



Shelter and Cultural Sustainability for Refugees

A course on cultural anthropology can be quite academic, but SMU students in Dr. Faith Nibbs' ANTH 2301 Introduction to Cultural Anthropology class have created several life-changing options that can be implemented today for refugees living in camps. Moved by the transient challenges of the people who wanted to continue their traditions, lifelong trades and cultural identities despite their plight, the students demonstrated what they had learned through displays representing two sets of refugees in Africa and Asia.

The students' focused on cultural sustainability after hearing the stories of refugee camps occupied by the Burundi and Bhutanese people. Burundi is an eastern African country, bordering Rwanda, populated by the Hutu and Tutsi farmers, both of whom have fled to escape ethnic persecution and violence brought on by civil war. The Bhutanese are Nepalese in origin, but have lived as immigrants in southern Asia for centuries due to inter-cultural and religious discrimination.

Recognizing the need for refugees to continue their important cultural practices to contribute some sort of normalcy to their lives while in a refugee camp, the students turned ideas into actual tools and material solutions that can be adapted by UNHCR. A portable pagoda temple makes continuing salient religious traditions possible due to a \$49 pop-up tent. A 4-by-6 foot lightweight and mobile garden plot by each camp tent allows agricultural groups to continue growing vegetables, and can fold up and be reused in another location when a camp is emptied. Material for an open lean-to space creates a cultural preservation site so that the groups' youth can learn of their heritage. Students also created a camp employment program where refugees can find meaningful work by sharing in the tasks it takes to run the camps. Additionally, a computer program modeled after FEMA's system to reunite family members after a crisis gives refugees the ability to find missing relatives.

The course—headed by Dr. Nibbs and her teaching assistant, Zasha Russell—got its sparks of inspiration from visits to the class by refugees from the two groups who are now living in the U.S.

“Camp workers are just thinking about how we can survive,” said one former Burundi refugee, “but in these crises, we are also thinking, ‘How is our culture going to survive?’” The students of Dr. Nibbs' class hope that by applying the principles of cultural anthropology, they can help solve some of these dilemmas.