

A great first week with UNHCR

Sun, 05/31/2015 - 00:00

|

Kayla Bruce newcomb@tulane.edu

[View PDF](#)



After finishing my first week with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), I'm in awe that I have the opportunity to intern here for the next two months. I'll start with a little background:

Headquartered in Geneva, the UNHCR was established in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. The agency is mandated to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary

purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country. It also has a mandate to help stateless people, meaning people who have no legal nationality (UNHCR). [The UNHCR Website](#) provides extensive information on its areas of focus, including emergency response, protection and capacity building. They also put out updates each week on major refugee crises around the world. Their new site called [Tracks](#) is a great way to read about refugees and field staff from a first hand perspective and to understand the challenges that refugees face on a more personal level.

As an International Development and Public Health student, I have spent a lot of time learning about the UN system in my coursework and am so fortunate that this has materialized. As a freshman, I started talking to a contact in the UNHCR about her job, her perspective on the organization, and any advice she had for pursuing a career in this field. As a sophomore, I started inquiring about potential internship opportunities. Between my relative lack of experience and the fact that I may have started inquiring too late in the year, she told me that there weren't any open positions that I could fill that summer. I found another great internship opportunity, where I gained valuable experience and expanded both my skill set and my resume. Early this fall, I got in touch with her again. Because I was ahead on credits, I told her that if there was a higher demand for interns in the spring than in the summer, I was available to take the semester off to work with the UNHCR (my alternative to a traditional study abroad). I provided her my updated resume and was able to talk about my interest in a more informed way. After seeing my dedication (or realizing that I wasn't going to give up and leave her alone) she offered me a position for the summer of 2015.

This is an incredible opportunity for me to learn what it is like to work in a multinational organization. I feel that with three years of undergrad under my belt, I will be able to make a meaningful contribution to this organization. I am excited to get a first hand perspective of how international organizations like the UNHCR actually work. I think this will be a great learning experience for me, particularly in understanding the challenges the UN organizations face from a first hand perspective.

I will primarily work with the Communications and Public Relations department under UNHCR Spokesperson Melissa Fleming, who was recently featured on TED,

discussing the Syrian refugee crisis and working towards more transformative refugee interventions. She has done a lot of work in my field of interest, and I am excited to learn more about how she got to where she is today.

I will contribute to daily media monitoring and will be responsible for pulling together a weekly impact report. This report will outline how UNHCR press releases, briefing notes and multimedia were covered in the media and on external platforms. I will also gather input from social media for this analysis. I will do research on current crises that will be used in articles, press releases and speeches throughout the summer. For example, this week I was asked to research the effectiveness of cash assistance to Syrian refugees living in Jordan. For my Resistance in International Disasters course I did a semester long project on Syrian refugees and humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis. It was so satisfying to see my studies directly connect to my work, and I was glad that this was the first research project I was asked to contribute to. I'm excited to do more of this type of work, as I learn a lot about these issues while researching them for a particular purpose.

The UNHCR is also planning for [World Refugee Day 2015](#) on June 20th. Many people do not fully understand the refugee plight and the impact it has on the world as a whole. For example, many people are surprised to learn that 86% of refugees live in the developing world, as opposed to moving to developed countries. This event is important for raising awareness about the UNHCR, the work they are doing and why it is so important. In the weeks leading up to this event I will be helping out wherever I am needed.

Throughout my first week, I have been overwhelmed by the helpful, welcoming attitude of all the UNHCR employees. The Public Relations department is currently understaffed and everyone is under a huge amount of pressure right now. Yet everyone has gone out of their way to welcome me to the office, and many of them have taken the time to grab a coffee with me and tell me more about their positions in the UNHCR and how they got to where they are today. I'm also learning about the impacts that this kind of position has on employee's lives outside of work. This internship is a great opportunity for me to really understand what working in a multinational institution like the UN would mean. I am so lucky to be interning with the UNHCR this summer and I think I will be able to make a meaningful contribution to the organization. Watch out for more information on World Refugee Day 2015 in my next post!