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Peace by Piece: Walking in Solidarity with Refugees

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Global displacement has reached record-high numbers, with more than 65 million people forced to leave their homes as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. This translates into one in every 113 people, with an average of 24 people forced to flee every minute of every day.

[Jesuit Refugee Service/USA](#) (JRS/USA) is working to address this challenge by meeting the educational, psychosocial, health, and emergency needs of over 720,000 refugees and other forcibly displaced persons in more than 45 countries.

Founded by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J. in 1980, JRS/USA works side by side with the displaced, providing assistance to refugees in camps and cities, individuals displaced within their own countries, asylum seekers in cities, and those held in detention centers.

The mission of JRS/USA is to accompany, serve, and advocate for the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. JRS/USA is inspired by the compassion of Jesus, who made it his mission to reach the most marginalized people of his time.

Rooted in the Jesuit tradition of educating young people, JRS/USA considers education to be a life-saving intervention and aims to promote hope by enabling refugees to continue their education and equipping them with life-changing skills. This includes access to pre-primary, primary, secondary, and post-secondary education, as well as vocational and teacher training programs.

While it is impossible to fully comprehend what it is like to be forced from your home and live as a refugee, JRS/USA has developed an interactive “refugee experience,” which provides individuals and communities with an opportunity to pause and experience, if only vicariously and for a few

moments, the frustrations, disappointments, and hopes that refugees around the world face.

Entitled *Walk a Mile in My Shoes*, this refugee experience has been a hallmark of JRS/USA’s outreach program for Jesuit institutions. Starting as a “camp-out” experience, the refugee simulation originally focused on the lives of individuals and families living in refugee camps. Yet, the reality is that the majority of refugees — six out of ten — live outside of camps, often in an urban area among their host community.



Entry/Border station; photo by Fairfield University

Walk a Mile in My Shoes now offers participants the opportunity to learn about the realities of life as a refugee by making their way through a series of seven stations in groups of four to six people. The time period could range from 10 to 60 minutes,



Students at the University of Scranton simulate a refugee shelter; photo by Caroline Earnest

depending on station facilitators and the conversation that ensues. Beginning with the Entry/Border station, the participant obtains a refugee identity card, which includes the true story of a refugee who has taken part in one of JRS/USA's overseas programs. They then visit Shelter, Food, Water, Medical, and Education stations where they learn about the challenges refugees face in accessing basic needs and services.

Finally, *Walk a Mile in My Shoes* participants conclude their experience by visiting an Advocacy station where they are able to send a letter to their policymakers regarding a particular policy that would improve the lives of refugees here at home and abroad. They are also encouraged to learn more about JRS/USA, sign-up to join the JRS Action Network, or even start a JRS Action Team on their campus or in their community.

Organizers are also encouraged to explore other ways to leverage their event by inviting refugees from their community to take part, incorporating an expert speaker or panel discussion, or contacting the local media to help spread the word. Faculty at host institutions can also consider incorporating a refugee-related issue in their course work or facilitating reflections with participants in small groups.

To date, a number of Jesuit institutions have hosted *Walk a Mile in My Shoes*, and student feedback has been positive. Notably, the University of Scranton and Fairfield University both hosted *Walk a Mile in My Shoes* during the 2015-16 academic year and are each hosting follow-up events in fall 2016.

In July 2016, JRS/USA conducted an information session and adapted *Walk a Mile in My Shoes* for the National Jesuit Student Leaders Conference at Regis University. Students were able to learn about JRS/USA, its programs around the world, and what it might be like to live as a refugee.

Participants in *Walk a Mile in My Shoes* shared their thoughts after taking part in this experience, including:

"It's one thing to look at pictures or read about something, but actually standing in a simulated environment like this is a whole different ballgame."

"I could not imagine having to carry [water] for miles when I had trouble walking five feet."

"I take away that the lives of the refugees are a lot harder than ours. I definitely want to help in any way I can."

JRS/USA works closely with *Walk a Mile in My Shoes* organizers to ensure that they have the materials and resources necessary to host an event. Creating a Planning Committee inclusive of school leadership, faculty, students, or community members plays a critical role in executing a seamless event as well as ensuring that volunteers staffing each station are adequately trained.

To learn more, visit www.jrsusa.org/outreach and download the *Walk a Mile in My Shoes* toolkit, which provides a step-by-step guide on how to host your own event. JRS/USA's work relies on the support of individuals across the U.S. to raise awareness about the plight of refugees and to advocate on behalf of the dignity and protection that each refugee deserves. HJE



Students at the University of Scranton staff the Advocacy Station; photo by Caroline Earnest