

Help Refugees Calais, France

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I spent a week volunteering with Help Refugees (<https://helprefugees.org>) in Calais and no two of these days were alike. Help Refugees were founded in 2015, dramatically expanding from a group of friends filling a van with donations to a giant within the humanitarian sector. Today there are over 100 refugee volunteering projects across Europe and the Middle East. Despite serving vastly differing needs, each project is based upon the same strong principles of community, empowerment, human dignity and fast action.

In Calais, the hub of humanitarian action is an old warehouse. Several charities share the space, collecting, sorting and mending donations. Another charity Refugee Community Kitchen (RCK) provide meals twice a day to the refugees in Calais and Dunkirk and Utopia provide the main emergency aid. This warehouse is unique in the sense that these charities work collaboratively with a common goal.

Each morning I would join the other volunteers to be updated on any developments in the refugee camps. Help Refugees is not a hierarchical organisation so no one would tell us what to do. It was up to me to decide how I would most productively spend my day. Taking initiative is a skill I believe will be very beneficial to me for my academic and professional development.

Often, I chose to work in the kitchen as they needed the most pairs of hands. While chopping never-ending amounts of onions I would chat to the other volunteers. People had come from all over the world and consequentially had a wide range of beliefs and values. For instance, one man had been a refugee in Calais himself and had returned to volunteer now that he had been granted asylum. I loved learning from other people's perspectives and made a conscious effort to be culturally respectful. I believe that actively practising cultural awareness is an essential trait and one that I will take with me into the workplace.

Some evenings I went on distribution. We took vans of fresh hot food to the refugee camp in Dunkirk. People would line up to receive their portions and often stick around for a chat. The children were keen to help, asking me if they could serve the food. I was amazed at how easy it was to communicate even though we had had such different life experience.



Outside of the warehouse I was camping with two other volunteers who I met over Facebook. It was somewhat challenging at first as they were both French, creating a bit of a language barrier between us. All being in the same boat, we could practise speaking with only a normal amount of embarrassment! I would like to develop these skills in the future as I believe that a second language would be a great asset in the workplace.

I have met so many interesting people through my international experience. I left Calais with promises to return next summer and contacts for my dissertation.

Without my time in Calais, I am sure I would not have had the idea to research the volunteer experience for my project. This has brought a new direction to my final year at university and added a very rewarding week to my summer.