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Building Empathy Through Action: The San Diego Sanctuary Project

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Teenager. What does that word make you think about? Do you think of recklessness and little care for the world or do you think of empathy, excitement, and hope for a good future? There are many life experiences that make a person who they are, but some experiences help teach compassion and help teach hope. This isn't any different for teenagers; we want to experience life and make the world remember our names. We can go out and start experiencing compassion in the world around us now, so why wait for our futures to come and find us?

This semester, through our Humanities and Spanish classes, we have been working on a project called The San Diego Sanctuary Project, where we are learning about the international refugee crisis and finding ways we can help refugees in our community and beyond. We have interviewed people involved in the refugee crisis, learned about how we can help refugees, and are exploring how to build empathy and support for refugees in San Diego through art and education.

One person we interviewed was Wasim Alabrash, a Syrian refugee and translator for the Syrian American Medical Society who spoke to us from Athens, Greece, where he awaited resettlement to Ireland: “I am one of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing the war, killing, and destruction... Our hope is just to live safely away from the murder and blood every day.”

Learning about the hardships that refugees face sparked our emotions and made us want to do more than just learn about the crisis; we wanted to make a difference in their lives. From the ideas and requests people shared in our interviews, we made seven action groups where we are using our interests for good. For example, one group of students, inspired by their interview subject who was a professional Syrian soccer player, connected with a local tutoring and recreation organization to invite our schoolmates to play soccer over several weeks with refugee teens at a local school. Sparked by an interview with a long-time San Diego educator and advocate for newcomer students, another group now volunteers at an elementary school with a large newcomer program, tutoring students who are learning to read and write in English. I am a part of the tutoring group, working with kindergarteners who are learning to write and spell their names. In this internationally diverse student group, I see their innocence. These kids did not choose to be uprooted from their homes but they were still uprooted, and though life may be difficult they are still being kids, learning, playing, and working towards their dreams in a safe place where education and support create possibilities. Working with small children and helping them write in a new language is extraordinary; I am connecting with kids who are achieving great things. These innocent children are getting educated and we are helping them, which is beautiful. Educating and involving ourselves in the well-being of others is helping to create empathy.

Empathy is an important thing, and sadly some people don't have it, especially toward people they perceive as “different” than them. It is a valuable life skill that can take us far in this world full of people in need. The first part of our project was the empathy stage where we learned about all that refugees go through in their journeys. When learning a person's story of struggle and survival, of persecution and danger, I couldn't help but feel this perpetual need to do something that would help them. I thought most people felt the same as I did,

but as we learned about the unwillingness of some governments and individuals to help others, it has been disconcerting. I question the world around me, wondering why more isn't being done to help these innocent people in need.

Through staying informed about current world issues I was able to form my own opinions and beliefs, which is very important, for my generation will be tomorrow's leaders. With the media playing a big role in deciding how the refugee crisis is perceived, at times it can be difficult to get clear information and make our own opinions, but tracking the news in a classroom environment has been beneficial because we are in safe space where we are getting multiple perspectives on this controversial but extremely important topic. We are learning about human lives, not just numbers on a chart, we are becoming truly educated on an issue that affects many lives worldwide.

In class we are learning about things that are relevant to today and about political decisions that have the power to shape our society. We have stayed educated and informed on major decisions around refugees and the executive orders, which we called the Travel Ban and then the Travel Ban 2.0. We learned different ways of staying educated through relevant articles, news updates, websites, and documentaries. Through the refugee crisis and the travel ban by President Trump, now more than ever refugees are known and seen by the public. It seems as if public opinion is split, humanizing these people or turning their backs on them, which gives the impression that our society is shifting into an isolationist and xenophobic community. With a topic so politically controversial it is compelling to want to learn as much as we can. In our education of the refugee crisis and all that they go through, we have become more and more interested in doing something to benefit the refugee community. I've realized that empathy has no age limits; it has no borders, and it has no limitations to what it can achieve with the help of a little education and determination.

As we learned about the new president's executive order banning and restricting refugee resettlement and more, we also saw compassion from individuals, communities, and organizations trying to help refugees in any way they could. We wanted to get involved with these people and make change happen. Our team of high school students is actively working to support and welcome San Diego's refugee communities with small acts of kindness and service in partnership

with local and national organizations, as well as to speak up in support of the humanization of refugees. We want the future to be better than it is now—not just for any single one of us, but for all.

We were all able to find paths of community service that fit our interests and passions, therefore making our work with the community more meaningful and having a long lasting impact. In my group, fifteen students would drive to Ibarra elementary twice a week, our means of transportation often varied and sometimes in limbo. When we were volunteering at Ibarra, the rest of our class was back at school working on their “action” or volunteer plans. Everyone had jobs to ensure that work was completed efficiently and correctly. Volunteer drivers and parents helped us get to Ibarra many times; without them we wouldn’t have been able to go. In order to go on field trips and take students where we needed to go for our action plans it was vital to stay in contact with students’ parents and see if they could not only help transport us places but connect us to people that helped us enhance our educational experience.

Communication is key for a successful project that has many components and skills. Students have drafted and sent out numerous professional emails explaining the San Diego Sanctuary Project and what we would need from the person we were emailing. For example, one action group has been collecting household supplies for refugee families in our community. They are collecting items for two refugee organizations: Survivors of Torture and the Syrian Community Network. Once they collect all the household supplies, they are going to deliver all the donated items themselves to the Syrian families directly. Through email they have been in contact with the organizations and they have also had a phone call with the head of the Syrian Network Community to discuss the items needed for donation. This action group believes that no matter what the circumstances are and where a person is from, everyone should be accepting to refugees. A member of this action group feels that when teenagers organize fundraisers or things in service to others, some people don’t believe that teenagers can accomplish things professionally, but this project is proving them wrong.

With this learning experience, I have been able to better understand and take part in conversations about the refugee crisis. Learning about

the refugee crisis hasn't just taught me about refugees, it has also taught me about America's society and the different political views that people are acting on. I have had discussions with family members about President Trump and the actions he's taking on the refugee crisis where we both give our views and opinions. I have always shared my opinions on current world events but now I am more educated about it. When discussing a topic that is known to many and at times controversial, it is important to have facts and resources to back up your claims. For example when I first started this project I would say that I didn't agree with the travel ban on refugees but I didn't give any explanations as to why. But now if I were to have a conversation with someone I would be able to express my views on the Travel Ban, justifying my position using information and personal experience from this project.

This is the most meaningful project I have worked on and it has given me a new outlook on the world around me. I think of this project as more than just a letter in a grade book; this project is valuable because it has been creating empathy and showing us how to act on empathy in ways that will benefit ourselves and others. Now I view the world with different lenses, not just my one point of view. It is also valuable to learn and teach about current topics for both the student and teacher. We as a society are in a time of response through action; what better way is there to show empathy than to educate ourselves and our society about the worth of the world around us and the people who live on it?