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# From New Haven To Turkey, With Layers

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As she mourned her adopted country's turn away from a world humanitarian crisis, Vietnamese refugee Trinh Truony found a reason to maintain hope — with the help of eight stuffed suitcases from New Haven. She and her classmate Hacibey Catalbasoglu delivered 200 winter coats, plus sweaters and boots, to Syrians living in a Turkish refugee camp after fleeing their country's civil war. Now they're back studying at Yale — and just getting started harnessing citizen power to counteract new efforts by the U.S. government — and others around the world — to close doors and hearts to millions fleeing mass slaughter.

Truony, whose grandfather spent nine years in a Vietnamese reeducation camp for having provided intelligence to the U.S. during the war there, came to this country at 3 years old with her family. She dedicated much of her adolescence to helping other families looking to escape similar circumstances for a new life. She was outraged at last week's order by President Donald Trump indefinitely barring Syrians from entering the country and temporarily suspending travel here from seven Muslim nations.

The world declares "never again" in response to humanitarian crises, she observed — after they stand by and watch them occur. "When," she asked, "are we going to say that actually mean it?" The humanitarian trip to Turkey grew out of the efforts of two young people with foreign roots to "actually mean it."

It began with a conversation Catalbasoglu had with a friend he met last summer at Maison Mathis restaurant on Elm Street.

Catalbasoglu grew up in New Haven, the son of a Turkish immigrant, Kadir Catalbasoglu, who owns Brick Oven Pizza on Elm Street. A woman from Turkey named Fatmanur Aydin got to know Kadir when she was studying in a summer Yale program and visiting the restaurant. Hacibey, who attends Yale, was in D.C. for the summer interning for U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy. During a visit back home, Kadir put his son in touch with Fatmanur; the two met at Maison Mathis and became friends.

"Obviously I am Turkish. I haven't been connected to my culture. I wanted to learn more about what is happening in Turkey," he said. He also thought about his fortune, having grown up here. "You feel responsible in a way" for those less fortunate abroad, he said. "Why am I lucky enough not to be in their situation? How can I help to change this?"

Fatmanur told Hacibey about a program she runs in Turkey called Volunteers United. It teaches the Turkish language to Syrian refugee women. Hacibey asked how people at Yale could help. She told him the organization has enough money. But it could use warm winter clothing.

Hacibey knew whom to ask to help him organize a drive: Truong, who is active in refugee-assistance organizations on campus.

Truong came to New Haven in part to do that work. She grew up in Utica, N.Y., which, like New Haven, has a reputation for welcoming newcomers. The city has resettled 16,000 refugees in recent years, she said. Her friends in school came from Burma, South Sudan, Bosnia. She knew why refugees come here, what they fled. Her grandfather "was starved, tortured, beaten" in his years in the reeducation camp, she said. Her mother's education ended after elementary school. They made a new life here. Truong felt a calling to give back, to work with the resettlement groups in her town. Meanwhile, she did well enough in school that she got to choose among colleges like Princeton, Columbia, and Dartmouth. She said "a main reason" she chose Yale over the others was the work being done here by groups like Integrated Refugee & Immigration Services (IRIS) to welcome refugees.

At Yale, Truong said, "people have extra clothing. You accumulate stuff you don't want anymore." She and Hacibey led a drive to collect all those coats and sweaters and boots. Then, along with Hacibey's sister Beyza Toslu, a student at Hamden Hall, hauled them all to Istanbul over winter break.

"We Are Failing In Our Obligation"

Once they arrived, they weren't allowed near the refugee camp. They delivered the bounty to Volunteers United. And they visited the classrooms of children from the refugee camp.

The experience moved them. They cried at the children's plight. They also felt inspired — "empowered" — by their ability to offer them help. They said they're convinced that people in the U.S. drawn to Trump's rhetoric about Syrian refugees would change their minds if they could meet those children. "The refugee students just want to learn and play with their friends. They are not terrorists," Truong said. "Their families are fleeing persecuting. They just want to put their roots down in a country where they are legally protected." She called the closing of international borders to the refugees "a huge failure of

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harmony.&rdquo;

Of the world&rsquo;s 60 million displaced people, only 1 percent get permanently resettled, Truong said. The rest remain stateless. &ldquo;The country you are born in is based on luck,&rdquo; she said. &ldquo;As a global society, we are failing in our obligation to protect the most vulnerable.&rdquo;

During their December visit to Turkey, she and Catalbasoglu noticed that the library that served the children had few books. Now they&rsquo;re starting a driving to collect books to fill it. Truong, who plans to become a civil rights lawyer, is working with a group called Jusoor to help displaced refugee students get into college. She was involved in organizing Sunday&rsquo;s march for refugees in New Haven, where she spoke from the stage of a rally on the Green.

Both she and Catalbasoglu said their coat drive is just the beginning of the work they plan to do. They realized how many &ldquo;tangible things&rdquo; refugees need &mdash; and therefore the tangible ways that people who don&rsquo;t want to shun them can help instead.

(By Paul Bass, newhavenindependent.org)