LENDING A HAND WITH THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN EUROPE
College of Arts & Letters alumna Caron Creighton was so moved by the stories she read on the refugee crisis in Europe she cashed in her vacation time, booked an airplane ticket, and reserved a place to stay on the Greek island of Lesvos.

“I knew I had to go when I read the stories of people fleeing terrorism in their home countries and traveling to Greece just to stay alive,” Creighton said. “I also read about the difficulty volunteers face when attempting to help these refugees, not only in Greece, but throughout Europe.”

One article indicated there were several volunteer groups in Lesvos, but no official organization guiding their efforts.

“The situation in Lesvos is fluid, but one constant is they always need help, both from on-site volunteers and donations,” Creighton said. “Some island residents – just your average people – had volunteered to help, so I thought maybe I could, too.”

Recognized as the greatest migration surge since World War II, in 2015, more than one million refugees and other migrants entered Europe, many through Greece, according to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees.

More than 57 percent of those refugees first landed on the Greek island of Lesvos, arriving at a rate of 3,300 to 6,200 people daily. This massive refugee influx sorely taxed the resources of the island’s 88,000 residents, resulting in severe limitations on shelter, sanitation, and site management.

“I resolved to use my own funds and vacation time,” Creighton said. “I also started a GoFundMe campaign to raise $1,000 to buy necessities and provide emergency funds for refugees once I was there. It was fully funded before I left, topping out at $1,285 raised in two months from 25 people.”

Creighton used the funds raised in the GoFundMe campaign to help meet refugees’ needs.

“First, I purchased ferry tickets for a family that was stranded on Lesvos without any money,” she said. “Then, a few days later, a friend drove me into town, where I bought about 500 euro worth of shoes and children’s winter coats, plus a few razors, diapers, and leggings.”

Those materials Creighton sorted and stocked upon returning to Moria Camp, and before she left for the day, volunteers had already given away some shoes.

Creighton spent two weeks in Lesvos, and during that time, volunteered in many different areas on the island.

“I wasn’t on the front lines, pulling people off the boats,” she said. “But I did get to meet many people and families, and I think the experience changed me. The world seems so much smaller now. And when I read articles referring to refugees dying or freezing in the cold, it hurts a lot more.”

Creighton also got to use the Arabic skills she learned at MSU during her trip.

“Because I studied Arabic for five years in college, I believed my knowledge of the language would be valuable in helping people feel welcome and comfortable while in the refugee camp. As it turned out, I used Arabic a ton,” she said. “Of course, once I spoke a bit of Arabic, people would think I was totally fluent and begin speaking so fast that it was hard to keep up. But, overall, it was definitely a plus to speak their language.”

Creighton, who works as an Information Developer for IBM in San Francisco, says that when she returned to work, “My manager was very supportive, and my immediate colleagues said they were proud of me for what I’d done. It was a very nice reaction to get.”

As for the immediate future, Creighton plans to apply to law school and journalism grad school at Berkeley this fall.