

A TRUE CALLING

Serving the Children of San Francisco's Dependency and Family Law Courts While Also Helping Syrian and Afghan Refugees in Greece

Julie Traun

Anyone who knows attorney Vicki Trapalis is immediately impressed by her passionate advocacy for children and families in crisis. As an attorney she is known for her remarkable skill set—much of which she developed prior to becoming an attorney in 2003. She holds a master's degree in social work and is well known to the criminal courts for her work as both an adult probation officer and a juvenile hall counselor at the Youth Guidance Center. She currently serves as a special master/parent coordinator, providing child-focused dispute resolution services to parents. In San Francisco Superior Court's Family Law Court, Trapalis represents minors in high-conflict custody matters, and in Probate Court she represents children in contested guardianship proceedings.

However, most of her legal work is through The Bar Association of San Francisco's (BASF) Lawyer Referral and Information Service's (LRIS) Court Program's Dependency Representation Program, a panel of highly qualified, spe-



Left, Vicki Trapalis

61,000+ number of refugees in Greece*

37% percentage of arrivals who are children*

*The UN Refugee Agency

cially trained attorneys representing parents and minor children in Dependency Court. She is a formidable legal advocate with a savvy insight into the social services so desperately needed by the clients she serves.

Trapalis regularly visits extended family and friends in Greece. As she describes it, “For the past ten years, I have visited Greece each summer to ‘get away from it all’ and reenergize from the stress of my life as an attorney.” But this summer, things changed. As her Greek family and friends talked about the influx of refugees, Trapalis sought out online and televised coverage; “I was immediately drawn to the images of thousands of Syrian and Afghan refugees, particularly the women and the children, landing on the shores of Greece. They looked terrified, traumatized, and exhausted, and I felt a strong pull to help them, to be with them, to know them.”

This summer, Trapalis decided to extend her summer vacation to seven weeks—one month volunteering and three weeks vacationing—or so she thought. She arrived in Athens and a few days later left for Lesbos (spelled Lesbos in English), a Greek island located in the northeastern Aegean Sea and an entry point for refugees escaping the political warfare of their home country.

During a visit to BASF, she shared some of her story:

“My experiences with the refugees from the start were intense—emotional, overwhelming, enriching, and gratifying. After seven weeks of working with these warm, brave,

strong, and loving people, I knew I must return.

“Currently, there are more than 61,000 refugees* in the whole of Greece, with 5,660 on Lesbos. The majority of refugees come from Syria, next from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Iran,” Trapalis says. “The refugees have not selected Greece as their final country of destination. They find themselves stuck in the country due to the border closures within the European Union. Greece is a poor country, bankrupt and facing high levels of unemployment, homelessness, and hopelessness among its own citizens. The country is now burdened with hosting thousands of vulnerable people, without the support and resources to do so effectively, or even humanely, in some instances.

“My time to date on the island has included working in a shelter for unaccompanied minors and at a refugee camp under the supervision of a Dutch nongovernmental organization, Because We Carry,” Trapalis continued. “At the camp I helped prepare breakfast for the over eight hundred residents, distributed food from tent to tent, facilitated recreational activities for the children, and taught English to a group of women.”

Trapalis returned to San Francisco just long enough to sublet her home and to receive a one-year leave of absence from her court-appointed dependency practice. “I am immensely grateful for the support of BASF’s Dependency Representation Program, all my colleagues on the Dependency Panel, and San Francisco Superior Court for all they have done to make this work possible,” she said.

Here is Trapalis's journal from her time in Lesvos this summer as told through her Facebook postings:



Today I had the great privilege of spending my entire day with a group of unaccompanied minor refugees from Afghanistan and Syria—the young people that I will work with for the next seven weeks.



Despite the horrors they have experienced in their country—including physical torture, being maimed, threatened, witnessing their family members' deaths and murders, and learning of beheadings and bombings that have taken the lives of their family members since they fled, they are the most loving, giving, grateful, and hopeful group of young people I have been around. They have such goodness in their hearts. They have touched me profoundly already. I am honored to be in their presence. I hope to touch their lives in some way that is useful to them.

All photos by Vicki Trapalis

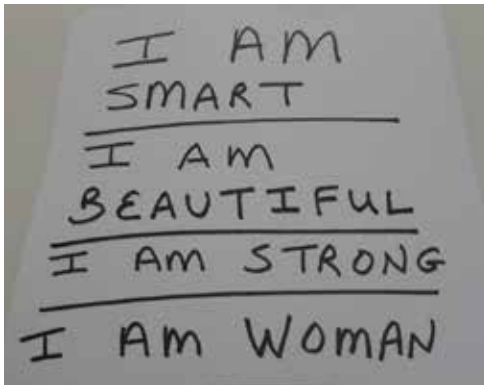


One of the children has two chopped-down fingers, another has welts on his back; one arrived barefoot because the boat he was on was sinking and they had to dump all their belongings to lighten the load and swim to safety; another learned last week that his six cousins (who did not have the money to pay a smuggler to flee Afghanistan) were lined up and beheaded, and so much more they have endured. They are so kind and want to have a human connection so badly, as they are missing their parents and families. This is so sad. They are all such dear, sweet, beautiful children with such intense stories. I feel sad every day when they share their thoughts and experiences with me and I feel happy every day that I am allowed to know them. I wonder about the millions more that I don't know.



The impact of the work is profound, touching, emotional, and intense. A whirlwind of emotions hits me each day. When I leave the camp for the day and return to my hotel room near the port, I feel sad, helpless, worried, and hopeless. But, when I am at the camp with the kids, women, men, and families, I do my best to be cheerful, hopeful, loving, and upbeat.





In teaching English to the women in the camp, I am able to get to know them, hear the stories of their lives in their country of origin,

their experience of their journey to Greece, and connect with them as women, albeit from a very different culture. These women are inspiring, their strength is admirable. We have decided on the motto of our class: "I am Smart; I am Beautiful; I am Strong; I am Woman." We begin our daily class with this phrase. I am privileged to know them.



Today I am feeling sad, helpless, and physically sickened by information that is coming my way through my work with the beautiful women and children I am spending time with. I don't ask anyone I meet to share their story with me because that feels intrusive and insensitive to the fact that I am only in their lives temporarily.

However, as the women feel more comfortable, they are sharing information. What is troubling to me is that if any of this information came my way in San Francisco, I would know exactly what to do, how to help, how to intervene—call the hotline, call the police, call the social worker, tell the judge, file a motion, refer them to a therapist, etc. Here, none of those interventions are options.

Yesterday a group of women in the camp asked me to help: a father has been physically abusing his ten-year-old daughter repeatedly. The women brought the girl to meet with me. She had a black and purple bruise on her eye. She said her father hits her. What to do? Another woman from my English class was physically assaulted by her husband yesterday. What to do? A fourteen-year-old girl is forced to perform oral sex on her father every night. The mother feels helpless. They both fear he will kill them if they say anything. What to do?

These are the women and children I know; what is happening to the ones I don't know? What hit me today is that not only have these women and children gone through the trauma of being refugees—fleeing war-torn countries and violence—but they are also going through the trauma of family violence. It's unfair, it's wrong—but what to do?



The children are sweet and loving, yet, at times aggressive and tearful. They are clingy and hold on to you so tight.

They have experienced such significant trauma and their difficult times continue every day.

When we met with Trapalis in September as she prepared to return to her work in Greece, she told us how excited she is to continue her work with the wonderful children, women, and men she met this summer. Her hope is “to be of service to them, to let them know that people care, see them, hear them, value them, and support them.”



Map of Greece and surrounding area. The island of Lesbos, where Trapalis is volunteering, has been at the forefront of providing support to refugees. In 2015, the people of Lesbos were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for their heroic efforts rescuing and caring for refugees.

In San Francisco, we asked her to recount her conversations with her clients here—most of whom are foster youth—as she told them of her plans to return to Greece to work with the refugees for the next year.

She explained, “I am so sad to leave ‘my children’ here in San Francisco, some of whom I have represented for more than ten years. As I met with my thirty-plus minor clients to tell them about my leave of absence and share with them my experience this summer, I was so touched by their selfless and compassionate responses.”

- A twelve-year-old girl, whom Trapalis has represented for eight years, told her, “I am sad that you are leaving, but I think the kids in Greece need more help than I do right now.”
- A twenty-year-old nonminor dependent, represented by Trapalis for more than four years, sent her an email: “Safe travels to Greece and continue to help the women around you. You have sure helped me.”
- An eighteen-year old young man, represented by Trapalis for eleven years, told her, “I am proud of you; go for it, you are leaving to do something good—I’m okay with that.”

Trapalis told us that many of the children clients here in San Francisco expressed an interest in coming with her to help or offered their help from afar.

- A preteen represented by Trapalis for nine years asked if she could donate some of her clothes because she “has too many and they don’t have enough.”
- She was profoundly touched by the generous offer of an eleven-year-old foster youth who asked if she could foster an infant refugee who lost her family. This child explained that she would love the baby, hold her, comfort her, and be the “best foster mom ever.”

Vicki Trapalis was visibly torn between helping her “precious child clients here in San Francisco” and the refugees in Greece, but she was certainly gratified to learn that her San Francisco clients “are also benefitting from my work—they have become interested in learning about the wars in Syria and Afghanistan, interested in what it means to be a refugee, interested in how they can help, and, I hope, this interest will continue to touch their lives in positive and remarkable ways.”

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Editor’s note: Vicki Trapalis has returned to Greece and Lesbos with plans to stay one year. She can be reached at vasiliki@mindspring.com.