SAN JOSE — Images of abandoned life vests strewn across European seashores and children milling around packed refugee camps wearing tattered clothing linger in Omar Perez's mind, keeping him awake at night.

Perez, 21, was part of a group of 14 San Jose State students who journeyed to Italy and Greece earlier this summer, where more than one million refugees have poured in on boats in recent years, fleeing war, poverty and religious persecution in the Middle East and Africa.

"Even now, I still have dreams about what happened," said Perez. "Seeing little kids not old enough to talk that went through that voyage... It's a lot to take in right away."

The trip, led by journalism professors Diane Guerrazzi and Halima Kazem, was part of a faculty-led program with the university's School of Journalism and Mass Communications, aimed at providing rare hands-on overseas reporting experience for students. The students, who paid to participate in the program, were selected from a pool of applicants. It is a trip that few journalism programs offer.

The group visited refugee camps, headquarters for international refugee organizations, and spaces where refugees spend their time, often in areas devoid of tourists. The three-week trip was life-changing for students, many of whom traveled out of state for the first time, according to Guerrazzi and Kazem.
“They walk away from these experiences in shock,” said Kazem, an independent journalist who covered conflict and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan for nearly eight years. “They’re still processing what they’ve seen and heard. It’s a lot to take in when you hear little kids telling you how they saw people killed in front of them or their homes were bombed. It’s hard for them to fathom.”

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Upon her return to the United States, Kazem, who specializes in human rights issues, had searched for a way to reconnect with the issues she covered in Afghanistan. This program has given her that opportunity, she said.

“We can’t take them to Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan,” Kazem said, “but we’re able to take them to safe countries where they can experience some of those stories without putting them in danger. I think that’s the uniqueness of our program.”

“The stories they report on help them understand what people have gone through. It puts a human face on the word ‘refugee.’”

More than 1.3 million refugees and migrants fled to Europe by sea in 2015, according to the International Organization for Migration. That number plummeted last year, with only an estimated 364,000 migrants arriving in Europe.

Yet the debate over refugee resettlement remains as polarizing as ever, particularly in the United States, where the Trump administration this year issued a series of executive orders aimed at stopping the flow of migrants into the United States. The Supreme Court in October will consider the merits of a legal challenge to the administration’s most recent travel ban. The ban is in effect in the meantime, barring refugees and visa-holders from six Muslim-majority countries without a close connection to the United States.

Meanwhile, California resettled nearly 8,000 refugees in fiscal 2016, the most of any state, according to Pew Research.

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Kazem and Guerrazzi said interest in the program has grown since its inception last year. Some students find a connection between their family’s immigration story and the refugees they encounter overseas, they said.
“When my parents came to the U.S., they were looked down upon, they didn’t have much, they had zero dollars and they didn’t know any English. So they didn’t feel fully accepted,” said Perez, the son of Mexican immigrants. “I felt like that pain of wanting to feel accepted and wanting help — it’s the same.”

The students produced a documentary and video vignettes about individual refugees, volunteers, aid workers, business owners, as well as Greeks and Italians who are living in communities with refugees, which they will publish on a website the group created. The documentary will be added to the website in a few months, after it’s submitted to some film festivals, according to Kazem and Guerraizi.

As they get re-acclimated to their lives in the United States, several of the students said they’re already thinking of ways to continue helping. Perez, a senior, hopes to shed light on the issue as a future journalist. He also hopes to return to the refugee camps.

“It’s not on the news as much anymore, but it’s for sure still going on,” he said. “These people are going to be there for a while. This is something you can’t ignore.”

Junior Jana Kadah, who hopes to become a lawyer, has made the trip to Europe twice as part of San Jose State’s program. It’s the memory of a 10-year-old girl that has stuck with Kadah the most. The girl gave the group a tour of the Pikpa refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece. They would later see news reports on Al Jazeera saying the 10-year-old once tried to commit suicide, according to Kadah.

“She had more life and love and energy than any other kid I had ever met,” she said, her voice shaking. “To know that she was at such a low point that she would contemplate suicide … it was really difficult to hear.”

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Tags: Immigration

Tatiana Sanchez
race and demographics reporter, San Jose Mercury News, for her Wordpress profile. (Michael Malone/Bay

Tatiana Sanchez

Tatiana Sanchez covers race and demographics for the Bay Area News Group. Previously, Sanchez was an immigration reporter for the San Diego Union-Tribune, where she covered race, diversity and the region’s multicultural communities. She received a master’s in journalism from Columbia University. Sanchez was born and raised in the Bay Area.

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