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The Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors at the Ministry of Migration and Asylum has four Units. The Unit for Integration and Support is headed by Dr. Gelly Aroni. She served as the Head of the Department for Refugee Education of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs of Greece, until 2020. She has notable experience teaching physical education in intercultural schools, where she employed



cooperative activities to promote the concepts, insight, and ideals of Democracy and Human Rights in education, through active involvement and collaborative learning. She has been working as an expert and trainer for the Council of Europe and European Wergeland Center programs on human rights education and education for democratic citizenship. She has led workshops for Arigatou International in Europe, Asia, and Africa, on intercultural and interreligious programs for ethics education. She has written and translated works in the fields in which she is an expert.

Dr. GELLY ARONI

Is there a language barrier when it comes to providing help to unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in the case they do not speak the English language? If yes, how do you overcome it?

G.A.: The truth is that language barriers exist. However, most minors speak English, and thus communication is facilitated. The problem is the acquisition of the Greek language, which plays a vital role in the minors' education in schools and social integration. As you can easily understand, refugees do not know how to speak the Greek language. Even though there are processes in place, such as reception classes led by specialized literature teachers, aimed at teaching Greek to the children, they are not enough to serve all. This happens since there are specific criteria that need to be fulfilled for these processes to occur, which include an adequate number of more than nine students for elementary schools and seven children in secondary schools for each Reception Class. We also need to mention here, the important role and contribution of the non-formal education actors, who have been providing Greek courses and remedial education lessons to UAMs, supporting the public system and children's school attendance.

Is there a state mechanism in place that provides help to unaccompanied minors as soon as they become legal adults, such as providing a safe place to stay?

G.A.: Unfortunately, once unaccompanied minors become legal adults, they lose the legal protection that comes with being a minor and everything depends on their legal situation. For example, if they have been given asylum, they could remain in the country for a specific period of time, enjoying all rights and services available to Greek citizens, except for voting.

What are the different levels of your work?

G.A.: In my daily work-related life, there are multiple levels. First, comes the administrative level, the level of the Ministry. Then follows the level of the shelter, the work with the practitioners and the Unaccompanied Minors in the field. The work at Ministerial level is horizontal for all shelters, while the second level depends on different factors, such as, the geographical location of the shelter, the number, gender, and age of UAMs residing there, the municipality the shelter is situated in, etc. For example, there is an obligation, according to legislation, that all unaccompanied minors should be registered in school within the first 3 months of their arrival in the country. Nevertheless, there can be minor deviations as a school in Kypseli, for example, does not have adequate infrastructure to accept refugee students. Since integration and support is a two-way process, my work also includes awareness workshops and lectures with students in schools all over Greece, like the one we implemented with you.

Seeing that you have worked on programs promoting Sport and Physical Activity as a means to achieve refugees' longer-term inclusion and integration into hosting societies, what is the connection between sports and refugees' gradual inclusion?

G.A.: I believe in empowerment in, and through sports. As far as empowerment in sports is concerned, when you engage in physical activity, you learn how to respect, you become familiar with fair play, you develop discipline, and assimilate anger management, by channeling the frustration and anger. At the same time, through sports all the qualities aforementioned become transferable life skills. You learn and use respect for your teammate, your opponent, the rules of the game, and you fully understand and practice cooperation and teamwork. Recently, I had the joy of watching Armenian and Turkish immigrants playing together, and simultaneously working on their ethnic differences. I believe that, through sports, we have the opportunity to start respecting each other in a way that is not forced, but inspired. In addition, although a more individual activity, art can also play a vital role in the increase of our appreciation for one another and our differences.



Celia and Sandro interviewing Dr. Gelly Aroni, who is accompanied by the mentor Ms. Negin Torfinezhadian.

Would you agree that there is a lack of culturally-appropriate programmes that would promote refugees' inclusivity?

G.A.: I believe that we are often focused on this notion of "national purity", consumed in our own homogeneity, culture, and religion. When you have people from 34 different countries, like it was in the case of the Intercultural school where I used to work, it is self-evident that we need to be more democratic, meaning inclusive and respectful, of their cultural heritage. When having to deal with refugees, we should not focus on the differences, making value judgments according to our own cultural lenses, but rather, be open to their cultures and respectful of their human rights, which are the same as ours.

Do you believe that it is possible for nations whose systems have been built on this idea of 'national purity' to improve and let go of this mentality?

G.A.: Yes, I do believe that. And I think that your generation will play a vital role in this change. You have to understand that this notion of 'national purity' was first introduced after WW1, in order to serve specific social needs of the time. But things have changed significantly since then, since we now live in a global planet. Personally, I do not believe in borders. I like to think that coexisting with other nationalities is like a marriage; you have to make compromises and learn to accept differences for the richness they can offer. We are not, and do not need to be exactly the same as each other- but we need to understand that we are equal.

How can teenagers, like us, aid your mission and participate in your work?

G.A.: You can support us by advocating for refugees' rights, and / or, by becoming volunteers. By getting in contact with *the Unit of Integration and Support*, one can find out more about the specific process followed for a pilot project on peer volunteerism, in selected shelters for Unaccompanied Minors.

In view of this, the Sunny Days magazine members would like to encourage students to participate in voluntary work, through the contacts connecting our school to Dr. Aroni's team.

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