Vassar College Solidarity with Refugees

On February 7, 1986, the Student Coalition Against Apartheid at Vassar staged a sit-in in President Virginia Smith’s office to protest increasing the college’s investment in apartheid-supportive companies. Two years earlier, when the Coalition was formed, students joined in a nationwide campus protest movement that demonstrated their support for divestment, blockading Main Gate for two weeks. These are only two examples of Vassar’s strong historical participation in political advocacy, and each emphasizes the student body’s interest in global events and engagement in movements that reach beyond Poughkeepsie.

Today, Vassar students are again responding to a global cry for help. “VC Solidarity,” led by Professor of History Maria Höhn, Sam Speers and Rabbi Kerry Chaplin from the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, as well as a student leadership council, is concerned with the world-wide refugee crisis. To initiate a campus-wide discussion, Professor Höhn and Rev. Speers invited Vassar alum Mariya Nikolova ’07, who currently serves as Editor of the International Review of the Red Cross, to join Professors Ismail Rashid (History) and Diane Harriford (Sociology) on a panel discussion. Although much of the panel focused on the Syrian crisis, it was clear by the end of the night that the Vassar community’s interest in aiding refugees spanned the globe. According to Professor Rashid, “the panel was very good in starting a campus-wide discussion regarding the issue of refugees and what we, as an institution, can do to contribute to supporting them,” as well as allowing students, faculty, and members of the local community to brainstorm ways “to link up with the campus to do things with agencies and organizations.” One immediate opportunity is through volunteering at Catholic Charities, which has been assisting refugees, primarily from Central America, who are in the process of resettlement in Poughkeepsie. Through such organizations, Höhn argues that Vassar “can immediately start doing and can remind ourselves that the focus is also on our doors. Its not just Europe, its not just Syria, its also Africa, Central America, etc.” Of the more than 130 students who have volunteered to work with VC Solidarity, more than 60% of have also signed up to work with Catholic Charities and the Rural Migrant Ministries, two organizations working locally with migrant populations.
VC Solidarity also hopes to make a long-term impact that extends beyond the local. One idea is to offer an opportunity for scholars fleeing conflict areas to take short-term teaching positions at Vassar. Since the panel in early October, Vassar has signed up for “Scholars at Risk,” an international network dedicated to protecting scholars living in regions with conflict or political repression. The college is currently reviewing the first applications for “Scholars at Risk” for the next academic year. On campus, students are looking to raise money (or utilize previously existing funds from the VSA’s budget for socially conscious activities) to subsidize students who would like to go abroad during breaks to work with refugee relief organizations. Such opportunities might exist for students in Italy, Greece, or Germany through various contacts of Vassar professors. Professor Höhn also suggests the possibility of using “digital technology to connect with people in the refugee camps and to support them in organizing their own structure of empowerment within the camps.”

In order to build a solid base of student support, Professor Höhn and student leader Anish Kanoria ‘18 organized dorm meetings in hopes of solidifying a group of interested students to build a student leadership council. While Höhn started the Initiative, she emphasizes that VC Solidarity needs to be “student-run”; she views the professors’ roles as advisors who can use their connections to assist the students. Together with Kanoria, she has put together a seven-person student leadership council (including history major Julia Albertson) who manage the website, research Vassar responses to past refugees crises, develop connections with NGOs, push the administration to create scholarships for refugee students, and organize future opportunities to help. VC Solidarity aspires to provide research and fieldwork credit for students—an opportunity for students to get academic credit and recognition for their work on a specific cause. Höhn believes that “if they are putting in all those hours, we need to have a way to record that.”

The History Department is known for pushing students to consider current events through a historical and global perspective and Solidarity with Refugees is no different. As discussions emerge on campus regarding how to best aid refugees, the Vassar community is reflecting on past experiences of activism, such as the anti-Apartheid movement, and programs being utilized by other universities. Höhn recently participated in a panel at American University to report on Vassar’s initiatives and explore with colleagues and
students at AU ways to organize and be involved. VC Solidarity is also working with other Northeastern colleges to build a more effective network of initiatives. Just as importantly, Vassar is seeking ways to move forward not only in providing relief but also by challenging U.S. policies that contribute to or exacerbate the crises. According to Professor Rashid, VC Solidarity is “getting people to think of what is going on beyond what is simply a humanitarian crisis – it is a humanitarian crisis, but [we need] to look at the big picture, [such as] global migration problems that have manifested differently. There is an African dimension to this, there is a Middle Eastern dimension to this, but there is also an American dimension to this,” which relates to “the larger conversation of being really conscious of U.S. policies, especially military choices and the way they contribute to conflict.” Solidarity with Refugees is truly an all-encompassing movement – one that engages with not only the Vassar community, but also members of the Hudson Valley in discussions that reflect local, national, and international issues impacting refugees.

- Lauren Stauffer ‘16