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Lawyers 'in a great position to help'

Attorney finds legal skills blend well with humanitarian efforts

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Dozens of tiny hands grasp at the front gate of a school.

A few of them reach up and try to jiggle the locks to gain entry into what many of them consider a happy place.

These children are Syrian refugees, and they are waiting for their school day to begin.

"This is how excited they are to come to school. Just to have something positive to do with their day," Shermin Kruse said, describing her experience in Turkey. "The amount of gratitude amidst the remarkable disaster and human capacity for survival is extraordinary."

Kruse, an equity partner practicing general litigation at Barack, Ferrazzano, Kirschbaum & Nagelberg LLP, traveled to the West Asian nation last month to work with the Karam Foundation, a Chicago-based nonprofit that is providing physical wellness, social and educational programming for Syrian refugee children.

She was there as a program evaluator and writer, interviewing students, teachers, refugees and Turkish government officials to develop a resource on refugees' legal rights in the country.

The Syrian civil war has displaced millions of people, Kruse said, and she sees the situation there as an international security threat.

"I genuinely believe it is the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world today," she said. "And it's not a Syrian crisis — it's a world global crisis."

Kruse was part of a team of 25 people who went to the Salam School in Reyhanli, a city on the



Barack, Ferrazzano, Kirschbaum & Nagelberg LLP partner Shermin Kruse traveled to Turkey last month to research and write about the legal rights of Syrian refugees. *Photo courtesy of Mohamad Ojijeh*

border between Turkey and Syria that saw its population more than triple after the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

The school serves 2,000 refugee children up to age 17 who attend school in three-hour rotations. Kruse was there from Nov. 13 to 21 with her husband, Stuart Kruse, who ran a chess program for students.

While much of refugee aid is focused on meeting dietary, medical and other basic needs, the emotional well-being of refugee children uprooted from their homes and traumatized by the war is forgotten, said Lina Sergie, co-founder and president of the Karam Foundation.

Teenagers often get lost in the shuffle because schools and other programs tend to be designed for younger children, she said.

Because of language barriers and a limited number of work

permits, Syrians who fled to Turkey have few educational and job opportunities. Even if they complete high school, Kruse said, the situation leaves teens feeling depressed about the future.

During its November launch, the new Karam Leadership Program opened a computer lab and taught 300 students online skills such as researching, Web development and design, photo editing and computer coding. It also taught them how to find scholarships and college programs they may be able to attend nearby or online.

"The world is not limited. If you have a computer and Internet and an idea for a business, you can compete with others in the world," Sergie recalls telling the students. "You don't have to feel trapped in this small town and feel that you have nothing."

Kruse said the teens she met

desperately want to learn things that will help them move on with their lives. They don't need people to come and "inspire them," she said, they need tools to help them figure out what's next for them and their families.

"I really had no idea the extent to which this community was interested in self-help measures," she said. "I think we take the opportunities we have here for granted, and I think sometimes we reject them out of spite."

The young girls she spoke with all wanted to go to college, Kruse said. One teen whose fiance had fled to Europe was thinking about selling her engagement ring to buy a computer. A 14-year-old boy told her that all he wanted to do is work and "live with integrity" in Turkey.

"There's a lot of hunger, a lot of thirst and lots of drive," she said. "They just need a chance."

One bright spot is that Turkey

has been welcoming to refugees, Kruse said, and has enacted reforms to help them. Turkey changed its laws to recognize Syrian high school diplomas, which will allow refugees to take standardized tests and have access to the country's universities.

News about the Syrian civil war is consumed by politics and the refugee crisis, Sergie said, and the long-term effects on children is rarely covered in the media. She said Kruse, who published a book earlier this year and blogs for the Huffington Post, played a valuable role in capturing the children's individual stories in a meaningful way.

Sergie commended her ability to balance a successful legal career and raise three children while taking an active role in humanitarian causes.

"She is such an inspiring person," she said.

Helping with the KLP project was an intersection of her work advising businesses and entrepreneurs, her writing and her passion for human rights, Kruse said.

There are many opportunities for lawyers to connect their skills with humanitarian work.

For example, Kruse said, lawyers that work with technology companies looking to build hubs or have online employment opportunities for Arabic speakers can look to the



Kruse with a group of Syrian refugee children in Turkey *Photo courtesy of Mohamad Ojje*

untapped potential in refugee communities such as Reyhanli.

Environmental attorneys can provide impact studies to help businesses create clean energy programs, which becomes a source of jobs and energy to a community.

"People in the legal community are in a great position to help by virtue of their relationships to

the private sector," she said.

Legal research is also needed in other countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, to gather information on refugees' legal rights to help both the refugees and policymakers.

Kruse said she was overwhelmed by the generosity and graciousness of Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees. Despite

their lack of resources, they wanted to share what they had with her, including the hungry schoolchildren who wanted to share snacks with her.

"I expected that things there would be extremely traumatic. It wasn't," she said. "Despite everything else, there is so much compassion and generosity in this world. It's amazing."