

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 162, No. 137

Serving Chicago's legal community for 161 years

Learning peacemaking skills from Syrian refugees in Greece

The young Syrian stood in his new white button-down shirt, khaki pants and dress shoes, and despite the sniper's bullet in his back (acquired while he was trying to fix his family's rooftop solar energy system) and the knowledge that he would be back in a Greek refugee camp within 72 hours, he gave an impromptu speech on the value of using mediation in politics.

With passion in his voice, he told the roomful of international law students, mediators, lawyers and professors how the mediation skills he had been exposed to for the first time that week could help his country's political situation.

He exclaimed that community leaders should have mediation skills so that people could go to them with disputes. Further, mediators could assist in discussions between people actively engaged in the fighting and local communities to help bring those people back into the communities. He even spoke with optimism of using mediation to end the war.

Anyone who has coached or judged an academic student competition hopes that each student, win or lose, will gain valuable training that will positively impact his or her career and the community. For students participating in law school and collegiate mediation competitions, the hope is that they will learn to find resolutions to disputes that are cost-effective and serve to build, rather than destroy, relationships.

For volunteers at the most recent International Academy of Dispute Resolution law school mediation competition in Athens, listening to the young Syrian and getting to know the five other participating Syrian refugee students brought new meaning to the idea of making an impact.

INADR (inadr.org) is a nonprofit organization founded 16 years ago by Chicago attorney-mediators Richard Calkins, Fred Lane and Joseph Stone dedicated to increasing the use of mediation by regularly sponsoring international mediation tournaments around the world. The tournaments include two days of training so that

students from countries with little access to mediation education can participate along with well-prepared teams from universities with dispute resolution programs.

Students play the role of mediator, advocate and client in cases that involve a variety of business, family, personal and other disputes. They are trained in negotiation and mediation skills such as active listening, identifying client interests, analyzing the best and worst alternatives to a negotiated agreement and using communication skills that enhance the ability of others to consider contrary or new information.

Every other year, the law school championships are held in the U.S. at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, drawing hundreds of students, mediators, attorneys and professors from North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. In addition to the law school championships, which have also been held in London and Dublin, INADR holds smaller tournaments around the world each year, such as the competition in May in Athens.

The six Syrian students at the Athens tournament were recruited from two refugee camps near Thessaloniki by Elena Koltsaki, a Greek attorney mediator and INADR board member. Koltsaki was inspired by seeing young refugees in the camps near her city who looked like they could be students. She felt strongly that "there should never be a monopoly on knowledge" and that participating in the tournament might help them.

She interviewed young people in the camp to find students who spoke English well and seemed to have the character and interests to benefit from learning mediation skills. She learned that many had to leave their studies unfinished because their universities were bombed and no longer exist.

"Elena Koltsaki invited the refugee students to participate because she took to heart that Greece is the culture responsible for democracy throughout the world, and she viewed helping them as part of her role as a Greek," said Allen Goldberg, me-



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diator and champion of mediation while he served with the Cook County Circuit Court. Goldberg participated in the tournament on behalf of INADR.

After a screening process, Greek officials permitted the students to leave the camp for several days to take part in the pre-tournament mediation training and tournament. When INADR volunteers met the students they realized they would need to provide clothing for them to wear in the competition. Many of the students had lost all of their belongings when the boats they were in capsized. The clothes and shoes they still possessed were threadbare.

The six Syrian students made up two teams of three for the tournament. The first team included Mutasem, 25, an English literature major from a small village (now uninhabited) who hopes to someday have a career in journalism. (Last names are being withheld for safety reasons.) According to INADR Executive Director Meghann Sweeney, who runs the tournaments, Mutasem was the student who gave the speech.

Next was Ibrahim, a 20-year-old Syrian Kurd who speaks two dialects of Kurdish as well as Arabic, Turkish and English and often serves as an unofficial interpreter in the camp. He left Syria with his mother and small sister to find his ill father and other siblings in Germany.

The third team member was Mohammed, 20, who crossed the Aegean Sea in February with his

two brothers after his parents sold everything they had to pay for their passage to save their sons from the army. He wonders if he will ever be able to complete his studies in chemical engineering.

The second Syrian student team included Ebrahim, Geema and Ahmed, young men who had served in the Red Crescent, an organization like the Red Cross, in Deir Ezzor, a city where civilians are starving because all supply and communication lines were cut in the spring of 2015. One of them spent nine months in prison for giving food to civilians instead of to the Syrian army.

He showed Sweeney the cigarette burns on his arms and his broken teeth and pointed out each of the bones broken during his time in the prison. When he was released from prison, knowing he was in danger from both the army and the Islamic State terror group, he decided to leave Syria. His two friends joined him and they climbed mountains to reach Greece. They had to leave all of their family members behind.

Unfortunately, the second team had to leave in the middle of the second training day and was unable to compete in the tournament. One of them learned through word of mouth (the only source of news) that a bomb had exploded back in Syria in front of his family home. He needed to get back to the refugee camp so that his younger brother would not be alone if bad news about family members came.

His teammates were clearly disappointed but determined to support him and returned to the camp with him.

During the tournament, according to Koltsaki, "other students from Greece and all over the world opened their hearts to the Syrians unconditionally to offer their support and solidarity, which was incredible."

In the end, Mutasem, Mohammed and Ibrahim performed well in the tournament, which also included teams from Greece, Albania, Romania, Turkey, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the U.S. The Syrian team placed in the top 10.