culture without borders
# Annual Report 2019

## 1 Mission, Vision and Values

1.1 Mission

1.2 Vision and Values

## 2 Objectives

## 3 History of OCC Greece

3.1 Where we work

## 4 Activities

4.1 Central Programming

4.2 Selected achievements in 2019

## 5 Strategic vision

## 6 Testimonials

## 7 OCC Team

7.1 Volunteers

## 8 Partners

## 9 Networks
1. Mission, Vision and values

1.1 Mission

OCC works to improve quality of life and promote the social inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers through education and community activities in transit areas.

1.2 Vision and values

OCC works in close collaboration with the local refugee community and in accordance with the principles of solidarity and inclusion. OCC aims to serve as a point of reference for both the refugee and Greek communities in language education and facilitating intercultural exchange and communication.

The principal values of OCC are teamwork, commitment, and volunteerism.

2. Objectives

The objective of OCC activities is to increase the inclusion of refugees and displaced persons through non-formal and social education. Specifically, the activities are designed to:

- Increase the capacities and competencies of refugees in order to improve their degree of employability and social integration.
- Facilitate the education of children and adolescents through social, educational and cultural activities.
- Complement the curriculum offered by Greek schools through extra-curricular education activities, as well as offering non-formal education for children not enrolled in Greek schools.
- Offer spaces and teaching tools that add to the empowerment of female refugees.
- Support the full development of infants by offering a Kindergarten space.
- Provide legal and psycho-social support to refugees through cooperation with other refugee support organizations.
- Promote the mobility of refugees through access to a bicycle rental system.

During 2019, OCC offered a range of services to fulfill our mission of improving the quality of life and promoting the social inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers. OCC’s primary areas of action are providing education, sports, leisure and integration activities to over 200 refugees, migrants and asylum seekers residing in Nea Kavala’s refugee camp and in urban areas in the province of Peonia and the village of Polykastro.

The OCC team is made up of both International and Resident, or Refugee volunteers who collaborate to provide a dynamic teaching environment with interpreters for all students. With an equal number of international and refugee volunteers, the team works every day to achieve our goals and continue to carry out our projects.

OCC is registered with the Ministry of Migration of Greece and its education curriculum is endorsed by the Greek Ministry of Education. OCC Greece has three accessible and inviting spaces; the cafeteria, kindergarten, and 3-classroom Madrassa.
3. History of OCC Greece

Since 2016, the Open Cultural Center (OCC) has worked in Greece supporting refugees with non-formal education for children and adults. The OCC was formed in April 2016 as the Idomeni Cultural Center (ICC). The project arose out of the collective initiative of independent volunteers in the Idomeni refugee camp. International volunteers and refugees worked together to teach and create a safe space for children and adults where learning could take place in the field. Early on, the OCC hosted cultural events and activities such as music and art classes, open mic nights, performances, and movie nights. At Idomeni, the Cultural Center quickly became an important resource in the camp.

Following the closure of the Idomeni camp on May 24, 2016, the OCC relocated to refugee camps in Cherso and Sounio, bringing with it the experience and resources to continue a program of classes, workshops and cultural activities led by refugees themselves. OCC formally registered with the Greek ministry of Migration as a non-profit organization in June 2016 under the name of Open Cultural Center.

The Open Cultural Center moved to Polykastro in February 2017 to offer educational and cultural support, as well as to support the integration of the refugee and migrant community located in the municipality of Polykastro, the surrounding areas, and the Nea Kavala refugee camp.

Currently, Open Cultural Center focuses educational support in urban areas in close proximity to the camps, serving a community of over 300 refugees living in houses and hotels in Polykastro and nearby villages.

3.1 Where we work

Polykastro is a city in the North of Greece where we have opened a center. This is the first Open Cultural Center to be opened outside of the camps. The pressures from the difficult winter conditions in Greece have forced the Greek government to relocate the most vulnerable refugees to apartments and hotels. We work with the families relocated in Polykastro and Axioupoli and with the asylum seekers living in Nea Kavala Refugee camp.

The Nea Kavala refugee camp is located just outside of Polykastro. The numbers of camp residents fluctuate seasonally with a current population of approximately 1,200. Together with the resident refugees of Polykastro and the surrounding area, these individuals are OCC’s target group.

The influx of refugees and migrants to the area has meant rapid change and the need for integration between the local and refugee communities. OCC offers a neutral and inviting space that supports and accompanies these groups to build community among themselves and learn how to integrate into the surrounding community, offering educational resources and a social and cultural space for all to share.
OCC is open to all migrants regardless of their legal status in Greece. In 2019, OCC had 204 registered users of which 118 were male and 86 female. The predominant nationalities among our beneficiary population were Syrian (94), Iraqi (50), Afghan (24), as well as Palestinian, Kuwaiti, Somali, Cameroonian, Congolose, Iranian, and Burundian. OCC also serves a significant Kurdish population spread across these nationalities.

Over 200 individuals committed to learning through OCC resources in 2019:

- English and Spanish courses for Adults attended by 69 students per day
- 1 resume writing workshop and job search space, serving 23 participants
- A weekly women’s space activity with an average of 15 women per session
- A bicycle loan service with 571 registered users
- A kindergarten space for the children of adult students, serving 20 children per day
- Classes and activities for children from ages 6 - 17 which cover English and Greek language attended by 55 children.

Movie Night, Guitar Class, and Women's Fitness. Once a month, OCC plays host to a legal clinic offering guidance concerning asylum law to members of the refugee community.

OCC holds all project activities in three rented spaces which are situated side by side along the main street of Polykastro:

**Madressa**: consisting of three classrooms, is the space in OCC holds Language classes for children and adults. The Women's Space activity also takes place here.

**Cafeteria**: OCC’s community meeting space and the location where OCC has its office. The cafeteria is open to all and offers free tea, coffee and internet access.

**Kindergarten**: A nursery area where the activities for infants and toddlers take place, as well as the psycho-social support activities carried out in collaboration with Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI).

A few meters away, OCC rents a flat where its International volunteers live.
4. Activities
4.1 Central Programming

OCC's offerings consist of a language education program, as well as a range of cultural activities focused on inclusion, the creation of community, the transfer of knowledge, and the development of transversal competencies. All activities are planned and undertaken by teams of international and refugee volunteers. The specific elements are:

**Language Lessons:** OCC holds English classes for children and teenagers from 5 to 17 years old. Classes for children are divided into three groups; 5-8, 9-12, and 13-17 years of age. Towards the end of 2019, OCC began incorporating Greek language lessons into our classes. There are four levels of English courses for adults, ranging from Literacy to B1 exam preparation and a conversation club twice a week. OCC received an average of 69 adult students and 55 child students per class day throughout 2019.

**Children classes:** We have 3 different groups of children: Falafels from 5 to 8 years old, Eagles from 8 to 12 and Pirates from 12 yo 17. We provide them languages classes and different activities to improve their skills as arts, music, sports...

**Kindergarten:** OCC’s Kindergarten space is for small children (0-5) whose parents are participating in Language lessons. In 2019, the kindergarten had an average of 20 children per day participating in activities. Once a week OCC volunteers collaborate with Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI)* staff to host a space where parents engage in therapeutic Kindergarten activities along with their children. In this center RTI holds sessions of its Baytna project which provides families with key emotional support they need alongside.

**Women's Space:** Women are encouraged and supported to carry out activities at OCC, offering them a reserved and intimate space, where they can relax and feel safe and confident. In 2019, an average of 15 women came once a week for two hours to an activity specially designed for them. Women's Space activities vary each week and range from traditional dancing to roundtable discussion on issues facing refugee women in Greece. These activities reinforce independent empowerment and assist these women in forming strong networks. Our team of volunteers take care of the participants’ children while the women enjoy the space.

**Bike Project (OCCycling):** With this ecologic initiative OCC helps to increase mobility for refugees by offering free bicycle loans. The bike loan service is available from Monday to Saturday. This project began as a collaboration between OCC and Drop in the Ocean, an organization serving the Nea Kavala camp, however in July 2019 became the sole project of OCC. In 2019, 571 individuals were registered users of the bike loan system. OCC maintains and offers 80 bikes which are available to loan.

**Legal Clinic:** Community members receive free legal advice on their asylum and residency cases through staff at Advocates Abroad and Mobile Info Team (MIT). OCC resident volunteers serve as interpreters for individual ‘clients.’

**Cafeteria Space:** The center of all OCC activities and the space where community members can register for courses and activities. Here OCC offers free wifi, coffee, tea and board games for all. Over 200 community members are regular users of this space.

**CV Workshop:** An activity held in the cafeteria where students and community members can develop their CVs, search for employment opportunities, and prepare for interviews. This activity began in October 2019 and has in this limited time received 23 participants, 4 of which were women.

Throughout 2019 OCC provided a range of cultural and sports activities for the community including weekly football matches, ping-pong and guitar classes. Dancing and movie night were held on a bi-weekly basis.

*RTI Baytna website: https://www.refugeetrauma.org/baytna-early-childhood-care
4.2 Selected Achievements in 2019

**English Language Certification:** In December 2019 a group of seven students from OCC’s most advanced English class took and passed a B1 level English certification exam with LanguageCert in Thessaloniki. The students prepared for the exam for two months, during which time OCC volunteers collaborated with them to successfully crowdfund all exam fees. OCC was also able to negotiate a 50% discount for this group, and for future exam groups. Below is the link to the crowdfunding page created for this group.

https://chuffed.org/project/help-our-refugee-students-to-archive-their-certifications

**Nursery Space:** Thanks to a collaboration with Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI), OCC was able to re-open its Nursery space and offer childcare to students whose parents are attending language classes. Since January 2019 the OCC Kindergarten space has been a hub for RTI’s Baytna project and a space where children and families engage in psychosocial support activities aimed at alleviating traumas.

**Asylum Process Training:** In November 2019, OCC hosted Mobile Info Team (MIT) for a workshop on the asylum process of refugees in Greece. This workshop was attended by members of the OCC community and volunteering team, as well as volunteers of other organizations in the Nea Kavala Camp; Drop in the Ocean and We Are Here. OCC resident volunteers served as interpreters for this session. MIT continues to return to OCC to provide similar training as well as a legal clinic for refugees in the area.
Cygnus Institute: In May 2019 OCC received a visit from the senior class of a Dutch High School - Cygnus Institute. The students joined us for a football match as well as traditional Syrian dancing. Later the OCC team hosted the group in the cafeteria for falafels, tea, and some words from our coordinator and resident volunteers explaining the situation faced by refugees in Greece. The school later provided a donation to OCC (and Drop) and plans to return in 2020.

Roger Torrent Visit: In August 2019 Roger Torrent, the President of the Catalan Parliament visited OCC to speak about the situation of refugees across Europe and in particular Greece and Spain. He fielded questions from the OCC community while OCC resident volunteers served as interpreters for this event.

Open Arms Donation: OCC received a donation of bicycles and educational supplies from the Catalan Open Arms ship. The shipment was delayed, but in May eventually made it to Thessaloniki and to OCC. The donation allowed OCC to expand the OCCycling project by offering more bicycles to the community.

Children’s Photography Project: In November and December 2019, OCC’s ‘Eagles’ group of students ages 9-12 participated in a photography project in which the class was taught basic photographic techniques. Each student was given a disposable camera and instructed to take photos expressing their experience in the area. The photos were collected, exhibited in the OCC cafeteria, and used to make books for the students.

“Territories of the Gaze” Project: In October and November, OCC hosted a group of early education professors from the University of Sevilla. These professors carried out a pedagogical experience, with our Falafel (5 - 8 year old) students, which focuses on social and community inclusion through audiovisual strategies. The product of which can be seen here:

https://vimeo.com/370668331
Pigmalion Project: OCC also hosted a group of early education students from the University of Ciudad Real with a project from the Pigmalion association. During 10 days these students worked with the OCCs Falafel students. This group is planning on returning over the coming academic year.

Community Celebrations: OCC celebrated a range of holidays from around the world with our community during 2019. In April and May 2019, OCC celebrated Ramadan with a late-night football tournament. Eight teams from the Nea Kavala Camp, Polykastro, and Axioupoli participated in the tournament. To mark the end of Ramadan, OCC held an Eid celebration and welcomed all students and parents for sweets and dancing. Championship winners were presented medals by the coordinators of OCC, We are Here, and Drop in the Ocean, and of the Eid celebration at OCC.

At the end of 2019, OCC united the community around Christmas, Thanksgiving and Halloween celebrations. These celebrations featured theatre performances for (and involving) young students, food and drink for all, and even a Santa Claus.

European Solidarity Corps: 2019 marked the beginning of an important change for OCC; a collaboration between with the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). In October, OCC received its first group of 9-month ESC volunteers. In 2020 OCC will be receiving additional groups of ESC volunteers, eventually shifting towards a team composed exclusively of ESC volunteers. This change has allowed OCC to seek out more specialized volunteers, cultivate valuable experience in long-term volunteers, and increase team and project stability.
5. Strategic Vision

• In 2020 the OCC team looks to advance on its goals and achievements by offering additional services and expanding participation across all services. The refugee population of the area is growing, in particular in the Nea Kavala Camp almost 1,000 additional residents are scheduled to be relocated from the islands in Spring 2020. OCC anticipates expanding its services to meet this need and serving as a bridge between the local refugee and Greek communities.

• With the expansion of the European Solidarity Corps volunteering project, OCC will have the capacity to offer Greek language lessons for adults and to expand the frequency of classes and activities for all children’s groups. The consistent intake of EVS volunteers will allow for greater specialization among the volunteer team, and for more stability in the offering of activities.

• OCC will commit to strengthening the structure and support for its volunteers. The ESC program will afford OCC the opportunity to provide training and mentoring to the volunteer team. It will also offer OCC the possibility to offer stipends to 20 refugee volunteers over the course of the year.

• OCC will look to address barriers to access that are faced by migrants living in Nea Kavala Camp, including mobility. Along with the expansion of course offerings, OCC will be contracting with a bus company to arrange transportation of students from both Nea Kavala and Axioupoli to OCC activities. Previously, OCC volunteers drove organizational vehicles to pick up students. Hiring a bus driver will allow for more involvement of volunteers in OCC core activities, and for increased mobility for those who are unable to walk or bike to OCC.

• The OCC team seeks to engage to a greater degree with the local community in 2020. In February, OCC coordinators held a meeting with Christos Draganakis, an aid to the mayor of Polykastro. A number of possibilities for collaboration were discussed, including a local ecological initiative and the involvement of OCC in Polykastro’s cultural week. OCC expects that with these collaborations and the addition of more Greek EVS volunteers our strong team of trained volunteers will be able to bridge the gap between the local community and our target population.

• To allow for expansion, manage operations, and support the current coordinators, in 2020 we will hire two permanent staff positions. OCC will add a full-time European Projects Manager to facilitate the collaboration with the Greek National Agency and work on grant applications, and a part-time English and Greek teaching supervisor who will coordinate teachers and generate course curriculum.
6. Testimonials

“I arrived at Nea Kavala in 2018 and I started to learn English at OCC. I think OCC provides a great opportunity to learn English. I have improved my English skills with them. I really appreciate OCC giving me the chance to learn English” - Mohammad (Syrian, 21, Student in Polykastro)

“I consider that I am one of the lucky people, because I came to this town and found OCC here and am able to share with others there. I consider it another home and I have benefited a lot from it in terms of education and teaching. It’s really great, and in the women’s space and women’s sports we benefit so much. I always feel grateful to OCC and to the volunteers for sure” - Hadia, Syrian (Kurdish) OCC Student and Women’s Space Participant

“I would like to thank the Open Cultural Center (OCC) and the teachers who spent their time teaching the refugees. I arrived in polykastro in April 2019. Since that time I have attended English classes with experienced teachers and other activities like football and bike services with OCC. They helped me a lot to improve my English, later I asked to work with them as a volunteer and they accepted me. I feel it is a great honor to be a part of the OCC team, I am helping them with teaching children groups and as Farsi translator. I learned how to work in a team and improved my communication skills. Because of all the hard work that they have done to help me thrive, I could find a job as a translator. And I will start soon when lockdown is over. OCC the best school for refugees in Greece to learn languages, play sports and improve your skills. For me it is the most amazing and interesting center I have ever seen. It is like my homeland, My family and everything in my life, that I don’t feel lonely.” Ramazan, 22, Afghanistan - Student and volunteer in Polykastro
7. OCC Team

OCC carries out its activity thanks to a team of volunteers that integrates full-time staff, volunteers and trainees alike who ensure the day-to-day running of the organization. Without them, it would be impossible to personalize the care offered from all projects to refugee children, youth, families and adults.

In 2019, OCC had one coordinator, 27 international volunteers, 15 refugee volunteers and 8 interns. This group of 51 people was made up of 27 women and 24 men of 18 different nationalities.

7.1 Volunteers

At the close of 2019 the volunteer team was formed by more than 20 individuals. Over the course of the year 51 volunteers collaborated with OCC Greece. OCC works with International volunteers, as well as ‘resident’ refugee volunteers who are living in Nea Kavala camp and in Axioupoli. In 2019 the volunteer team was made up of people from Afghanistan, Argentina, Canada, Colombia, France, Italy, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Netherlands, Peru, Spain, Syria, United Kingdom, United States, and Uruguay.

OCC works with programs like Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships and European Solidarity Corps (ESC), which support our work and assist us in the recruitment of volunteers. Four of our volunteers are beneficiaries of the ESC program and receive stipends for their work with us.
8. Partners

OCC has active partnerships with different organizations. These partnerships allow OCC to expand its services and provide more extensive education to migrants and refugee individuals and families.

**Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI).** OCC collaborates with RTI in the nursery/kindergarten project to provide weekly sessions held in OCC’s nursery space. Following RTI training and guidelines, OCC volunteers provide support to children from 0-5 years of age and their mothers and fathers. The objective of the weekly RTI session is to alleviate the strain of traumatic experience through therapeutic free-play activities that involve mothers or fathers and their children.

OCC hosts **Mobile Info Team (MIT)** lawyers once per month in order to provide guidance on asylum law to refugees in the area. MIT provides a mobile legal aid service. OCC translates and distributes information received from MIT to the community on a regular basis.

Locally in Polykastro, OCC partners with **Omnes** - a refugee housing support organization. By sharing information about the community with Omnes, OCC is able to lend assistance or simply guidance to individuals facing exceptional difficulties.

Each month OCC coordinators meet with **We Are Here** and **Drop in the Ocean**, non-formal education organizations active in the nearby Nea Kavala Camp, to speak about local needs, collaborate on educational material, and share information about the camp and local community.

9. Networks

The OCC participates in a network of NGOs supporting refugees that are located in the North of Greece, facilitated by the Help Refugees organization. As part of this network, OCC coordinators attend monthly meetings in Thessaloniki where they share and receive updates on the activities of network organizations, information about refugee movements across Greece, and updates to relevant government policy. Through this network OCC coordinators receive important information to share with the team and inform future decision making.

OCC is also a member of the Anna Lindh Foundation, a network of over 4,000 organizations that works to promote intercultural dialogue across Europe and beyond. Across this network, organizations share best practices, monthly activities, and have the opportunity to collaborate on joint projects.

As a participant in the European Solidarity Corps program in Greece, OCC attends meetings organized by the Greek national agency of all participating organizations. Here, organizational representatives discuss policies and priorities for the nationwide network and individual organizations.