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Education

UWC Atlantic College: the elite school in a castle that's helping educate young refugees



Gilded towers: St Donat's Castle Wales (Sarah Savage) Etan Smallman 6 months Wednesday April 12th 2017

Glitterati parties

In the 1930s, St Donat's Castle in the Vale of Glamorgan, south Wales, was the venue for lavish parties attended by everyone from John F Kennedy and Frank Sinatra to Clark Gable and

Charlie Chaplin – when it was owned by American newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst.

But if you visit the imposing 12th-century estate today, you are more likely to come across one of the most international assortments of students in the UK than a glittering bash.

Educational sanctuary

UWC Atlantic College's 350 pupils hail from 90 countries. The boarding school attracts wealthy teenagers whose parents pay fees of £58,000 for the two-year International Baccalaureate programme (alumni include the King of the Netherlands, two serving members of the Chinese Communist Central Committee and the offspring of Queen Noor of Jordan). But more than half of students receive some kind of scholarship – among them a contingent of refugees who have fled warzones in pursuit of a top-class education and sanctuary in the remote seaside castle.

“One of the greatest challenges for the refugees is getting over the guilt of being rescued”

Catering for them is no easy task. Teachers are keen not just to overcome the language barrier by improving their English, but also to help them maintain their mother tongue (with a dedicated Arabic teacher, for instance). Then there is the financial support needed for children who arrive with few possessions to study alongside the progeny of tycoons and diplomats clutching their state-of-the-art laptops. Finally, extensive counselling is offered for pupils reeling from what they have left behind.

“One of the greatest challenges for the refugees, who are almost exclusively coming by themselves, is getting over the guilt of being rescued, in a way,” says Peter Howe, the new principal. “They don't have to worry about literally dying the next day, but they've left their families in those conditions.”



Castles in the sky: Anagheem Qassem is an alumna of UWC Atlantic College

Material world

On a material level, teachers have learned that they often need to force refugee pupils to accept everything from winter coats to mobile phones.

“They’re so grateful for the opportunity they’ve already been given, they don’t want to ask for more,” says Howe, who adds that even when students are given pocket money for necessities, many insist on sending it home. (Meanwhile, it is drilled into the richer students that this is not a place for flaunting affluence, so much so that “EDW” – excessive display of wealth – is a buzzword wielded by pupils if anyone gets too flashy.)

Resilience

But despite the various traumas, Howe says: “In my experience, it tends to be more the middle-class kid who’s homesick. I think the refugees are incredibly resilient and they know that they are the future for their families, for their communities.”

Atlantic College was founded in 1962 as the first of 17 United World Colleges, inspiring a total of 9,000 students a year “to create a more peaceful and sustainable future through education”. It was the brainchild of German educationalist Kurt Hahn, who set up Gordonstoun, the alma mater of the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince of Wales. The college pioneered the International Baccalaureate, and was the first in the UK to abandon A-levels in its favour.

Anagheem Qassem heard about the movement while at school in Syria – which had been forced to move four times because of the conflict.

It is pupils, rather than parents, who apply for their place at the sixth form college – via local committees in 150 countries – and Anagheem won hers after a rigorous series of essays, exams and interviews.

Without a family

Aged 17, she left her family behind in war-torn Damascus and spent 27 days alone at the Lebanese border waiting for her visa to travel to Wales. “Stuck without my family, and facing constant uncertainty, these were the worst days of my life,” she says.

She was late to start both her first and second years because she was stuck in border hold-ups and once safely in the UK suffered nightmares that could keep her up all night.

Although she accepts that her parents and two brothers are refugees (now struggling to start a new life in Germany, having fled to Turkey on foot), she rejects the label herself. It is in part because she immigrated as a student, not an asylum seeker.

“I could have taken the easier way and gone with my dad to Germany. But it wouldn’t have been what I wanted. Because I knew that I had what it takes to get accepted to something on my own without using the refugee card,” says the 20-year-old, now in her first year of a chemical engineering degree at Brown University in the US.

Anagheem says she felt both delighted and obligated” to help refugees in Cardiff as part of her “service” – as essential a part of the AC experience as the formal curriculum. But the Syrian star pupil, who breaks down briefly while talking about her parents, says that worries about the fate of her family is, even now, “always in the back of my mind”.

“I try to ignore it, try to act that it’s not there and that I don’t care, but it’s not true. I have horrible dreams every night about a lot of stuff. But I know that I can’t do anything about it so just have to move on.”

A fresh start

When I ask how different her life would be had she not received the scholarship (which attracts more than 100 applicants per place), she stumbles over her words. “Ohhh... I try not to think of that.”

Yara Eid, 16, arrived in September, having spent her life in the Palestinian Al-Bureij refugee camp and lived through three wars in the Gaza Strip. Howe says that “dealing with guilt is a big

part of being at UWC”, and so it has been for Yara from the start. Choosing to abandon her homeland to study was her first dilemma.



Growing confidence: Yara Eid, a first year student at UWC Atlantic Colleges

“Of course, because back home I was volunteering, helping children in my neighbourhood, going to the elderly hospital,” she explains. “What if there is another war and I will not be there? I can’t do anything here. It was the hardest thing for me.”

Yara insists she has no regrets and is embracing the chance to learn piano, travel twice to Europe in one week, journey to the US for a Yale summer school – and even engage in political debates with Israeli classmates.

But she adds of her friends back home: “A lot of the time I feel guilty because here I’m having a good life comparing to them, where they have no electricity, where the situation is really bad and my friends are depressed.

“A lot of talented students can’t travel just because they didn’t have the opportunity that I had.”

More Schools in Castles

Cyfarthfa High School, Merthyr Tydfil, Wales

A comprehensive school, started in 1970, Cyfarthfa means “Place of the barking (dog)” and the school crest features a dog’s head. Cyfarthfa Castle housed the school from 1913 to 1981 but it relocated to modern premises at Cae Mari Dwn in the 1980s and then became a single site 11 – 16 school from September 2014.

Hatherop Castle School, Cotswolds, England

An independent day and boarding prep school in a listed Tudor castle, set in 22 acres of parkland. The castle dates from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, but was partly rebuilt by the architect Henry Clutton for Baron de Mauley in 1850–56.

Rugby School, Warwickshire, England

The Victorian gothic school dates back to the 16th century, and is one of the oldest independent schools in Britain. The 19th century buildings, designed by William Butterfield, are perhaps the most impressive. Butterfield designed the church at Keble College, Oxford and the Rugby buildings feature soaring towers and an ornate chapel.

Scotland Street School, Glasgow, Scotland

Charles Rennie Mackintosh designed the school in 1906, adhering to the requirements of the School Board of Glasgow. It features a semi-circular tower and ornate flourishes typical of Mackintosh’s style.