Aha m bụ Emory
Emory Bouffard

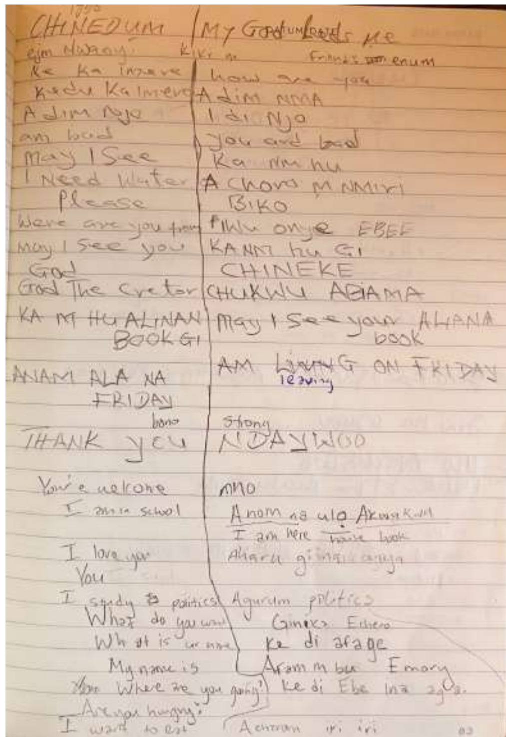
There was a heavy and wet heat in the taxi I'd been in for about 45 minutes, and we hadn't moved more than 45 feet. The driver had a thick Greek accent and drove recklessly, but that was hardly an issue on the other side of the border. He'd been talking about the Turkish side of Cyprus the entire time, with exaggerated hand movements, half the time I couldn't tell if he was angry or thrilled. I had the same conversation with every taxi driver since I'd arrived on the island, the border splitting the island was still an anomaly to me. It was an easy escape from the question each driver would eventually ask me, dampening the mood immediately. "So, why are you in Cyprus? You are American, no?" I'd always try to fake confidence, but it was getting awfully difficult after the last interaction I'd had with a taxi driver about my work. "I'm doing volunteer work in Nicosia," I'd reply. "What do you volunteer for?," "Refugees. We help them with asylum paperwork, labor cards, food, hair cuts, just the basics."

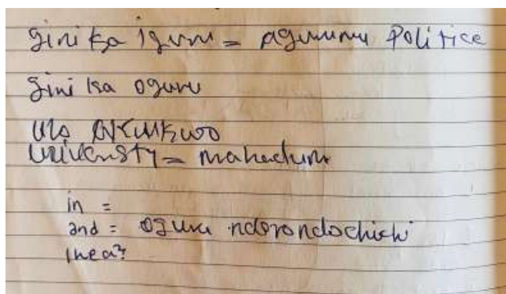
This is usually when the silence would grow, stretching well into the Turkish border.

Most of the native Cypriots had a strong distaste for the populations I was spending my days with. I volunteered with Refugee Support EU, an organization with the inherent goal of shifting the nature of volunteer work away from a model replicating a vestige of Western-European missionary work and bringing dignity and autonomy into the equation, as was indicative in the name of our center, the Dignity Center. But this was hardly a concern for most of the people I talked with in Cyprus. I'd heard responses ranging from a polite head-nod and a simple "That's kind of you," to a 20 minute rant with explicitly racist comments; "The Nigerians are the worst," "they bring their jungle laws to these civilezed places"(yes, that is a direct quote), "I voted conservative just to keep refugees

from coming to Cyprus." Unfortunately, the latter response was far more common than the head-nod and friendly smile.

Cypriot immigration policy had hardened many Cyprus-residents, Nicosia had the worst of it being the only location with easy access to the Department of Labor and social services. It was no wonder that throughout the day at the center, many of the refugees we worked with, primarily young Nigerian men, would stay in far longer than they needed to, just to talk about their frustrations: the racist treatment they received, inability to find a job (Cyprus has been suffering from economic struggles since their banks collapsed in 2012-2013), or their exhaustion from the never-ending government bureaucracy. Indeed, most of the volunteers, including myself, grew exhausted from printing form after form, labor card after labor card, all for naught when a government official miscopied an alien number (an unfortunate name for refugee identification), or a deadline was missed and they needed to refile paperwork, waiting weeks all over again. It was no wonder many of the people we saw throughout the day would resort to yelling, with no government official to speak to and no advocate in the system, sometimes one form that couldn't be submitted would be the straw that broke the camel's back.





I felt like I had found the magic solution to lightening the mood. The people working the main desk often got the worst of the frustration, so my solution was to manage the crowds outside the building, bringing water in the sweltering heat and sitting with the men on the bench outside the office. If I could get them laughing before they stepped foot in our crowded building, everyone tended to be substantially more patient as they sat waiting for volunteers to type out names, birthdays, alien numbers, location of origin, etc. I found that if there was anything that made them smile, it was Igbo.

Most of the people we helped were young Nigerian men fleeing from Boko Haram, economic destitution, or both. Igbo izugbe (pronounced ee-bo ih-zu-be), general Igbo, is widely spoken in Nigeria, and the vast majority of the men at the center spoke it. After spending weeks, months, sometimes years, needing to learn new skills fast and rely on the help of strangers, it seemed like a welcome opportunity to be a teacher. My way of learning was passing around my notebook, asking people for their favorite words, and most of the time someone would take charge, going over some basic phrases and asking me what I needed to practice. It

wasn't hard to catch on to many of the phrases, they were often adamant that I needed to listen to conversation between them and reply only in Igbo.

Our conversations became almost musical, with a rhythm and pattern. They would say something in Igbo, I would of course not know it, I'd turn to another person and ask for a translation, they would grab my notebook and write it down, I ask how to reply, they'd give a response, I'd butcher it three to five times, laughter, and eventually I'd respond correctly.

I became fast friends with many of the men who came to the center daily. Despite the fact that they could only receive food once a week in our market, or they already had their papers printed, they no longer needed our services, many would stop at the center to say hello to the volunteers, coming in for some water, to enjoy the air conditioning, or to simply talk. Refugee Support EU volunteers in the summer tend to be young college students. Our group spoke Italian, Spanish, French, Arabic, Luxebourgish (a language previously unbeknownst to me), Portuguese, English, German, and Hebrew. There were only five to seven of us at any given time, but there was a strong sense among all of us that we were there not as rescuers, but as global citizens.

The Dignity Center did an amazing job at teaching volunteers how to work with people who walked in short with us. The work by nature was stressful, guiding people through a kafkaesque process in a country burdened with conflict of its own.

Cyprus was listed as the location for volunteers who had experience already working with refugees, the people at the center were often newly arrived and newly registered, needing more assistance with paperwork and less accustomed to the process. Even for familiar with the center, newly implemented time limits for how long people had access to our resources left some leaving without food and volunteers needing to turn people down. It was often disheartening, but all of us found a way to cope and connect with the people who walked in. Learning Igbo was one of many ways. One volunteer had played Nigerian music, another would crack jokes. In a way the most difficult part of the work is the careful balanancing of professional relationships and friendships. Even though I was learning from many of the people at the center, and would consider most my friends, we were unable to give or receive contact information, even friendships had necessitated limits for the emotional health of all parties. Volunteers have limited time at the center, and for good reason. Studies have

indicated long-term emotional damage on children, especially, when volunteers make life-long connections and leave soon after. This was one of many ways Refugee Support EU ensured respect for the people we provided services for, a recognition that their emotional health is just as important as protecting their physical health. In a way, spiritual health was maintained by offering books in our mini-library in the center. It was a welcoming environment with a colorful mural painted on the walls, it was understandable why the volunteers attracted were as happy as they were.

As an Arab Studies Major, Davidson College has taught me time and time again the value in learning and attempting another language; while my experience with Igbo would never be categorized as professional instruction, it still very much signified a commitment to learning. I'll always remember how thrilled my Nigerian friend was when I introduced myself, "Aha m bụ Emory," "My name is Emory."