



**SEEKING REFUGE:
FAITH-BASED APPROACHES
TO FORCED MIGRATION**

Poverty and Peacemaking II
March 3–4, 2017 at Princeton University

Refugee Work as Vocation

Pulin Sanghvi, Princeton University Career Services (Moderator)
Joey Ager, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities (JLIFLC)
Marisol Conde-Hernandez, Rutgers Law School
Lina Sergie Attar, Karam Foundation
Julianna Wright, Princeton University (Student Rapporteur)

Pulin Sanghvi of Princeton University Career Services initially set the tone by citing the Dalai Lama, explaining the difference between a job, a career, and a vocation. A job, is about the acquisition of resources, a career, the acquisition of status, and both are driven by outward motivations. A vocation or a calling is different because it comes from an intrinsic motivation. It is work that we would continue to do for its own merit. Some, recognize their vocation from an early age that they want to engage in the issue of forced migration. For others, it is serendipity that throws them into the work. The panelists touched upon the following themes: How we as individuals can best make a difference against the problem; how we start to design our unique personal professional identities; and how we engage with others, joining organizations that are already in place or organizing people against something new.

Lina Sergie Attar, spoke about her path that led to founding and leading the Karam Foundation, an organization that currently runs a wide array of “Smart Aid” projects for Syrians affected by the civil war and consequential refugee crisis. Sergie Attar grew up in both the United States and Syria. She originally wanted to become a doctor, but since she did not meet the requirements for medical school in Syria, she found that she had to settle for an architecture degree. After moving back to the United States, and realizing that she had no interest in continuing with architecture, Attar decided to found Karam foundation. Karam, which means generosity in Arabic, originally had little to do with Syria. They ran programs on the south side of Chicago and built schools for girls in India and Afghanistan. It was a part time job of a few hours a week, and it made her happy. In 2011 with the start of the revolution in Syria, the organization started focusing on providing humanitarian aid in Syria. Learning on the fly, the organization grew to become a 24/7 job with 16 employees.

“I never expected to have this life or job, but I think of all of the Syrians who never expected for their lives to be that way either. We never expected university students would become citizen journalists, so many children to be orphans, so many people to die, so many to be displaced.” said Sergie Attar. The organization is currently mainly focused on running education projects for refugee children living in Turkey as well as an array of other Smart Aid initiatives.

Next, Marisol Conde-Hernandez, a Marsha Wenk Public Law Fellow at Rutgers University Law School and immigrant rights advocate spoke about her experience coming to terms with an



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element of inherent risk in the work that she does. Conde-Hernandez came to Princeton when she was one year old. She knew since she was four years old that she was undocumented, “illegal back then,” and she looked very different from her peers. There were not many Hispanic families in Princeton back then, and from the very beginning, she just knew that she had to go to college. Her parents “undertook extraordinary abandonment” to get her here, leaving behind their language, culture, and family, and she had to make it worth it. Even when she got to college, and was working 60-70 hours outside of classes to be able to pay the out-of-state tuition that undocumented students must pay, she just stayed focused. She lived in a state of dual risk and privilege: risk as an undocumented person but privileged in her ability to go to college. At 18 she first came out in public as undocumented, and while she was nervous, she knew she had everyone in Princeton to support her, and that there would be a strong force to pressure ICE into giving her discretionary relief were they to detain her. Conde-Hernandez wanted a voice so that she could directly challenge people. Channeling the words that her father once told her as a child: “You need to speak up because you can’t expect people to listen to you if they can’t hear you. If they can’t hear you in the first place it’s your fault to not speak up.”

Finally Joey Ager spoke about the concept of praxis, and the incorporation of action and reflection into one powerful tool. Ager works in Seattle as a faith-based community organizer. He describes finding his vocation as “a wild goose chase”. His core touchstone has been the theory of praxis central to liberation theology. He now works for the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Learning Communities (JLIFLC), a global collaboration of active practitioners and others around faith activities. He is currently working as a researcher on a project about the role of faith communities in the experience of forced migration in South Seattle, where more than 160 languages are spoken in just one school district. Ager further discussed the importance of deliberate reflection, and allowing yourself to be taught about the ways in which your worldview might be privileged. “This is the work that we who occupy the “powerful group in society” have to do,” he said, “It’s [building] deep relationships, not an academic exercise... People don’t care what you know until they know that you care.” He concluded calling for participants to “learn to listen deeply and honestly” to people coming from other cultures and experiences.

As the conversation turned to a more informal dialogue, Emma Coley, a freshman at Princeton, asked what she should be doing to make the most out of her experience at Princeton to prepare herself for the kind of work that the professional members of the group do, which soon led to a discussion of the dichotomy between academic work and on-the-ground activism. Conde-Hernandez encouraged students to take advantage of the resources and experiences on and off campus. Miriam Lowy, a professor at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) proclaimed that she considers herself an activist in the classroom, teaching young people about what it is like to live in Syria and Egypt, providing information they do not yet know. She asserted that scholarship is a form of activism, they truly do combine.

In closing Sanghvi asked the speakers if they think that the issues that they work on will be solved in their lifetime and how they found motivation. All responded with a resounding “no.” Sergie



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Attar responded “I wish I could wake up tomorrow and not have a job,” but no. She hopes to stay focused on Syria, someday working inside the country, and even as part of the reconstruction and postwar healing process. Conde-Hernandez responded that despite the complexity of the American immigration situation, which leads her to believe it will not be solved in the way she would like to see it solved in her lifetime, she finds meaning in her work from the individual interactions with people and the community. Ager claimed that although we are in a state of unparalleled global crisis, he is optimistic. The world is changing around us: the people who represent Trump saw it, got scared, and organized, and now it is time for us to organize too.