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Leadership for Global Change

August 31st, 2026

LiA with Lighthouse Relief

My academic and professional career has always been shaped by experiences connected to my pursuit of medicine. It has always been Pre-Med ever since my dad got diagnosed with Kidney Failure resulting in him navigating multiple clinical settings. It was in one of these clinics that my dad recounted experiencing racism from a nurse because he spoke Spanish. This recount fundamentally influenced what I defined to be a medical professional. Medical professionals have a responsibility to treat patients with respect since patients come to them at their most vulnerable and to disrespect them is a betrayal of that trust and professionalism. I refashioned that negative moment into my “Why medicine.” I wanted to be an advocate for individuals of my community and be the one to offer respect in a system that continuously perpetuates the disparity between us and access to medicine. I wanted to break barriers and offer dignity to those overlooked in the healthcare system similar to my dad. I saw leadership through a similar lens; to be an advocate or representative. I defined a leader as someone who used their voice to speak for others and a figure holding authority. My experiences had earlier limited my

understanding of what it meant to be a leader. This summer, Laidlaw Scholars challenged me to reconsider that definition and redefine what I believed it meant to be a leader.

I realized my understanding of what it meant to be a leader was tied to environments where I knew how to succeed. I knew how to lead when I understood the community, the subject, and my role within such as chasing titles for school clubs. I didn't understand what it meant to be a leader with a different context. Laidlaw allowed me to face that question.

This summer I spent six weeks in Athens, Greece working as a Programming Officer for Lighthouse Relief. Greece is currently home to around 230,000 migrants and asylum seekers. People residing in refugee camps on the Greek mainland are shut off from opportunities and vital services that enable them to live with dignity and a sense of control over their life. The severe psychological effects of these restrictive settings are exacerbated by living in isolated areas with little access to transportation and little possibilities for employment, recreation, and education. Silove, Ventevogel, and Rees emphasize in their paper, "The contemporary refugee crisis: an overview of mental health challenges" that refugees' mental health is shaped not only by the trauma they may have experienced before displacement, but also by the ongoing stress, uncertainty, isolation, and disruption that can continue after they reach safety. In this context, Lighthouse Relief was created to offer dedicated safe spaces to deliver vital mental health and psychosocial support to men, women, and children living in Refugee Camps. The recreational services were not just a source of entertainment but also an escape from the harsh reality of displacement where people could experience joy and normalcy again.

As a Programming Officer for Lighthouse Relief, much of my work was hands-on and field-based. On Mondays, me and my colleagues, Khaled Naiemi and Pauline Klose, would go to

a camp in Ristona where we would facilitate a sports session for participants to play soccer together. Tuesdays and Wednesdays we would go to Korinthos and collaborate with another organization called Meraki. Here, Lighthouse Relief would provide the patrons of the center with job admin support. My role involved creating resumes for refugees that they could use when applying for potential employment opportunities. My colleagues assisted with other aspects of the process, such as navigating the Greek tax system and obtaining social security numbers, areas in which they had more experience with the Greek employment system. After job support sessions on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, we would facilitate additional sports activities for the patrons, including basketball. On Thursdays, we returned to Korinthos to work with Meraki, but instead of working in the organization's center, we spent time in a community garden that the organization operated. There, we participated in community activities with refugees and had the opportunity to interact with them in a more informal setting.

Given the nature of my work at Lighthouse Relief, which was in a discipline I wasn't accustomed to, I had to ask myself: How do I measure the success and impact of my work? In areas I had understood throughout my life, success was easier to define. However, as the impact of humanitarian work is frequently less immediate and far more difficult to measure, how was I supposed to gauge success? The answer came from the people we served. I began measuring the impact of our recreational programming through the number of participants who returned each week, but also through something much simpler: the number of smiles. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, when I provided job-administration support, measuring success was more tangible. I could count the number of resumes I completed each week, knowing that each one could eventually help someone. But even then, the true impact of my role was found in the people behind those numbers. During my first week at Lighthouse Relief, I completed fifteen resumes.

One of them belonged to a refugee named Prince, from South Sudan. At the time, he was simply the eleventh person whose resume I had created that week. In my fourth week Prince came back to tell me that he had gotten a job at a grocery store because of our help. At that moment, he stopped being “case number eleven.” He became a person whose life I had, in some small but meaningful way, helped change. Lighthouse Relief cannot replace the larger systems and institutions needed to support the 230,000 migrants living in Greece. But meaningful change does not always begin at that scale, sometimes, it begins with one soccer game, one smile, one resume, or one person feeling seen.

I only realized the value of my role at Lighthouse Relief, particularly for people like Prince, after my LiA experience had ended. Throughout the summer, I often questioned my ability to contribute to Lighthouse’s mission. I knew I would be entering a field unfamiliar to me, but being in a new country experiencing a different culture and talking in a different language made that uncertainty even more difficult. I loved my time in Greece and being able to try new foods, explore Athens, traveling to Santorini, Paros, and Rome, and sharing memories with my colleagues and friends, but the language barrier was one of the biggest challenges I faced during my LiA. Because I did not speak Greek or languages that the refugees spoke, I often felt limited, especially when my work required direct interaction with others. This experience forced me to confront the limits of my own cultural knowledge. Tervalon and Murray-García describe cultural humility as an ongoing process of self-reflection and recognizing the limitations of one’s own knowledge when working across cultural differences (Tervalon and Murray-García 117). I had always been accustomed to feeling confident and self-sufficient, but in Greece I had to accept that I did not have all the answers. I had to learn to step back, ask for help, and rely on people who understood the language and culture better than I did. Asking another refugee to translate

for me did not make me less capable; it allowed me to serve them more effectively. I learned that leadership does not require me to be the most knowledgeable person in the room. Sometimes, leadership means having the humility to recognize what I do not know and being willing to learn from the people I am there to serve.

I spent six weeks in Greece because the Laidlaw Scholars Collaborative challenged me to understand what it truly means to be a leader. I entered the experience believing that leadership was primarily about advocacy, representation, and having the authority to create change. I leave with a much broader understanding. Leadership is not confined to a title, a position, or even the ability to speak for others. For me, leadership exists in the moments when I can positively impact another person's life, empower someone to move forward, and show up for a community even when I am not the most knowledgeable or capable person in the room. I will carry this understanding into my future endeavors, particularly my pursuit of medicine, where I hope to advocate for patients while also listening to them and recognizing when their experiences and knowledge are greater than my own. Whatever my role, whether I'm dealing with a patient, a co-worker, or an entire community, I want to be the one who leads with humility in asking for help, being flexible enough to learn, and giving people the feeling of empowerment.

Bibliography

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