More children, and more, and still more. Mostly unattended. Mostly searching for something that can second as a toy—an old lighter, a cigarette butt, a few rusty nails.

When choosing Lesvos as a stop on our European retirement trip, it was the promise of its culinary excellence that drew us to the island. My husband and I knew of the refugee situation there but surmised that we could easily steer clear of it. We would rent a car, visit small mountain villages, stay off the beaten path and play cards in local smoke-filled tavernas. We did all those things until the very last day, when we decided to visit One Happy Family, a Swiss-operated NGO serving the needs of refugees. It was more of an anthropological inquiry than anything. I had never been to a refugee camp. I had curiosities—the kind of curiosity one has when seeing people bathe and pray in the Ganges of India.

But this was not the shore of the Ganges and curiosity quickly turned to a deep ache as we watched these children struggle to reclaim a childhood threatened by circumstances beyond their control. Thankfully, children are good at this. A few rusty nails have almost as much intrigue and possibility as most modern toys; and maybe more. The interesting affordances of sound, directionality and use as a writing tool in the dirt engaged the children for a while. As the children tinkered, over 300 adults sipped coffee, handled their affairs, talked on cell phones and made use of the many programs offered to adults at the community center.

We breathed in the vibrant energy and bustle of OHF. An hour later, in a brief conversation with the center’s director, and on a whim, we offered to return to furnish a small room where children could safely explore with appropriate materials and supervision. As the executive director of the Pedagogical Institute of Los Angeles, I was certain the board would agree,
and if not, Tom and I were committed to raising the money independently.

The Pedagogical Institute of Los Angeles was founded in 2014 by a group of teachers interested in promoting discourse about progressive education. We believed that a city-wide dialogue could help level the playing field in LA’s economically diverse schools, where access to inquiry-based education is often lacking. In 2015, in response to the great disparity of education in low-income schools, we started the Collaborative Teacher Project, an ongoing mentoring program for public school teachers interested in reform.

While international work was not on the docket of our small organization, the PILA Board quickly approved this seemingly minor and finite project on an island in Greece. A letter to family, friends and supporters generated over $10,000 in just 48 hours. Eight weeks later, in January, 2018, Tom and I returned to Lesvos to build the “Nest,” an open-ended play space where children can create, explore and be autonomous. Together with refugee volunteers we painted, unpacked boxes and put together furniture. It was during this time that we met Mina, a young Afghan woman, all of 19 years old, who was living in a camp with her young husband, Mehdi. Like all the others, they arrived in Lesvos by the light of the moon in an overcrowded, weathered raft coming from the shores of Turkey. Neither could swim.

Nest Lesvos

When we met Mina and Mehdi they had been on the island for just three months. Mina was eager to help us set up the Nest. Together we unpacked a 600-pound crate that we had shipped from the States, a truckload of furniture, and six large suitcases. As Mina made her way through the boxes, she found a baby doll. As if she had found a live baby in a pile of rubble, she instantly took the baby in her arms, cradling the lifeless doll while rocking and singing to it. Ten minutes later, Mina was still rocking the doll and singing softly. I wondered about her childhood, and assumed that she had missed some vital part of it. It was not until several days later that I learned Mina and Mehdi’s story of leaving their village after their secret marriage.

Their families were from warring clans so they were cautioned by the Imam not to tell a soul of their union. Mina learned she was pregnant around the same time that her father announced her engagement to an older distant relative. On the advice of their one confidante, who was certain that the two would be stoned to death for their marriage, they left Afghanistan at dawn a few days later. For a month they crossed multiple borders, traversed mountain ranges and fled the authorities. In Iran, while running from police gunfire, Mina fell. Dragged to her feet by her husband, she kept running, even as blood trickled down her thigh. They had lost their baby.

Three months later, as Mina held a lifeless doll to her bosom in a quiet corner of the Nest, she found a way to say goodbye to the child she and Mehdi would never know.

Just a few days later, the Nest opened. In spite of the repeated skepticism of all who entered the room—“This is beautiful, but it won’t last a week here”—the Nest quickly became a place of refuge, safety and peace for children living in the squalid conditions of Moria. Everything had gone as planned; we had set up a beautiful space and would now leave it to OHF to provide volunteers each day to work there. Our work was done, or so we thought as we prepared to leave. But alas on the last day of our trip, our plan suddenly seemed wholly naive. It was the story of a 10-year-old Angolan boy, Beza (name changed), that illuminated how ill-conceived this project was.

Beza is a charismatic master player whose abundant joy is matched only by his rage and inability to manage it. He had made quite an impression during our numerous playful and sometimes challenging interactions. He knew how to work a
room, cook up an expertly prepared pretend chicken, convince all the other children to join him for a dinner party, dance his way to construction, and build an elaborate block house—all in a single play session. His charisma filled the room and captivated the other children. So did his anger. Indeed, once he slapped Mina across the face so hard it reddened her cheek, simply because she had asked him to leave the Nest to make space for a child who had been waiting.

At dinner that evening as we prepared to depart on an overnight ferry to Athens, we learned that Beza is an unaccompanied minor, living alone on the streets much of the time, fending for himself, growing up faster than any child should. No wonder he so desperately wanted to spend time in the Nest. No wonder it was so hard for him to leave and make room for other children—children who had parents with them, who had someone to calm their fears and see to it that they had bread to eat each day. If only I had known. If only I could stay. I thought about what the Nest could be to a child like Beza. It could be something so much more than a place to play for a couple of hours. For Beza, it could be a place to feel safe, to know that he is protected and that someone is watching out for him. How could a revolving door of young, untrained volunteers possibly provide the expertise and support needed to heal such deep wounds for children who have experienced unthinkable trauma? How could I not have calculated this? It was naive to make an offer to set up “a space,” as if a space has the power to fix, fill or remedy what has gone horribly wrong in the lives of these children. Is this even a bandage? Maybe it is just some temporary balm on an open, bleeding wound.

The overnight ferry ride was long, dark and tear-filled. But as we approached the port in Athens, just as the sun was rising, the distance measured by the sea behind us and the land ahead brought a certain clarity that only distance can. The Nest must offer children some measure of continuity by trained professionals. There was no other way.

Since then we have been recruiting experienced teachers from around the world. We call them “Nesters.” They hail from countries across the globe—Australia, Singapore, throughout Europe, Canada, the U.S. and South America. In preparation for their trip, they join a virtual online meeting to discuss the right of children to play, to be autonomous and to rebuild the sense of control and empowerment that is so deeply needed by victims of trauma. The meeting orients our Nesters, who come from many different models of teaching, to the basic pedagogy used in the Collaborative Teacher Project: open-ended exploration, creative freedom and scientific discovery.

Additionally, we train refugee volunteers, “Local Nesters,” people such as Mina who take on the daily running of the Nest, providing the continuity, shared language and culture that
international Nesters cannot. Their training, also done online with a translator, helps them appreciate the importance for children of having agency, choice, and most of all, respect.

The Model

Since the inception of Nest Lesvos just two years ago, we have opened four more Nests on three continents. One more in Greece, on the island of Samos, two at the Congo Peace School in the economically poor village of Mumosh, DRC, and most recently, one south of our own border in Tijuana, Mexico.

The contexts, based on culture, politics and resources, are naturally quite different, but the model is always the same: local and international Nesters working together—one group bringing first-hand knowledge about the values, culture, language and circumstances of the children we serve, and the other with experience and knowledge of children’s developmental and psycho-social needs. The Nests are the first of their kind in all the locations, informed by a strong constructivist pedagogy in which children have the freedom to explore materials, engage in play scenarios of their own making and construct their own meanings. For young children who have been torn from their homelands and carried across borders, the right to be autonomous, to make decisions and to freely play is critical. After all, play is a human right, the right of every child. And play, by definition, is self-directed. While many of the NGOs who work with children in emergency situations provide activities—perhaps making a shaker from a toilet paper roll, or making a mask from a paper plate—the Nests offer children the right to explore their own passions, to find their voice, to express their dreams, fears and interests. The Nests are deliberately designed to offer early practice of living in a democracy, where the balance of responsibility and freedom are continually refined.

And the Nest offers beauty. While beauty may seem like a frivolous luxury in the life of a refugee whose basic needs loom large, perhaps it is even more necessary to provide refugee children and their families a place where they can fully exhale, and then breathe in peacefulness, visual coordination, and yes, beauty. Beauty breeds optimism and hope and changes how people behave. Beauty is a way to acknowledge our humanity and it is our right to surround ourselves with that which makes us feel honored and respected. Most importantly, no matter its location, each Nest offers a protected space where adult problems are left at the door. For children who are living in very close quarters with both relatives and thousands of strangers, there is little that they do not hear. As families check in about their legal status, financial concerns or about the uncertain fate of loved ones they have left behind, children are right there, hearing all of it—the good, the bad and the ugly. The ugly, when you are a refugee, can be nightmarish. Overhearing adult woes produces a secondary trauma that keeps psychological wounds open and fresh. But in the Nest, none of this exists. There, children can be children. A question such as, “Where is the missing puzzle piece” replaces, at least for a while, the question, “Where is home?”

Nest Samos

Nest Samos is housed in a rented, light-filled storefront on a commercial street, not far from the Samos Refugee Camp that 7,000 refugees now call “home.” Our partner on the ground is a British NGO, Action For Education, which provides classes in Greek, English and other creative subjects to primarily young men ages 18-23 years old. Naturally, with so many young, able-bodied men around, setting up Nest Samos happened quickly. Refugees came with an eagerness to build furniture, paint, and fix plumbing and electrical systems—skills that they brought with them from their home countries of Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Congo. In no time, the Nest was ready. It was time to train the refugees to be Nesters.

Admittedly my own stereotypes were called into question when AFE brought me a team of six young men, 20-year-olds at best. Unlike Lesvos where all the local Nesters are women, in Samos they were all men—the very men who helped me set it up!

I was dubious to say the least. For the next two weeks we worked together, finding the competencies of children, learning to listen as the children shared their ideas, supporting their play, understanding how a prepared and beautiful environment is critical in the learning process. It was not an easy two weeks for any of us, and at times I worried that my unrelenting and sometimes stern feedback and interventions would unravel their enthusiasm. But they were not deterred. They hung in there. They stopped making models and holding children by the wrist. They learned to give children the space to figure out difficult problems. They learned to scaffold without taking over. They learned to listen. And all the while I was learning. I learned that these young men are tender,
compassionate, nurturing, always playful and sometimes downright silly. They defy all existing stereotypes about Muslim men in child care roles. They are the glue that holds Nest Samos together.

What we could not have imagined was how the Nest would also be the glue to hold their lives together. For the local Nesters, the Nest is a reason to wake up in the morning. Working with the children brings joy and lightness to their days, but more than that, it gives them dignity to know that they are the most vital piece of the Nest puzzle. Habib, a 20-year-old from Afghanistan, has been at the Nest for almost a year. He does not know how much longer he will be living in the camp, but suspects it could be another year or more. Single men are at the bottom of the priority list. While he waits out his time, Nest Samos is where he is happiest. "The Nest is like my job. I love it because there is relaxing energy here."

Nest Tijuana

Of course, as we set up these Nests on other people’s borders and in far-away villages, we were painfully aware of the dire needs on our own southern border, where thousands of children and their families await asylum in makeshift shelters. With wait times up to six months, children find themselves in a state of suspended childhood. In September, 2019, we opened Nest Tijuana, just 10 minutes south of the U.S. border.

Nest Tijuana is a two-story house, rented directly across the street from a migrant shelter.

Downstairs we serve 15-25 preschool-aged children, while upstairs we offer a parent/toddler program for 20 children ages 12- to 30-months.

Like our other Nests, Nest Tijuana was intended as a drop-in center. But intention is not always reality. At 8:30 a.m. on our very first day, parents and children lined the sidewalk waiting for the gate to open. With ribbons in their neatly braided hair and donning their Sunday best clothing, children waited eagerly for the first day of “school” to begin. And so Nest Tijuana, in its own special and unofficial way, has become a school. We have morning meetings, snack time, work times and monthly parent meetings.

Now, with five Nests around the world, there are moments when it seems that PILA is more of a humanitarian relief organization than a pedagogical institute. But Nest Tijuana reminds us how deeply rooted our practice is in constructivist pedagogy. Admittedly there have been numerous conversations through the years about the challenges of our name, The Pedagogical Institute of Los Angeles. We hear again and again that people cannot pronounce it, or they think we are a foot organization, or worse, pedagogy sounds like pedophile! As the founder of PILA, I have fiercely advocated to keep our name because our work is always pedagogical. Our choices are consistently based on the belief that learning environments are places where curiosity and uncertainty drive learning and lead to inventiveness. Herein lies the difference between those adult-driven activities that are so prevalently doled out in relief situations and a pedagogically grounded program for young children.

Why a Nest?

Having travelled around the world, particularly in developing countries, we have watched children play in less than ideal circumstances. Yet, in the face of some of the worst circumstances, we have also seen immense joy. It seems to be the human condition to find joy no matter the situation. Finding joy is almost always an option, always within reach. This being the case, why then do we need Nests?

Whether seeking asylum in the U.S. or in the European Union, eventually the children who visit the Nest will, if things go as planned, find themselves in public kindergartens in a new host country. For all children entering kindergarten, this is a critical time when they are defining themselves as learners and as students. Sadly, for migrant and refugee children, these beginnings are often challenging, setting a negative course for the next six years. They have already travelled some rough terrain and the road ahead does not necessarily get
smoother once they are granted asylum. They come speaking another language, often with darker skin, different cultural customs, and with scars from past losses. Seen as “the other,” they encounter bias, distrust and judgment. The journey of finding one's way into a new culture is complicated.

The Nest is the space in between. It exists in that place between two worlds, one known and familiar, one unknown and strange. In this in-between space, a space that exists between political, geographical and cultural borders, children are encouraged to take initiative, explore ideas, and offer solutions. The Nest is a place where the voices of children ring like church bells, awakening a community to the power of an idea. Can we change the trajectory of a child's life? We think so. We think that time at the Nest gives children the confidence to act; to offer an idea; to experience their own worth in a group context. They will need this when they get to kindergarten, likely even more than their classmates.

Finally, the Nest offers hope. Hope, like joy, is what keeps all of us going—the belief that things will get better, that another, brighter day awaits us. We have hope until we do not, and then we have despair. Yesterday I had a long phone conversation with Habib.

“Alise, I am just a refugee. I have no home. Sometimes I go to sleep and hope I do not wake up in the morning,” he said.

The words cut to my heart. Habib has always had hope, but on this cold rainy night in Samos, he has lost it. He cannot find a way out or see how this 412-day ordeal could possibly end well. I lay in bed at night wondering the same thing. Will Habib be granted asylum at a time when the EU is deporting more and more refugees back to Afghanistan? Habib closes his eyes on the day with a sense of deep despair. But tomorrow morning he will again wake, stand in line for a piece of bread, and then go to the Nest as he always does. There he will play with the children—hearing their ideas, dreams and passions. And there, in the Nest, where the joy and laughter of children fill the room, Habib will harness the courage to go on.

We all hold strong to an unflinching sense of hope for each child who passes through the door of the Nest. We have to. We do not know where they will go, or when they will go, or how they will fare when they get there, but we hold an unwavering flame of hope that somehow tomorrow will be brighter. We hold fervently to the belief that our collective humanity will prevail over politics, national borders and fear. Habib has always held this deep hope for every child in the Nest. Tomorrow, amidst the joy of children playing, Habib will borrow this joy until he can again find his own.
With every article, every news special, and every tweet about the immigration crisis, our hearts ache: what about the children? As educators, we live and breathe best practices in early childhood: we know it is not just our job and our passion, but our moral obligation to show up for every child and share what we know about child development with others. Fifty miles from our school—next door yet across a border, nearby but a world away—the Nest calls us, and teachers like us, to action, encouraging us to create the answers that we seek.

Over our Thanksgiving break, we spent five days serving at the Nest, walking across the border into Mexico each morning and returning to the United States each evening. The harsh irony of the ease with which we could do so was not lost on us. For Keri, going to the Nest was a quick decision: it was necessary to see the impacts of a political situation outside of her control and do right by the children caught up in it. For Samantha, it was a return to her roots as a trauma-informed educator and an act of allyship and solidarity. For each of us, the Nest was a space to share our social-constructivist values and provide a foundation of teaching and learning for our future neighbors.

Across the street from a migrant shelter that is wall-to-wall mattresses, the Nest is bright and airy, carefully curated to be carefree. Organized spaces are touched with whimsy and magic, begging to be explored. With all of the uncertainty and all of the heartbreak in the lives of these children, it was the moments of joy—the laughter during story time, the chatting during snack, the thrill at seeing an airplane—that colored our five days of service there. The deck serves as a hub for sharing food and performance, the art studio allows for imagination and expression, the construction room is a place of connecting materials and ideas: when you create a space that is made to be owned by the children, they will—no matter who they are or where they come from—fill it with imagination and delight.

Serving at the Nest is not intended to be a feel-good social bandage. It is hard: not just for the emotional weight of the work happening there, but also for the appropriately high

What About the Children?
Teaching and Learning at Nest Tijuana

by Samantha Balch and Keri Brewer

Samantha Balch is a master’s of education candidate at Clemson University and an early childhood educator. Her teaching experiences range from programs that exclusively serve children experiencing homelessness to private schools (and many things in between). She lives in southern California with her husband and her books.

Keri Brewer is a constructivist early childhood educator residing and teaching in Southern California. She is absorbed with children’s wonderings and ideas and loves to witness their “a-ha!” moments. She earned a bachelor’s in human development with a specialization in early childhood education at Pacific Oaks College and is pursuing a master’s in human development with a dual specialization in social change and leadership.
expectations of working with others across cultures for the betterment of children. Much of the time is spent in half-Spanish conversations with local Nesters, who themselves are migrants from across the street that have chosen to volunteer at the Nest. They come from all different backgrounds, experiences and cultural views of who children are and how to interact with them. Our role is to share best practices in education, encouraging them to develop an image of children that respects their capability and individuality. This responsibility is a delicate balance of stepping into a place that is not our own, yet being seen—and being willing to be seen—as an expert and a leader. At the same time, we talk as friends: sharing stories about ourselves, teaching parts of our languages and culture, and partaking in tacos from Tio Jose’s cart down the street as a team. When Daniel (a 19-year-old local Nester who spoke no English) and Samantha read a bilingual story to the children together, we saw firsthand how joy and laughter transcend borders and barriers, and how two people from vastly different places can have and achieve the same goals.

This is not to say that serving at the Nest does not feel good: it is intensely rewarding to share your passion for how children can and should be treated with others, especially others who have fought to simply make it through another day. Sitting with children and hearing them giggle as they squish clay together for the first time, surrounded by a gentle breeze and soft classical music, is the kind of moment that reminds you why you dedicated yourself to this field to begin with. Hearing a local Nester say that your example has opened their eyes to new ideas about teaching is affirming and humbling. The Nest is a safe place in more ways than one: it allows us, as teachers, to pass on our expertise and knowledge by modeling, meeting and conversing, and also forces us to reflect about what we know, what we do, and why we do it. At the Nest, you teach and learn in equal measure.

At the end of it all, when we think about the children we worked with, we wonder what foundations the Nest lays for their self-esteem, their inquisitiveness, and their resilience. We wonder where the explorations at the Nest will bring these children and adults, and we wonder where it will bring the two of us. Through moments of despair at situations outside of our control, we are filled with hope from the willingness of others to work to mend the parts of the world that are within their reach. When you go to serve at the Nest, know that the work will challenge you, stretch you, and fill you with a profound sense of gratitude, understanding and urgency. The goodness that Nest Tijuana creates will impact both sides of the border in ways large and small, echoing for years to come.