Life is squalid in refugee camps in Europe; food and running water are in limited supply, and boredom and depression are rife. While many charities tackle material shortages in the camps, some organisations, such as CircusAid, focus on addressing occupational deprivation.

CircusAid was started by occupational therapist Jill Maglio who visited the Greek island of Lesvos in December 2015, with the aim of providing general support.

She went armed with donations of clothes, medical supplies and camping equipment, but found what the refugees really lacked was meaningful occupation.

‘The refugee experience is an uncertain one, and can be a breeding ground for mental instability and illness,’ she says. ‘People are no longer able to pursue their previous productive and leisure occupational roles, and their identity and dignity become fragmented.

‘What happens when life is unstable and we have nothing to occupy our minds? We worry. We ruminate about the past, project into the future about things we cannot control and inevitably our mental health and motivation to move forward deteriorates.’

Jill found that when provided with simple circus tools, such as juggling balls and hula hoops the refugees showed an immediate interest in participation, and a new sense of joy and hope – CircusAid was born.

‘Extensive evidence on occupational deprivation supports that opportunities for occupational engagement and the acquisition of life skills during the refugee migration journey are essential components to healthy resettlement,’ Jill says.

‘This evidence is the foundation of the CircusAid project in which we aim to collaborate with other organisations to help the debilitating occupational deprivation suffered by the refugees.’

After Lesvos, Jill turned her attention to Calais, France – where about 10,000 people, including many unaccompanied children, were living in limbo after fleeing conflict in their home countries.
A volunteer appeal on social media resulted in a number of people offering to help. As a result CircusAid volunteers, including occupational therapist Sophie Thwaites from Brighton, worked in Calais in the Jungle Camp (which has since been very publicly demolished, with refugees dispersed to other camps in France) and the nearby Norrent Camp throughout August.

The aim was to promote mental health by using circus skills as a tool to build resilience and social cohesion.

CircusAid worked with four established organisations in Calais and provided workshops for three different age groups (children, teenage boys and adult males) and six mixed ethnic groups (Afghani, Syrian, Iraqi, Sudanese, Eritrean and Ethiopian).

Twenty days of circus workshops (three to six hours a day) were provided. Outcomes included regular attendance of workshops, consistent levels of active participation, laughter and smiles as well as positive testimonials from the participants.

But while the camp residents were responsive to the team, CircusAid volunteers still faced a number of challenges on the ground.

Jill goes on: ‘Every day the police would ask us for something different when we entered [the camp]. Some days they wanted to see my ID, other days a car permit. After one month there, a police officer told me it was obligatory to have a fluorescent yellow jacket to enter the camp.

‘I explained I had been visiting the camp for the last 30 days and this was the first time I had been asked for that. He let me in without the jacket stating he was giving me a “gift” that day. Police aren’t supposed to give “gifts”. They are supposed to uphold consistent policy to protect the wellbeing of people, not hinder it.’

CircusAid was blocked from building any infrastructure in the camp, despite having permission from an on-site school and head NGO partners. The atmosphere in the camps in general was oppressive.

Jill says: ‘The work is intrinsically motivating but the environment is very draining. The air quality is poor, people are depressed and resources are scarce. People are stuck and frustrated.

‘The moments I have working with people, teaching juggling, playing, being in the present moment, laughing and working together are so much fun. But over time the human spirit is broken down and disease becomes more abundant.’

After her time in Calais, Jill, who studied at La Trobe University in Australia, returned to her home in New York, where she runs a private practice called Holistic Circus Therapy.

She says: ‘I was motivated to reflect on the project’s lessons and respond to them by creating a more sustainable circus programme that can continue to address the changing needs of the refugee community throughout Europe.’

CircusAid’s work in Calais was possible because all human resources and planning were self-funded and other costs were covered through crowdfunding. However Jill does not feel crowdfunding is a sustainable strategy. Instead, CircusAid will become a social enterprise providing circus team building workshops to corporations to fund future refugee projects.

CircusAid also plans to build a mobile circus structure and take the tent to different camps in Europe with an artistic director to help the refugees tell their stories through performing circus activities.

Jill adds: ‘I really believe in the potential of circus as an occupational therapy intervention to improve the quality of life of people who engage. I have seen the results first hand and read other studies with similar outcomes. CircusAid programme activities are backed by research that discusses the promotion of resilience and solidarity among marginalised populations through circus.’

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