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Greece: Improving living conditions while clowning around



The Hellenic Red Cross in cooperation with the Red Noses Clowns help children learn the importance of adequate hygiene and sanitation in camps, where migrants are stuck for an indefinite period of time. Caroline Haga/IFRC

Published: 14 June 2016 16:00 CET

By Carline Haga, IFRC

An innovative cooperation between Red Cross Red Crescent and Red Noses International ensures children, and adults alike, learn the importance of good hygiene amid fun and laughter.

Children of all ages sit laughing in a circle on the gravel while their parents stand around with smiles on their faces at the Nea Kavala camp in northern Greece. Wendy – a clown in a blue dress and white hat – is admonishing her brother Turbo for throwing an empty water bottle on the ground. When, after many hilarious attempts, Turbo FINALLY manages to place the bottle in the bin bag where it belongs cheers and applause erupt all around.

“Why not try a fun approach”

Over 50,000 people are currently stranded across Greece. As they are expected to stay for months in hastily established camps the Hellenic Red Cross, supported by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), is doing its best to improve the living conditions. Cleanliness and good hygiene plays a critical role in ensuring a safe environment for the families to await decisions on asylum and EU relocation.

“Who would want to live in a dump? But that’s exactly what many did for their first weeks in the camps. Poor hygiene and sanitation cause all kinds of problems from diseases that easily spread in close quarters to vermin and snakes overtaking the area. We knew we had to do something so why not try a fun approach,” says David Castellano, IFRC coordinator for water, sanitation and hygiene activities.

Enter the Red Noses International clowns who usually work in neglected spaces and hospitals cheering up little patients. Having established their “Emergency Smile” programme in 2013, the international clown team were keen to spread joy among the migrants who have already endured so much, while at the same time fulfilling a role as hygiene promoters.

A new future filled with love and clean spaces

For more than a month a three-person clown team has been touring the camps where the Hellenic Red Cross works with their story called “Little Treasures,” inspiring hope for a future filled with love, clean spaces and magic.

“We want to show everyone that hope, love and laughter are still here even in the dry soil of Greece,” says Gabriela Rajniakova (29) from Slovakia who portrays the heroine Wendy. “I really believe that we can help them to forget about their difficulties and even generate a more positive outlook on their future.”

Her ‘future husband’ IQWY – Palestinian Tarek Zaboun (28) - agrees: “Most of these children have probably not seen a clown for a long time, possibly never. To show them smiles, laughter and love is truly special, something I think that they will remember even when they’re 23 or 67 years old.”

It is evident that the example set by the clowns at the Nea Kavala camp catches on as several children get up to throw the trash they find around them to the bin bag Wendy is holding. These interventions are a part of the comprehensive hygiene promotion programmes in the camps which also include training motivated inhabitants to act as hygiene promoters among their peers and a range of technical improvements to ensure better functioning water taps, latrines and showers.

The clowns also play another critically important role at the camps by providing psychosocial support to the children whose eyes light up whenever they are around. In fact, the clowns are so popular that wherever they go they have a hard time leaving the camps without children clinging on to them. Together with the Hellenic and international Red Cross teams, the Red Noses are constantly planning new ways in which to share important messages on issues such as non-violence and road safety while at the same time spreading much needed joy among children and adults.

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