

DRC brings attention to refugee crisis at annual summit

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Every year, Douglass Residential College (DRC) selects a theme that its students and faculty make the focal point of their work — this year's theme was "Forced Migration, Gender and Global Allies."

On Saturday, the women's college held its annual Douglass Global Summit at the Kathleen W. Ludwig Global Village Living Learning Center, an all-day affair that has raised awareness for war, conflict, poverty and displaced families.

The summit, that ran from 9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., not only educated attendees about the harsh realities of war, but featured non-profit organizations that allied with displaced women and children and invited refugees from Palestine and Bosnia to speak about their first-person experiences through war.

The day started with educational presentations about the war and refugee crisis from students in the Global Village. The Global Village is a living learning community for DRC women that consists of nine houses, each with a theme that students learn about through credit-bearing courses and service work in the field, according to the DRC website.

The presentations were followed by speeches from the vice president of Rutgers Global, Dr. Rick Garfunkel, the founder of the NGO Spark 15, Hourie Tafech, a member of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Andrew Painter, and a member from Interfaith Rise, Anna Petrie.

Another speaker was a woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who shared her story of living through genocide in Bosnia — trekking her way across the countries' borders to receive medical attention and eventually finding her way to the United States.

She was the first Bosnian to receive medical asylum in the United States, said Elizabeth Gunn, assistant dean of Academic Programs at Douglass and an overseer of the Global Village.

"It was a very personal narrative, and she had the entire 200-plus room just captivated," Gunn said.



Elizabeth Gunn is the assistant dean of Academic Programs at Douglass Residential College and said it was captivating to hear female refugees describe their wartime experiences and to intersect these scholarly, innovative minds at Rutgers. RUTGERS.EDU

She said that another prominent speaker who addressed the crowd was a woman born in Palestine, that escaped to Malta, and by a random sequence of events, is a student at Rutgers.

"So it really brings it home," Gunn said.

The goal of the summit, Gunn said, is to bring together some of the most moving, innovative and

if not, we hope that they learn something for today and decide whether this is an issue we want to advocate for," she said.

Gunn said that students not only had the opportunity to learn about the crisis but were also educated about how to get involved and make a difference locally and globally.

There was a 45-minute session from Jennifer Castro, director of

central New Jersey, assisting asylum seekers and supporting local faith and civic groups as they advocate for and work with refugees in their communities, according to its website. The coalition assists with the housing, social services, education and medical needs of families as they struggle through their journey to independence.

theme. It's affecting so many people right now and is so relevant so it would be the perfect theme to bring everyone for the 100th anniversary of Douglass to highlight an issue that's impacting us locally and globally," she said.

Susan Martin, a chair in Women's Studies at Rutgers, is an alumna who came back to participate and celebrate the Global Summit, 100 years of Douglass and the 50th anniversary of her Douglass College class.

Martin said that there is a very strong humanitarian reason to be concerned about these populations and how they are doing, but there is also a strong self-interest in knowing that as much as can be done is being done to help protect them.

"When you have women who are subject to rape, sexual attacks, sexual exploitation just for being a refugee, and became a refugee just because of those same factors, I think it's incumbent on all women, including students, to become better informed about what the issues are to be part of finding solutions," she said.

Martin explained small ways that students can get involved. One way for students majoring in public health is to explore courses that prepare them to work overseas after graduation and immerse themselves with helping refugees abroad.

When asked what the highlight of the event was, she said there were two things.

The first was having refugees themselves share their stories and tell their own narrative, one that is not filtered by anyone else.

"It was having a refugee voice present. It wasn't just us talking about them," she said.

The other highlight, she said, was that the summit occurred on her 50th reunion for Douglass graduates. Martin said it was incredible to be able to reunite with her classmates while discussing practical solutions to worldwide issues.

On the other hand, she said it was moving to be able to work with current Douglass students who gave presentations, prepared the speaker panel and helped run the conference.

"To see that the students of today are every bit as smart, committed, interested in real issues as we were in 1968. That was an amazing experience," she said.

"One in six people in the world is displaced in some fashion, either externally or internally. Because it's such a global issue and it affects woman and girls so disproportionately, is the perfect theme."

ELIZABETH GUNN

Assistant Dean of Academic Programs at Douglass and Overseer of The Global Village

scholarly minds to engage students, faculty, staff and guests on issues related to the global refugee crisis.

"It impacts women and girls disproportionately around the world. We know some of our students are impacted by this ... and

Displacement and Resettlement at Interfaith Rise, about the advocacy options and volunteer opportunities at the Interfaith Rise coalition that is located only a few miles away from Rutgers in Highland Park.

The organization is committed to resettling refugees in

It is a very prevalent matter, Gunn said.

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