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Connecticut teen brings joy of basketball to Lebanon refugee camp

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

"In front of me, sitting in the middle of a dirt field, was a 7-year-old boy. His clothes were covered in dust, and as the sun baked the sweat on his brow, his mouth grimaced and his eyes conveyed a pained thirst. He looked up to me but didn't hold my gaze. I looked just behind him at a five-star hotel and a water park. It was a mere hundred yards from where he sat, but a 15-foot concrete wall, a coil of barbed wire and 60 years of political tension segregated him from it."

David Maloof published these words April 11 on bustedhalo.com under the headline "Finding God in a Palestinian Refugee Camp." The writer was describing what he witnessed the previous summer when he was 17, a time of experimentation and romance for many of his classmates.

I met David on May 19, a month after his bustedhalo.com piece was published, when he was honored at Pax Christi Metro New York's annual Peacemaker Awards Reception. The 2013 Fairfield Prep High School graduate had organized a program of support for young Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. His goal: to build a bridge of awareness and care across the continents.

Our brief encounter gave rise to my personal admiration for David and many questions of my own.

Sr. Camille: David, where did you see the child you described?

Maloof: I was standing in the Dbayeh Christian Palestinian refugee camp just outside of Beirut, Lebanon.

What brought you from Connecticut to Beirut?

This was the summer 2012. It was, in fact, my second time being there in four years. My great-grandfather had come from Lebanon when he was 19. Inspired by our heritage, my father and I traveled there for the first time in the summer of 2008. On that trip, I visited the Dbayeh refugee camp for only one day, but the conditions I saw were too striking to ignore.

When was that camp built and what was it like?

The camp was built in 1956 for Christian Palestinian refugees fleeing from conflict in northern Palestine, but when my father and I visited, we were meeting the descendants of these evacuees. About 4,000 registered refugees live there. The homes are mainly concrete with metal sheets for roofs.

How many people does such a place shelter?

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We visited one home that housed a mother and four children. It had only a single light bulb, hung from the ceiling by a wire. Work was hard to come by, and most of the residents are extremely poor.

David, you've just graduated from a top-notch Jesuit school and you're headed to Columbia University. What educational opportunities would you expect await the 7-year-old who touched you and others like him?

Through the support of the UN and the Catholic church, there's a school in the camp that educates children until about high school age. However, at that point, the children have to apply to schools outside of the camp, and only the lucky ones will be able to continue their education.

What did you decide to do to improve the lot of children in the camp?

At the request of the camp directors, my dad and I decided to create recreational facilities for the children. I helped build a basketball court there because basketball is a sport that is accessible to learn, can be played by up to 10 people simultaneously or with one person alone, and the equipment required is low-maintenance and durable.

How did you raise money for this project?

I raised money through a tag sale at my church and by having family and friends sponsor me in a polar bear swim.

You named the camp as "Christian." Is the Catholic church involved in helping the people confined there?

Yes. A group of Belgian nuns minister to the camp residents, and their effort is instrumental in supporting the camp.

Do you see any providential connection between your visits and what you've been able to accomplish for the children there?

Yes. Originally, I only could raise enough money to build a single hoop for the children, but later, upon seeing this, the Italian embassy decided to finance the building of an entire court.

I see God at work in that he inspired me to do something small, then inspired others to continue to build upon it until we created something wonderful. When we returned to the camp in the summer of 2012 for the first day of our basketball clinic, we found something spectacular. There was a full basketball court built, complete with two steel baskets, European-style court markings, chain-link fences, even lights for playing at night. My dad and I would later find out that the Italian embassy, in connection with the Catholic church, had been building a water tower for the camp's 4,000 residents and had learned that some of the children were playing on the single hoop my father and I donated. They were inspired by the idea and decided to fund an entire court to encourage kids to be active and vivacious in spite of their circumstances.

How did you react to this discovery?

I think that's where God comes into this experience the most. There are coincidences and good people in the world, but I can't believe that this was anything other than God's hand. We contributed a small thing that was within our means, and the fact that God took it and used it to inspire others to build something absolutely life-changing for these kids is beautifully divine to me. Living like these children do, it can often be hard to see God. But on the last day of the basketball clinic -- as they skipped around the court and laughed and smiled while they played -- I knew God was there.

What in your faith most inspires you to care for others? Is there something from the Bible or the example of those you admire? Both?

Galatians 5:14: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' "

You've mentioned your father and great-grandfather. How does your mother feel about your passion for this cause?

She has visited Lebanon once as well and is 100 percent supportive of me.

Do you have brothers and sisters? Do they share your interests?

Yes. I have a 20-year-old sister, Julia, who is also involved in this issue. She's visited the camp and helped the children in their English and art classes in their school. She certainly wants to return.

Are any of your friends involved in this or similar activities?

Many of my friends are involved in service efforts here in the United States. I have a good friend who teaches guitar to poor kids in Bridgeport, Conn., and another who teaches tennis to others who are underprivileged.

Are you involved with youth in Connecticut?

Yes. In Connecticut, I volunteer at a soup kitchen in Stamford. I also used to coach wrestling for the children there, and I coached basketball for elementary school kids in my hometown of Darien.

Was your Jesuit education formative in this regard?

Yes. My whole life, I have been involved in charity work, but it was my theology classes in high school

that helped me understand that being a good person is a lifestyle, not a weekend project, and that to do good in the world, you need to consistently be committed to doing good.

Who are your heroes or heroines?

I think that in life, many people pay attention to the waves of influence but very few notice the ripples of continuing effort. So my heroes are all of those people who have stood for goodness through adversity, even though the world may have forgotten them.

What in your faith most inspires you?

Other people doing great things in the name of God. William Wilberforce, a British evangelical Christian abolitionist who led the campaign to abolish slavery in England in the late 18th century, was inspired by his tenacious beliefs in the importance of morality and religion; his faith is an inspiration to me.

David, how and where do you worship?

I belong to St. John's Church in Darien.

Do you have a favorite way of praying?

St. Francis of Assisi once said, "Let all the brothers ... preach by their deeds." I like to pray through my deeds as well.

What inspires you to care so much?

I think about how throughout human history, there's been a trend of the eventual success of righteousness. I consider myself part of the inevitable goodness of God.

Have you set goals for your college years?

I haven't. It's wonderful to make mistakes and learn from them as you move forward in life.

Where would you like to be and what would you like to be doing 10 years from now?

I wish I could give you a specific answer to this right now, but I can't. I don't know what I want to be or do just yet, but I can tell you that in 10 years, I'll be profoundly affecting people's lives for the better.

Do you ever think about the child you first encountered? What does that memory mean to you?

It's a sobering memory and a reminder to continue my efforts for others in the name of God.

David, it's inspiring to find such dedication and determination in such a young man. Thank you for your generous spirit.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available from Now You Know Media.]

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