EXCURSION INTO EMPATHY

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Ten days abroad gave Pacific Oaks students a new perspective on the global immigration crisis and a new tool with which to practice their profession: compassion.

For most people, immigration is intellectual. Deciding whether to support or oppose it is a mental exercise that builds political muscles one can flex during dinner parties and on social media. For Pacific Oaks College student Alma Garcia, however, immigration is a lot more than conversational candy to suck on or spit out at will. To her, immigration is life. Or, tragically, death.

The PhotoVoice project paired students with a refugee to explore their story, experience, and hopes for the future through photography. Here, Pacific Oaks student Alma Garcia bonds with her partner.

The daughter of Mexican immigrants who fled a small town to pursue better lives in the United States, Garcia had a front-row seat to immigrant life as a child in Compton, Calif.

"There were six of us living in a one-bedroom trailer," she says of her early childhood. "When you move to a new country you don't have a credit history, so it takes you years to save money and establish yourself. It's very hard."

For the Garcias, struggle eventually begat success. Not all families are so lucky, however.

"A friend's mom was from Guatemala and didn't have enough money to bring all her children here. When things got violent there, she asked my dad to sponsor her son so she could bring him to the U.S.," recalls Garcia, who says the boy was killed by gang violence in Guatemala less than two weeks after starting the paperwork to immigrate, illustrating for her that negative stereotypes about immigrants rarely hold water. People don't immigrate to steal jobs or resources from another country, she learned; usually, they immigrate to improve their life. And sometimes to save it.

The sadness Garcia felt for her friend's family came rushing back in 2015, when she saw the now infamous viral video of a Hungarian camera operator tripping and kicking Syrian refugees as they fled police.

"That really made me think: We need to do something to change how the world perceives immigrants," she says.

Her desire to help vulnerable populations is one reason Garcia enrolled at Pacific Oaks College, where she will graduate this spring with a master's degree in marriage and family therapy. It's also what inspired her to join "Immigration in Context: Examination of Germany," the first-ever cross-institutional, cross-disciplinary study abroad program sponsored by TCS Education System, of which Pacific Oaks is a partner institution. Joined by 18 other students, five faculty, and leadership from each of TCS's five colleges, Garcia spent eight weeks online discussing immigration through the lenses of law, psychology, health care, and human development before embarking on a 10-day journey to Berlin in December 2016 to learn about immigration from those most qualified to teach it: immigrants and the social-services community that supports them.

Immigration: A growing crisis

The size and complexity of global immigration is staggering. In the United States alone, there are more than 43.3 million immigrants, constituting 13.5 percent of the total U.S. population, according to the American Community Survey (ACS). Worldwide, there are approximately 244 million migrants, according to the United Nations. Of those, some 20 million are refugees who were forced to flee their homelands to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

With anti-immigrant sentiment growing and nationalistic governments rising—including in the U.S., where President Donald Trump already took executive action to restrict immigration—the message is clear: Now more than ever, the world needs professionals who are knowledgeable enough to help migrants and passionate enough to advocate for them. Through courses like "Immigration in Context," Pacific Oaks aims to create them.

"Pacific Oaks was founded 72 years ago on the Quaker values of inclusion, social justice, diversity, and the potential of every single person," says Pacific Oaks President Patricia A. Breen, Ph.D. "Those values will never change and are especially important in a world as troubled as ours is right now, with so many people in need."

Of course, values alone can't help people in need. What made "Immigration in Context" so compelling, therefore, was its focus on interdisciplinary learning and practical application, which helped students know how to translate values into action long after the course's conclusion.

"An issue like immigration is so big and so complex that unless we take a holistic approach to addressing it our society will be unable to make headway," Breen says.

Tearing down walls

Under Nazi rule, Germany was easily the most hostile place in the world for immigrants. Now, 70 years after the end of World War II, lessons learned during its dark history have made it one of the most hospitable. So much so that in the last two years alone Germany has welcomed more than a million refugees across its borders.

Germany was the perfect setting for "Immigration in Context," according to Dr. Rebecca Rojas, core faculty member at Pacific Oaks' School of Cultural and Family Psychology. "Berlin appeared to be a very progressive city." Rojas co-taught the online course that students completed prior to their trip. As part of the course in Berlin, students visited agencies that provided legal advice, psychological interventions and housing for pregnant women and victims of violence. As refugees waited for their court hearings on their request for asylum German language classes were provided at no charge. According to Rojas, "There's a real effort to integrate refugees into German society."

Garcia immediately noticed Berlin's progressive attitude when she arrived at the students' host facility: the emergency refugee shelter of the Berlin city mission, Berliner Stadtmission.

"I worked for a long time on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, where all the homeless in L.A. gather. When I pictured a refugee camp, that's what I saw in my head—a depressing, dirty place in a bad neighborhood," says Garcia, who instead encountered a place whose ethos she summed up in one word: welcoming.

Erected in 2014, the shelter is a contemporary, air-inflated structure dubbed "the balloon." Housing up to 300 people in semi-private sleeping cabins, it features a large dining area, a playground, a full kitchen, and even Ping-Pong tables and games for entertainment. It's here that "Immigration in Context" sought its "context." During their 10-day visit, students dined and socialized with shelter residents, toured cultural landmarks, listened to lectures from immigration experts, and held multidisciplinary discussions about the challenges and solutions witnessed in the immigrant community around them.

The highlight of the experience, however, was *PhotoVoice*, a participatory photography project in which students were paired with refugees of whom they asked the question: Who are you? Each *PhotoVoice* pair received a camera, which they used to take photos around Berlin that answered the question through images.

Pacific Oaks student Nancy Retana was paired with a 24-year-old refugee from the Middle East. An aspiring engineer, he took Retana to where the Berlin Wall once stood in Potsdamer Platz. There, he photographed remnants of the wall because they reminded him of a similar barrier in his hometown, which he fled because of war.

"Just like the Germans, who are proud to know they've taken down the Berlin Wall, he hopes to go back to his country someday and celebrate that the wall there has been taken down," says Retana, who graduated from Pacific Oaks in December with a master's degree in early childhood education. "He showed me pictures of what his life was once like. He can't go back there and live now. It's literally concrete blocks. That's all that's left."

Syrian refugee Mahmoud Kadduura explained that, for many refugees, the journey into Europe took a month and included transportation by train, taxi, boat, plane and even on foot.

Because they're so moving, refugees' stories are also unifying, according to Majdi Laktinah, community manager at the Berliner Stadtmission refugee shelter. "Our goal was to give students actual contact with immigrants to break all their stereotypes," says Laktinah, a former dentist who immigrated to Germany from Syria in 2012. "It was so great to see how both the students and the residents worked as consorts, and how the students got to know the residents as humans that had lives, plans, and many other things before they had to give up on them and leave."

The project, which culminated in an exhibition of the *PhotoVoice* images, benefited residents as much as it did students. "The feedback I got from residents was only positive," Laktinah says. "It meant a lot to them to be able to tell the story they chose to tell, instead of the story someone else wanted to hear."

The reason it meant so much is that it gave them hope, according to Retana, who found herself weeping throughout the experience. "It was emotionally draining to hear so many heartbreaking stories," she says. "I told my partner, 'I'm sorry I'm crying, but I just feel so hopeless.' He told me, 'Don't say that. You offered me hope just by coming here and listening to my story. I didn't think anyone cared. But you do. It makes me feel like perhaps I will get asylum here and be able to start my life over again.'"

Bursting bubbles

For the students who went to Berlin, coming home was a splash of cold water to the face. Germany has opened borders. And with an executive order banning travel from six mostly Muslim countries, the United States has closed them. In the afterglow of "Immigration in Context," students felt as though they'd traded "the balloon" for a bubble. Fortunately, bubbles can bepopped. And thanks to their experience in Berlin, students like Retana and Garcia are armed with a fresh set of pins.

"There were six students from Pacific Oaks who took part in this course," Rojas says. "Because we live in Southern California, which is incredibly diverse, there's no question our students are going to be dealing with cultural differences in their places of work. This course gave them the knowledge and skills they need to work effectively in diverse communities."

Members of the cross-affiliate study abroad group pose in front of remnants of the Berlin Wall, a haunting reminder of Germany's tortured past.

Of course, it wasn't the course that imparted so much wisdom. Rather, it was the students who participated in it.

"Being with people from other disciplines really expanded my view and allowed me to see immigration from a different perspective," Garcia says. Discussions with legal students, for example, helped her appreciate how difficult it is for immigrants to find employment because of the challenges their legal status presents. Likewise, legal students learned from socialworkers and psychologists how to recognize clients who may suffer from PTSD.

"Our students at Pacific Oaks are trying to become educators, therapists, and human services professionals," says Breen, who attributes the course's success as much to its experiential qualities as to its interdisciplinary ones. "Having been exposed to a broader lens, I'm certain that they're going to be much more sophisticated, analytic, and holistic in their approach to solving problems. When you give students an opportunity to take what they've studied in books and classrooms and apply it in real-world situations, you get really amazing results."

Those results aren't amazing test scores or flawless final papers. They're diverse and resilient communities built on empathy, not enmity.

"I decided to get an advanced degree because I wanted to make more money and have my career go a certain way. But that's not meaningful to me anymore. What's meaningful to me is helping other people," concludes Garcia, who says her experience in Berlin made her feel like her work as a therapist has a larger purpose. "With everything that's going on in the world right now, it's easy to feel like there's nothing I can do to help. With the shift in my view of the world and of the struggles that people go through, I've realized that communities need my services. That's what I can do help."

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For questions or comments on our news stories or releases, or if you are a reporter who would like to speak with an expert in education, human development, or marriage and family therapy, please contact Johanna Atienza at JohannaAtienza@pacificoaks.edu or 626.529.8092.

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