

As I packed to spend my summer in Chios I tried to stick to the basics: a few outfits, hair and skin care, period products, and a toothbrush. Despite my goals to budget my space appropriately I had managed to both overpack and under pack. Although I had a handful of untouched items at the bottom of my suitcase, I had failed to remember more than a few things that were probably more essential than the extra pairs of shoes I had managed to shove in. My philosophy as I was in Heathrow and realized I had no toothpaste was that I could just buy whatever I'd forgotten. Looking back after spending my summer with Offene Arme, I realize that I had taken for granted what a luxury it is to be able to have such easy access to essentials and have more items than needed.

Offene Arme is a charity based in Chios Greece that provides supplies to refugees staying in Viall, the Island's refugee camp. The organization has two main tasks: running a free shop and doing supplies distributions. At the free shop customers browse through a selection of tops, trousers, undergarments, and miscellaneous supplies to select a certain number of items based on their age. During supply distributions the organization sets up rails with clothes at Viall to recreate the environment in the shop. One of the most needed distributions run by Offene Arme is to distribute pads and diapers to the camp. I was shocked to find out that such essentials were provided by the charity and not the government. A goal I had while undertaking my LIA was to understand how to approach solving problems by first being able to identify unmet needs.

One of the biggest obstacles I faced was overcoming the language barrier. Effective communication is one of the most important parts of leadership. Though I struggled at first to clearly show how many of each item they could take after a few shifts at the shop I found ways to show what I meant without words. During supply distributions the volunteers were placed either at check in, item stands or check out. I was placed at checkout for a distribution and despite our best efforts at crowd control I was overwhelmed. Maintaining control in a situation with high pressure is an important skill for a leader. Despite the crowd, I remained calm and took the steps to check the customers out. Another skill I learned during my LIA was how to be a leader who understands the people they are leading. The head of the organization, Toula, made sure to emphasize that the customers got a true shopping experience complete with calming music and shopping baskets. She reinforced the idea that the customers should be able to pick out things they want and not all have to wear the same thing. Further she ensured everyone who worked in the shops was dressed appropriately to make sure the customers felt comfortable. Further Offene Arme has a section of the shop aimed for the local women of Chios who are in need to help too. This empathy and understanding inspired me to incorporate this into my leadership style.

My time in Chios provided me with invaluable leadership experience through both firsthand experience and working under community leaders.