

Experience report about my internship at NAOMI in Thessaloniki

I started my studies with the aim to combine social work with textile crafts in the future. When I began to look for an internship to do my practical semester, I didn't expect to find an organization that combines the two within the University's online portal of previous host organizations. But I did, it took me less than 15 minutes to find NAOMI in Thessaloniki, an ecumenical workshop for refugees.

I had started my research according to the countries I was interested in, because I was sure that I wanted to do my internship abroad. I appreciate the chance to spend part of my studies in another country, because I'm sure that as soon as I start working in the field, it will not be easy to travel abroad for several months.

The search about Greece in the database produced only ten hits, so NAOMI was one of the first search result. I sent my application documents via E-Mail and got a very fast reply. The contact was uncomplicated and kind, we managed the paperwork and besides I signed in for a Greek language beginners' class in Berlin, to learn some basics before my stay in Thessaloniki.

NAOMI is divided into a social and a textile department. The social department's main task is the coordination of the sewing classes. Interested refugees can choose from four different levels from beginner to professional trainings. If a person completes the last course and convinces the supervisor, it is possible to start working in the production department. There are up to six workplaces offered. The production department gets orders from outside (e.g. T-Shirts, bags, pants etc.) and finances the salaries of the employees through that. The workers get minimum wage, holidays and insurance. The mentor of the interns is a social worker who does case work and emergency aid for several people outside the production and the courses. Besides that, NAOMI offers support regarding career counseling, the development of soft skills for women and it tries to raise awareness in sustainability and environmental consciousness.

My internship started in the end of August, after the summer holidays in Greece. During the first phase my main tasks were orientation and acclimatization, getting to know the surrounding and the people at NAOMI.

Due to the fact that I have mainly done practical work for more than ten years (volunteering, internships, apprenticeships, employments in different sewing companies), I usually feel a little useless when I don't have specific tasks. That was why I struggled a little to just observe in the beginning and I spent a lot of time in the production department instead: chatting, ironing, and cutting threads.

From one week to another I got more included in the work of the social department and my stays in production got less. Starting with administrative tasks, I created an organigram of NAOMI to get more into the structures of the organization, compiled lists and forms for different purposes, flyers for events and a presentation to convince potential sponsors of NAOMI. I enjoyed these kinds of tasks, because they were clearly defined and it was an easily gained sense of achievement for me, because I like to organize, structure, and design anyway.

Over time the interactive tasks increased: I assisted in sewing classes and textile workshops, got included in the procedure of two current cases, started German language classes for interested refugees, talked to people about NAOMI at festivals/bazaars and introduced the social department to visitor groups from different countries and backgrounds or in online-sessions with students. The more knowledge I had about the organization itself, the easier it was to present NAOMI to people. In general, I don't hesitate talking to strangers, but I always feel more comfortable, when I'm familiar with the subject.

In November I got the opportunity to set up my own project in collaboration with another NGO working with traumatized minors. I designed the program and implemented it in a period of six weeks. It was challenging because I have never had this much responsibility before, but I really enjoyed the experience and learned a lot from it.

After assisting in a few registrations, it became one of my duties to register the new arrivals myself. In our first supervision, my mentor gave me a brief introduction into asylum, access to health and employment as well as the different states of a person entering Greece. After that I knew the meaning of AMKA, AFM and OAED, what to ask and how to fill out the registration form.

By entering the training phase, this process got more challenging, because I got more included in case management and therefore, I needed to gather more information of the beneficiaries to plan interventions. This new task implicated some difficulties to me. Due to the knowledge I had gained about the disillusioning perspectives of asylum seekers and refugees in Greece, I didn't feel comfortable asking too many questions.

I felt uneasy with the fact that I enjoy all the freedom and privileges these people rarely gain access to and that I do not have the opportunity to change this situation. Of course, changing all this would be overly ambitious, but in Germany I felt more capable of acting in at least individual fates. The position of being a foreigner in this country myself, impeded my personal intervention: I was unfamiliar with politics, law, and institutions in Greece, and I didn't have the contacts/network to refer to if a person voiced a specific need. I couldn't follow discussions and often even research was difficult for me, because I didn't understand the language.

At times these difficulties lead to doubts about the decision to do my internship in Greece. Through conversations with my mentor and exchange with other volunteers, I realized that this feeling was part of the experience. Until the end of my internship, I didn't find a suitable way to cope with all of this but I got convinced again that it was the right choice to come to Thessaloniki. The reactions of the people visiting NAOMI confirmed my conviction about the importance of getting a realistic picture of the refugees' situation in Greece, because the reporting in Germany and other European countries is totally insufficient. Furthermore, I can imagine myself working with refugees in the future and I think it's important to know more about the situation at the European external borders because it has a huge impact on the conditions of refugees in Germany as well.

I learned a lot about myself, how I want to work and what I need for that. Besides it was the deepest insight into an organization of social work I have had so far. I think that is valuable because it has a lot of similarities to the situation of social workers in Germany. Apart from that, I really enjoyed the interaction with all the different people at NAOMI in the production, the social department, the sewing lessons, language classes and the shop. I liked to listen to their stories in informal talks, to share my knowledge about sewing and to learn new techniques. This social togetherness and exchange of experience was the most important part during the internship for me.