Athens. He saw Greece as an escape, but it has turned into a prison. "My home is Bangladesh," he told us. "But I need to live here." The trickle of customers into his shop and the dream of life for his family in Europe are enough to keep Haidi in Athens. For him, though, it may not be his future. Greece is not his country. Victoria is not his home.



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Haidi smiles for the camera as he tends to the market he owns in Victoria.

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Like Haidi, Hasan was born in Bangladesh. He too left for Northern Europe when financial hardship struck. His journey was cut short in Greece, where he runs a mini market. "I don't have papers, I can't keep going." Yet Hasan's outlook on home couldn't be more different. That Haidi's, Haidi is still clinging to the threads of his home in Dhaka, where he has a wife and children. Hasan, however, is unmarried and lives alone. "I miss my mother, but my brother and sister are here. I have a lot of friends. This is home."

13



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Conversations between students at the Youth to Youth program often turn to plans for the future. While many refugees wish to leave Greece for the Netherlands, Germany, or U.S., an even greater number have become content here in Athens. The reason for this is apparent. Coming to ACS, every Saturday is the best part of their week. Many of the children refer to program leader Julia Tokalidou as "Mama." Warm hugs greet students each time they walk through the doors. The Youth to Youth community is the closest thing the young refugees have to a family. A life involving it is the best substitute available for home.

15



Maryam (Iran), Julia Tokatidou (yzy coordinator), Faadumo (Somalia), and Aziz (Afghanistan)

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"Be careful! this street is dangerous."

After being stopped and asked for our IDs, this comment was made to us by Athens municipal police patrolling Omonia square. When we questioned the nature of the danger, the only response we got was:

"It's just dangerous, don't go there."

This interaction reaffirmed the feelings we had experienced during our hour in Omonia. We were offered marijuana, met with withering looks, and followed multiple times. In the neighborhood just 500 meters from Psiriki, the conditions couldn't be more different. The refugees and immigrants staying there are isolated from the rest of the city, Omonia is dirtier, poorer, and less safe than nearly any other place in Athens. It is as if the people living here never left their homes in South Asia.

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Omonia and Victoria, Athens's most refugee-dense neighborhoods, look more like Mumbai or Dhaka than Athens.

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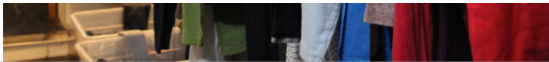
"Afghanistan, there are problems. Here, I am refugee. There is nowhere for me to go. I have no home" Zafra's outlook on life is grim. She sells trinkets on the sidewalk each day to pay her asthmatic daughter's hospital bill. When there is nothing left over, she is forced to visit Khora's free shop and soup kitchen. She hopes to join her brother and mother in Germany, but without papers and money, Zafra's dream seems distant and wild.



23

Khora Free Shop attempts to alleviate the difficulties of finding amenities such as clothing, soaps, and toiletries by providing them free in some of Athens's most refugee-dense areas. It has something for everybody, from young children like Abdul Bak to mothers such as Zafra, to elderly women including Ibtisam. All are welcome and made to feel at home, even if they know Greece will never be that for them.





another, they will find clothes, they will find food. But finding friends, being welcomed, is much harder."

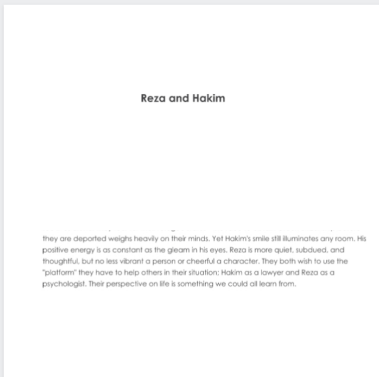
-Free Shop coordinator Ali Zeego



Three year old Abdul Bak accompanies his parents to Khora every month. All the clothes he has worn for the past two years are from the Free Shop.



- Statement given by Frontex on their alleged pushbacks of refugees into the Aegean Sea.



Reza and Hakim

They are deported weighs heavily on their minds. Yet Hakim's smile still illuminates any room. His positive energy is as constant as the grass in his eyes. Reza is more quiet, subdued, and thoughtful, but no less vibrant a person or cheerful a character. They both wish to use the "softball" they have to help others in their situation. Hakim as a lawyer and Reza as a psychologist. Their perspective on life is something we could all learn from.



"He is very strong and can survive bad situations. He is honest and pure - my best friend"

- Reza on Hakim



34

Hakim has never stopped smiling. Not as the Taliban entered his home in Bamyan, Afghanistan. Not as he fled to Greece, nor even as he was separated from his family. "I have an opportunity, and I want to express my talents," Hakim is grateful for his opportunity - to live in Europe, study, and have a house. He knows that many others have been left behind in Afghanistan, are unable to find a place to live, or are unable to pursue their passions. "I want to be a lawyer, to help people in my situation. I am so grateful for my education and want to use it to serve the community." Hakim's commitment to helping others, even as he finds himself in a grim situation, is nothing short of incredible.

35

"A hardworking person. If he says he wants to be a psychologist, he will be a psychologist. If you feel sad or need empathy, your should go to Reza. He is there to help."

-Hakim on Reza

In Athens, Reza's fear of capture by the Taliban is gone. He can play basketball for the first time since his childhood and occasionally watches his favorite player, Stephen Curry. He is able to learn about psychology, improve his English, and pursue an education. "Here, I am free. I can express myself." Yet the difficulties of Reza's life are just as prominent: He has not spoken with his family in two years. The Home Project, which provides housing for unaccompanied minor refugees, is filling up, jeopardizing his spot. Recently, he was forced to move when his shelter was given to a group of Ukrainian teenagers. Focusing on the positives makes Reza confident that his situation will improve despite these challenges. "I am close. It is possible now. I can reach my goals."

36



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"Here in Victoria is good, it's friendly. But maybe in other places they don't like black people..."

To tourists and locals, Victoria and Omonia are some of Athens' worst neighborhoods. Yet those who live there wouldn't have it any other way. Ukin likes the food, Hasan and Mohamed have created lasting friendships. Hakim's mini-market anchors him to the area. Perhaps the sense of belonging that refugees and immigrants feel in these places come from their similarities to home. No one would have left if they didn't have to. Now that they are here, the familiarity of life in Athens's "refugee towns" eases their homesickness more than a polished street, fancy meal, or Greek tradition ever could.



Mohamed (left) has neither a house nor a home. This doesn't stop him from waiting for a brighter future. "It is harder than I thought, but it will be harder if I stop trying."

39



40

"Giannis is Greek"

This was one of the most telling sentences we heard while speaking with Yiannis Talkas about his interactions with Giannis Antetokounmpo "I like children and dogs," Talkas recounted, "so I helped him." "Giannis is one of the very few in Sepolia who cared for Giannis during his teen years. For many other Greeks, people with African ancestry such as Antetokounmpo and his family are a disgrace. They are not Greek. They are not even human. Yet Greece still holds a part of Giannis's heart. Despite living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he describes himself as Greek-Nigerian. For him, something about Sepolia makes it home. The love he was shown by Talkas, and the memories he made playing basketball on this court likely play a significant role in that interpretation.

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Giannis grew up in Sepolia (left), but now lives in Milwaukee.

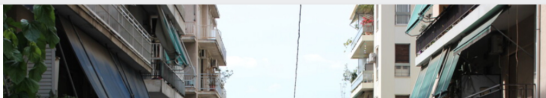
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Where?

The search for a place to call home is one that



There were not many unaccompanied minors.
Those who make it to Greece may not be there legally, living in constant fear of arrest and deportation. Those who are duly processed and granted papers that are supposed to guarantee their acceptance may not be welcomed by their neighbors. Those who are able to make friends and build connections will likely still have trouble finding sufficient pay to buy a house or afford regular meals. They may never feel the sense of belonging that we associate with home. As can be seen, "Homeless," is a condition that goes far beyond the ownership of real estate. "Where do you live?" is a question much deeper than the street address of the place you sleep.

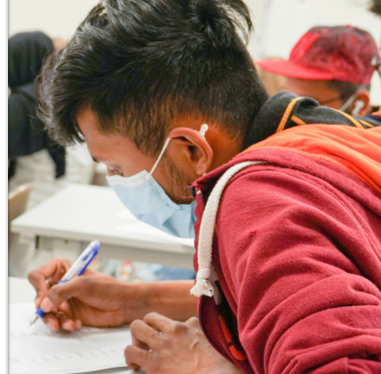


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Who?

A true home is defined by the feelings of safety and belonging that one feels while there. For refugees and immigrants, cultivating these feelings can seem an impossible proposition in a life of constant change. Many we spoke to agreed that the presence of extraordinary individuals, from their families, to friends, to strangers they met along the way, contribute significantly to their definition of home. This shows that all of us - refugees, volunteers, and everyday citizens - can help make home home.



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