

Profile

Efi Latsoudi: in solidarity with refugees

Efi Latsoudi grew up listening to the stories of her grandmother, who travelled by boat from Turkey to the island of Lesbos in 1922, when the Greeks living in Asia Minor were forcibly repatriated after massacre and defeat in the Greco-Turkish war. Like many Greeks, Latsoudi has always known about refugees, she says. She left Athens and moved to Lesbos in 2001 for a quieter life than the city allowed, but when the boatloads of refugees began to arrive on its shores, she had to help.

Latsoudi was last year the joint recipient of the Nansen Refugee Award, given by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), for her tireless work during the crisis that hit the island in 2015, when more than 500 000 desperate people arrived at Lesbos by sea—more than half the total of 850 000 who made their way to Greece, many of them fleeing the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In October of that year, the numbers landing on Lesbos peaked at 10 000 a day.

While the 2000-strong Hellenic Rescue Team, joint recipients of the award, pulled people from the sea, saving thousands of lives, Latsoudi, who trained as a psychologist, worked to establish PIKPA, the “village of all together”, in a former run-down holiday camp near Mytilene airport. Now known as Lesbos Solidarity, it became a refuge for the most vulnerable, who included children with disabilities and women whose babies had died in the crossing.

Before the camp opened in 2012, vulnerable refugees, including women and children, were being held in police cells, Latsoudi explains, and support groups could not help them. “At that time we didn’t have access. That’s why PIKPA was so important, because it was an open place where all the locals can come and help,” she says. They opened with a capacity of 100 people. At its peak in 2015, they were hosting around 600 a day, “sick people, families that lost their members in the sea, people with mental health problems, people with psychosocial needs for support”, she says. They offered lessons and activities for the children, as well as food and shelter and medical care.

The numbers are smaller now that Greece’s borders are closed so that refugees cannot move on, but refugees still come and many remain on Lesbos. Their mental health needs are greater, if anything, Latsoudi says. Before, they considered Lesbos a temporary stop on their journey to a better and safer life. Today, they have nowhere to go, Greece’s health service is suffering from austerity measures and lack of money, and Lesbos does not have what it needs to support them. “There are 90 000 people living on the island and 6000 refugees. And one psychiatrist for all of them”, she says.

Latsoudi believes it ought to be possible to help the refugees who remain in Greece. “What needs to be done is to create a plan of support for these people and to ask Europe to support us and create infrastructure. In Greece now we have 60 000 refugees approximately. It is not a huge number. With some help and with a political decision we can deal with them. We don’t need to put them in so much difficulty. We can do something”, she says.

Latsoudi grew up in Piraeus, the port area of Athens. Her father sold insurance and her mother helped him and looked after the house. It was a poor neighbourhood, where solidarity mattered and left-wing politics flourished. “I was born in 1968 so in the time of dictatorship and I grew up with these stories of people fighting for freedom and how important it is to fight and to be united”, she recalls.

She studied psychology and worked with young offenders as well as patients with mental health problems who needed rehabilitation in the community after the closure of a big psychiatric hospital in Athens. When she moved to Lesbos, she took a job in the international relations department of the University of the Aegean and became a leading activist voice in the community, campaigning to protect local wetlands and hosting a radio show, before realising that the numbers of refugees arriving in Lesbos were steadily increasing and that many were dying at sea on the journey. She formed a small group of like-minded local activists and humanitarians in 2005, who fought to help the refugees as the crisis developed.

When she won the Nansen Refugee Award, UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi praised her and the Hellenic Rescue Team for refusing to stand by as they witnessed the humanitarian situation unfolding on their shores. “Their efforts characterise the massive public response to the refugee and migrant emergency in Greece and across Europe, in which thousands of people stood in solidarity with those forced to flee, and the humanity and generosity of communities around the world who open their hearts and homes to refugees”, he said.

Latsoudi wants to see a better response to support refugees in Europe. “On the European level we need to create policies that will respect their human rights and the rights of the refugees and we need to share this solidarity between the European countries otherwise it cannot work like this—closing the eyes and closing the borders. It will get worse and we are in danger now because our societies are becoming more and more closed and more and more xenophobic and that’s very dangerous for Europe”, she warns.

Sarah Boseley



© UNHCR/Roland Schoenbauer