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From Bristol to Holland, Professor Rachel McCormack Pilots Book Drive for Syrian Refugees

Literacy education professor spearheads efforts to bring Arabic education to Syrian children in Dutch refugee camps



March 7, 2016 | Sabrina Polin '17

BRISTOL, R.I. – When Roger Williams University Professor of Literacy Education Rachel McCormack headed to Europe on sabbatical, she expected to encounter cultural differences that would supplement her project on native language programs. McCormack’s project became even more profound, however, when an unexpected encounter at a Syrian refugee camp in Holland inspired her to take action and bring Arabic books and education directly to the Syrian children.

“This was not something I set out to do,” McCormack says, “but rather it was something that found me.”

McCormack originally travelled abroad to study how travel and immigration across European countries affects education and fluency in what she calls “mother tongue languages.” While there, she was made increasingly aware of the escalating refugee crisis, as that was what most English-speaking news coverage consisted of, and it opened her eyes to its severity and underlying challenges not making headlines – including a lack of education in the refugees’ native language.

McCormack was connected with a Syrian activist who was traveling to Dutch refugee camps the same week McCormack had planned to be in Amsterdam. The pair made their way through the countryside from camp to camp where she witnessed the conditions of the camps firsthand.

While Holland has “model refugee camps,” according to McCormack, there are huge setbacks in education, particularly for children who don’t even know how to read and write in their native language. In Holland, and all over Europe, in fact, refugees are being educated in Dutch, German, English and French in an effort to assimilate them. There is a dearth of Arabic materials, McCormack says, and that is a tremendous setback for school aged children.

“They’ve got to maintain their mother tongue. They’ve got to learn to read and write in Arabic,” McCormack says. “When I spoke to the parents about it, it hadn’t previously occurred to them that [Arabic education] was something that was really important.”

McCormack contacted the Literary Research Association (LRA), explaining her mission to bring Arabic education to the refugees in Holland, and received an overwhelming amount of support for a book drive for the camps. She organized fundraisers to purchase the Arabic language books, and then was connected with a student in Missouri who was from Holland and volunteered to hand-deliver the first set of books – just over 40, the most that would fit in a suitcase – to a social worker who would distribute them at a camp.

The books from McCormack’s pilot only went to a single camp, but she continues to promote the book drive in an effort to increase its reach as interest and resources continue to grow. Her plan for the future is to order the books through an online program such as Amazon UK and have them delivered abroad; the missing piece for the project to grow into more camps, she says, is a point person to serve as distributor on location.

“These people left their homes in Syria because it wasn’t safe. Some kids haven’t been to school in two or three years, and parents just want them to have a good life,” says McCormack. “I can’t save the world, but it’s just one little thing I’m trying to do to be able to say I helped during this crisis; it’s not going to get better without effort.”