

ALL IN THE SAME BOAT

When REFUGEES came across the seas in the summer of 2015, German-Greek ENTREPRENEUR Paula Schwarz LAUNCHED *Startup Boat*, an initiative to unite people and address the CHALLENGES of mass migration – at sea.

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IMAGE COURTESY OF MIGRATION HUB

By August 2015, more than 125,000 migrants had made the perilous journey to Greece from war-torn countries including Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. Some Greek islands are only a few kilometres away from the Turkish shoreline, and during that year's refugee crisis, Greece became the busiest entry point for refugees fleeing to the European Union. Already scarred by debt, Greece struggled to cope – as did its new arrivals.

Paula Schwarz, 26, a half-German, half-Greek entrepreneur from the island of Samos, relays these events over salad and lemon tea in a bright cafe in Berlin's Rosa Luxemburg Platz. She's dressed in a pink polka-dot dress and a starfish necklace that hints at her connection to the sea. With the slow cadence of a German castaway (and the copper hair of Ginger from *Gilligan's Island*), she says she remembers watching boat after boat approaching the Greek isle of Lesbos, followed by people setting up tents on the sides of roads.

"Tourists started coming, and displaced people were sitting next to families hoping to enjoy their carefree vacation under the Greek sun," recalls Paula.

With a background human rights (formerly a trainee at Human Rights Watch) and entrepreneurship (she has worked with the Venture Bus in Africa and Stanford University's 500 Startups program), Paula began wondering how start-up thinking, technology and

collaboration might be able to help the refugee crisis. Soon she had an idea: *Startup Boat*, a multi-day session at sea during which recent migrants could join entrepreneurs

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and business leaders to discuss the most pressing challenges relating to migration, and brainstorm ways to solve them.

"I wanted to bring people to Greece to work on social challenges," Paula says. "And when you invite people to Greece, you don't invite them on a bus. You invite them on a boat."

In August 2015, the first *Startup Boat* set sail off the coast of Samos with 18 diverse attendees, ranging from a Lufthansa Innovation Hub executive to an Afghan refugee. The trip resulted in several initiatives, including *First Contact*, an information platform that Paula helped develop to connect new migrants with ferries, hospitals or the closest refugee camps. >





IMAGES COURTESY OF MIGRATION HUB

The next month, Germany – led by Chancellor Angela Merkel and her “open-door” policy – became the number one safe haven for refugees. One weekend, 20,000 migrants arrived. Paula’s colleague Ana Álvarez Monge vividly remembers locals at the Munich train station applauding and greeting new arrivals with signs reading ‘willkommen’ (welcome). Ordinary residents directed exhausted travellers to food, health checks and housing.

“I saw such a movement going on here with new initiatives already working as a first response,” Ana tells me of her early days in Berlin. We’re seated in the attic-like office space at Migration Hub, which offers cheap or free workspaces to entrepreneurs focused on refugee issues. Ana is a former TEDx-planning, United World College head from Costa Rica, who launched this co-working space with Paula and Berlin entrepreneurs Katharina Dermühl and Thomas Lehnen.

“Even though Costa Rica is the happiest country in the world, I’ve never seen that [kind of response from residents],” says Ana, now the managing

director of the Migration Hub Network, which doubles as a way to integrate migrants into the labour market and broader society, while also offering training in leadership, intercultural communication and design thinking.

“It’s an integration from both sides,” says Ana, “so we work with those initiatives that really understand that. At the end of the day, our vision is to transform the challenges of mass migration into opportunities.”

About halfway through our conversation, a young Syrian man named Salim Mohamad walks through the door. He’s Startup Boat’s new managing director but also works in telecommunications and studies

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at the ReDI School (a project Mark Zuckerberg had just visited a few weeks prior, which teaches coding to refugees). Although Salim has only been in Germany for eight months, he speaks clearly and passionately about his role within Startup Boat and Migration Hub – as a sort of project translator and cultural mediator between entrepreneurs and the migrant community.

“I’m trying to be two persons at the same time,” says Salim, “to understand that person, the founder, and then to be one of these persons, the refugees. [The founders] might think they have the best solution to solve [a] problem, but they don’t know that their solution doesn’t fit with this community.”

When I ask about the biggest challenge refugees face in Germany, Salim doesn’t skip a beat: “I think the most important thing they need is to feel an inner peace. We know there are work problems, there are integration problems, there are ‘blah blah’ problems, but we don’t know the biggest problem that all of them have. No one has inner peace. No one can say he’s happy in life. We cannot solve anything if we cannot solve that very, very important problem.”

With these types of issues in mind, Migration Hub currently runs two other spaces in Germany, plus another in Athens. Five more, from London to Milan, are in the research phase (with the help of 180 Degrees, a consulting firm for nonprofits and social enterprises founded by Sydneysider Nat Ware). Meanwhile other successful start-ups that grew out of Migration Hub are going strong, including Kiron University, which offers free online courses to

refugees from such top institutions as Harvard, and Daheim, a Skype-like service for German language courses.

Startup Aid – Paula’s umbrella organisation for Startup Boat and Migration Hub – has secured approximately \$AU2.2 million, which a Finnish prepaid credit card company, Moni, loans out to initiatives that offer jobs or help to refugees, primarily in farming and translation services. The network has also partnered with the German Senate, the World Economic Forum, UNHCR and Google.

At the end of our interview, Paula reflects on the past year, remembering the trauma of the crisis and how far Startup Boat and Migration Hub have now voyaged.

“We’re more flexible now because the crisis has gotten better. I mean, I’m wearing a pink dress,” laughs Paula of her new lightness. “In a time where innovation is needed so much, how cool is it to have an open house where people can come and say, ‘I want to speak up. I have this idea. I’m looking for people who want to change the world with me.’”



5 PROJECTS HELPING MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

CUCULA, BERLIN

This design workshop and educational program founded by five migrants from West Africa builds furniture out of sustainable materials, such as wooden watercraft used during migration. An educational component offers training in carpentry, German and migration law. cucula.org

KITCHEN ON THE RUN, VARIOUS LOCATIONS ACROSS EUROPE

An offshoot of Berlin-based Über den Tellerrand, this mobile kitchen and dining room fashioned from a shipping container spends the summer travelling around Europe to unite refugees and locals over food, recipes and stories. kitchenontherun.org

THE MACHINE TO BE ANOTHER, BARCELONA

Building empathy through technology, this virtual reality tool allows Europeans and migrants to step into each other’s minds and bodies, in order to challenge perceptions about identity and society. themachinetobeanother.org

MIGRANTOUR, VARIOUS LOCATIONS ACROSS EUROPE

Imagine being welcomed to a European city by a group of migrants to help you understand the place through their eyes. That’s what Migrantour offers, plus many secrets unknown even to locals. mygrantour.org

#BIKEYGEES, BERLIN

Armed with bikes and the notion that pedalling is the path to mobility and independence in Berlin, #Bikegees is teaching refugee women how to cycle, and is having a lot of fun along the road. bikegees-berlin.org