

Summer Experiences (Continued)

Looking back, it would have been so easy for the crew to get frustrated, angry, or hostile toward the migrants we took on board. There was usually a language barrier. With anywhere from five to 27 individuals, an extensive amount of time and work went into their care. They had to be under constant supervision to ensure their safety as they lived out on deck, which meant an extra duty rotation for an already-busy crew. I was called out frequently for “blanket duty” – as one of the few females on board, any time a female migrant needed to shower, use the head, or change – out of consideration, a female chaperone was required. Yes, it would have been, very, very easy for the crew to blame the extra workload on the migrants on board. But none seemed to. I never saw anyone act with anything other than professionalism and courtesy toward these people, who were, after all, just regular people like any of us. It spoke great volumes of how deeply entrenched the core value of respect is within the Coast Guard, and the strength of character the crew members of the *William Flores* and *Sitkinak* must have possessed to uphold it even under duress.

Upholding the high standard of treating everyone with constant respect requires the fundamental lesson we learned back in Swab Summer: discipline, “the right attitude.” Respect is an all-encompassing virtue; in treating others as we would be treated ourselves, we must not only abstain from doing them wrong, but also learn to think beyond ourselves to prioritize others’ needs when they are discernibly more important than our own. Respect requires empathy and a degree of suppression of self that doesn’t come naturally to most people. Respect requires you to take actions that may be uncomfortable or unpleasant if the greater good they will provide to another is of more value than the momentary displeasure you may experience. And to commit yourself to perceiving and tending to others needs out of respect for them, despite your conflicting desires requires discipline.

Did the crew want to stand double 4-8’s watching over our migrants on deck in addition to their regular duties? Probably not. Did the food service specialists want to work overtime to prepare double the amount of food they normally would? Probably not. Did I want to stand outside holding the blanket-kite for twenty minutes at a time with my arms feeling like they were about to fall off? Definitely not. But we all contentedly preformed our duties out of respect for our guests.

And in the end, it wasn’t difficult to feel a sense of compassion and even admiration for these individuals. Here were people brave enough to strike out into the ocean to try to travel 90 or more miles to Florida in makeshift rafts and rowboats that were anything but seaworthy. Some had been caught and brought back to their home countries a half dozen times, and still they persisted. Despite our workload, despite our requirement to stop them in their attempts to reach the U.S., the migrants we took on board had earned and received our respect through their strength of spirit. Meeting and working with these people and the Coast Guard crews, made my time aboard the *William Flores* and *Sitkinak* one of the most eye-opening experiences I’ve had since I entered USCGA three years ago, and one I’ll be forever grateful to have had.