

SHATILA STORIES

INTRODUCTORY LETTER

My name is Shyam Jones and I'm an Austrian filmmaker with a passion for factual filmmaking. In March 2017 I travelled with a small team to Beirut to work on a documentary about the living situation for refugees in Lebanon. I first heard about the refugee crisis in Lebanon through a friend who was working for the NGO SB Overseas which provides education for children who have missed out on opportunities because of conflict and displacement. I had up until that point been totally unaware of the problems facing Lebanon due to the nature of the Euro-centric reporting of the refugee crisis in the media. The majority of refugees have flooded Syria's neighbouring countries which do not have the financial capacity absorb them. The crisis in Europe is dwarfed in comparison. With a total population of 6 million people, one-third of which are refugees I felt that Lebanon had an ongoing humanitarian crisis which deserved to more attention.

As my friend had been working with an educational NGO it felt natural that we would put our film's focus on the children. However it soon became clear that with children you need an entirely different approach to investigate their thoughts and feelings. Interviews are intimidating and children are not emotionally mature or verbally competent enough to express themselves in front of a camera. Especially when it comes to talking about the repressive memories of war. Children express themselves through play. They draw pictures and act in narrative play as an act of outward expression which reveals their internal disposition. So we decided to teach the children about filmmaking and acting and make a few short films based on the children's own story ideas. By allowing the children to tell their own stories we can interpret how they experience life as a child refugee living in a slum in Beirut.

Working with the children was not only fulfilling but gave us a unique insight into the situation for child refugees. The lives of refugees are plagued with problems ranging from daily violence, poverty, sexual abuse, trauma and lack of opportunities. However to see a child's playfulness still intact despite their situation signals true human resilience. After all the horrible things we discovered during the investigation for this film, it was the children's strength and the determination of the NGO workers that ultimately filled me with hope. In every crisis there are people who choose to help and these are the people who deserve our attention and serve to inspire others to do good. Providing a handful of children with a creative activity is merely a drop in the ocean when it comes to dealing with the terrible consequences of the Syrian war. However since the filming ended it has become my personal mission to get their message out to as many people as possible.

