



A MULTI-GENERATIONAL TRIP TO THE FIELD



By Sarah Mandato

In our screen-centric world, where exhausting news cycles and social media celebrities present a distorted reality, achieving moments of clarity of perspective is more critical than ever. I had one when my father and I visited Save the Children's programs within the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, just south of the Syrian border. I'd never been just miles from a war zone.

My father Joe is a member of Save the Children's Board of Trustees. When he emailed asking if I'd be interested in visiting Za'atari, I replied "okay." I currently live in Los Angeles, a predictably clichéd existence including scenic hikes and voluntarily consuming (enthusiastically, even!) overpriced green juice. I'm not sure what I expected of our trip, but a vision of poverty, despair and sadness took shape. What I observed upon arrival, however, is something I never expected.

Established in 2012 amidst a raging Syrian civil war, the Za'atari refugee camp is home to nearly 80,000 inhabitants. 20% of them are under 5 years old.¹ Save the Children's humanitarian programs within the camp focus on child protection, education, food, security and livelihood; a response to what the World Health Organization called the worst ongoing humanitarian crisis on earth.² We visited several of these programs, each a culture shock, but also a vision of humanity, hope and positive change.

Touring the Community Health Project, a Save instructor discussed constructive forms of communication with the women in attendance. As the room abruptly fell silent, I looked to our translator: the teacher had asked about the use of rape as a form of discipline in the home. Unthinkable to me, particularly in the #MeToo era, my eyes teared and my breath caught. Shaken, I also felt the essentiality of building awareness about what I consider to be basic human rights.

A glimpse at a vocational training program where teen boys learned barber skills was an emotional palate cleanser. In one corner a group shaved cream off of inflated balloons with razors. In another, one student gave another a haircut: a smart fade evidencing skill far beyond that required for a standard trim. Dad and I both remarked on how all of the students had, appropriately, great hair! Upon completion of the program, each "graduate" receives a complete barber kit: the first step in setting up a small business.

Next, a family of six invited us into their home. Small and spare, a mother and her four daughters led us to a table set with Jordanian Arabic coffee and a feast of coconut and nut desserts. In between one of the children repeatedly running over to place cushions behind my father's back and the electricity temporarily going out, we learned that the youngest child had an irregular heartbeat requiring a pacemaker. The mother gravely

¹ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63051>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/09/six-million-displaced-by-war-in-syria/100587/>

worried that her daughter, still too young for the procedure, would never reach five years old. This reality stung bitterly in contrast to the sugary confections Dad and I consumed, trying our best to be gracious guests. As the young girl squealed and jumped around the room seemingly without a care in the world, I concealed a small pastry into my napkin, carrying it with me the rest of the afternoon.

The Early Learning Center was our final stop. As we entered a classroom, a resonant anthem and controlled chaos greeted us: dozens of kindergartners danced around to “Baby Shark.” I did the only reasonable thing one could do in this situation. I joined them. Doing my best approximation of arms-as-fins, I looked at the smiling faces of these happy, guileless children who would grow up in exile.



Sarah Mandato and Joe Mandato visiting the Early Learning Center at the Za'atari refugee camp

As we departed each program, my father thanked those present for welcoming us as their guests, and said how important his work with Save the Children was to him. During these moments, I felt proud to be his daughter.

Leaving the camp, we stopped briefly at its highest point. The severe, expansive picture in front of me did not show the heart, perseverance and inspiration I felt throughout our visit. At home I spend an inappropriate amount of time thinking about how to make more money to do and buy more things. Looking at this incredible refuge, I suddenly, acutely felt my own privilege.

You know how when you return from a vacation, refreshed, you make inspired but ridiculous resolutions to learn a new language or cook a certain foreign dish, and that just never happens? Well, I'm trying. I'm now volunteering with Save, an exciting time as we prepare for this year's Centennial Celebration in Los Angeles. It's gratifying to participate with my father - the shared involvement brings us closer.

What can you do? Donate to the Promise of Childhood Campaign. I also encourage you to visit Save the Children programs, as I was lucky enough to do. Bring your children, even if they're not really children anymore. Whether you worry about them spending lost weekends bingeing Netflix, or just want to share quality time together, it's a singular experience they will never forget. A reset that will truly make one examine their life and think about their place in the world, engaged philanthropy is a small but necessary way to actually have an impact. To both the giver and beneficiary, it's a gift.

www.savethechildren.org/centennialcampaign