

Learning about the Refugee Experience in Strasbourg

FOR MICHELLE JITUBOH '17, A SYRACUSE ABROAD SUMMER internship in Strasbourg meant reconnecting with her first language. Growing up, Jituboh lived in Côte d'Ivoire, Tunisia, and Ghana, where she predominantly spoke French. Her advanced knowledge of the language allowed her to intern at the *Centre d'Accueil et d'Orientation pour les Migrants* (Reception and Orientation Center for Migrants), where she used her French skills in a professional setting. Despite having some reservations at first, Jituboh says, "It was refreshing because that was the only language I could really speak."

During her internship, Jituboh assisted with the organization's daily functions, translated documents, aided in conversations, and used her skills in French and English to teach classes to the migrants. Many of them came from the Calais "Jungle" in France, an illegal camp of migrants and refugees from the Middle East and East Africa, and were relocated to Strasbourg. According to Jituboh, the migrants enjoyed her presence because they don't usually interact much with the social workers who assist them at the center. She describes her unique relationship with them as a "different bond."

Jituboh was one of several students who, through the Syracuse Abroad Program in Strasbourg, interned last summer at organizations devoted to assisting refugees and migrants. Whether during the semester or summer, the Strasbourg program provides its students with the opportunity to gain experience in a desired field in workplaces ranging from astronomical observatories to pediatricians' offices, from museums to fashion boutiques. "We really try to listen to what the students' interests are," says Raymond Bach, academic director of the Strasbourg program.

Forming a unique relationship with refugees was an experience shared by Syracuse Abroad participant Jonathan Williamson, a James Madison student who interned at the *Collectif d'Accueil pour Solliciteurs d'Asile de Strasbourg* (Association for Welcoming Asylum Seekers in Strasbourg), a similar organization to the CAO. Williamson assisted in translating documents and, along with his other daily tasks, taught classes and planned cultural visits. Williamson says he realized the importance of his interactions with the asylum seekers, knowing he might be their first point of contact in France. He explains that he saw another side of their personalities, different from when they first met, once they opened up and he was teaching them French. "It was incredible to see the change," he says.

The Strasbourg program has inspired both Williamson and Jituboh to pursue graduate degrees in the future. Williamson, an international affairs and French major with a minor in European policy, plans to go back to France to study international diplomacy. Because of her positive experience providing assistance to migrants at the CAO, Jituboh, who earned bachelor's degrees in international relations and French, plans to pursue a master's degree in social work. Apart from providing insight on her future, her time abroad opened her eyes to other people and cultures. "It makes you aware of other things people are going through and mindful of how good your life is going for you," Jituboh says.

Such insights are what Bach hopes students will get out of their internships. He notes that interning with the Strasbourg program gives students the advantage of getting out of the “academic bubble” and seeing another side of France. In the case of working with refugees and migrants, he believes it’s important for the students to know that people value their work. The experience also allows them to see the country from the perspective of someone coming there and hoping to receive immigrant status. In the process, the students will learn more about their own country, the United States. “It’s not about saying one country is better than another country, or one society is better than another society,” Bach says. “It’s about learning to understand the world in all its complexity with a critical perspective, and that’s really what study abroad ideally should give you.”

—*Gina Reitenauer*

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