Class Aids Syrian Refugees

Students in a world history class taught by Kathryn Johnson (History) have devised an academic service learning project to benefit Syrian refugee children. The conflict between forces loyal and opposed to President Bashar al-Assad is tearing the nation apart, according to the BBC. Tens of thousands have lost their lives and the bloody internal battle has forced two million people to flee across the country’s borders. The students were motivated to action after participating in a video conference on the country’s culture and history with Maya Alkateb, a Fulbright Scholar from Syria who is studying at Indiana University (pictured). They initially wanted to create care packages for refugee camps, but quickly learned a lesson about the “endless obstacles” to delivering aid to crisis regions overseas.

“They went through several weeks of investigation, research and hitting dead ends trying to figure out how to support those in need,” Johnson said. “They also received a response from the former Australian Ambassador to the Middle East, who is an expert on the region and a family friend of mine. The solution they came up with was to fundraise directly for UNICEF and have donations go straight to Syrian refugee relief efforts. The students organized this effort. Every step and detail of the project was voted on repeatedly using the students’ iClickers in the classroom.”

The class created a UNICEF-sponsored website for the project and set a fundraising goal of $1,500 that they hope to achieve by the end of the academic year.

During the video conference, Alkateb covered Syrian history from ancient times to current events, showed the students photographs of the most famous historic locations, helped students understand the complexities of different religious and ethnic groups and emphasized the vibrancy and humanity of the Syrian people.
“I liked how real it is to actually have the opportunity to talk to someone and learn about how they live being all the way across the world,” wrote a student in response to a Qualtrics survey on the video conference. “I liked how she talked about the conflict and how it is affecting her and her country. It is weird to actually hear it coming from someone who is living there than just over the media. I also really like that she still is very positive about her country and wants people to see the good Syria still has. Not just the terrors from the conflict.”

Johnson said the students will continue to publicize the project via social media channels.