



Orphanage children with the Meaningfulworld team!

Humanitarian Work: Experiences and Advice

With Ani Kalayjian, EdD

By Bradley Cannon



The Meaningfulworld team working with Haitian refugees who were forcefully removed from Dominican Republic!



(Clockwise) Upper left: Meaningfulworld Teams distributing toys and balls to children in orphanages, and playing with them in therapeutic story telling format. Upper right: Meaningfulworld teaching environmental sustainability and beautification! Lower right: Haitians are challenged daily with traffic jams, being stuffed in overcrowded tap-tap's in the heat of over 100 F with high levels of humidity. Lower center: Heart-to-Heart Circle of Love and Gratitude! Lower left: Haitians are very artistic and creative: these and other street art is aesthetically displayed in the streets.

After growing up in the war-torn country of Syria, Dr. Ani Kalayjian became devoted to understanding the impact of trauma and helping survivors of natural and manmade disasters. A renowned psychiatric nurse, professor of psychology, author, and international researcher, she is the founder of the International Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention (ATOP) MeaningfulWorld, a not-for-profit charitable organization affiliated with the United Nations.

In the past 26 years, Dr. Kalayjian has been on more than 100 missions with MeaningfulWorld in more than 45 countries, and more than 25 states in the United States. The organization's motto is "When one helps another, BOTH become stronger." It is an honor to interview Dr. Kalayjian so that we can share her experiences and insight on conducting future humanitarian work. This guidance, although aimed for Psi Chi chapters, can be applied by any number of groups interested in leading humanitarian missions.

How did you become interested in humanitarian work?

My interest developed from my childhood as an Armenian (Christian minority) in Syria. There was a lot of sadness growing up that I could feel in my heart, but I didn't know what it was about, because as a child I was "protected" from all the sadness. The Turkish government was still sort of terrorizing Syria, and they had a conflict about land in the northern part of the country. My family didn't talk about the Ottoman Turkish Genocide, of which my father was a survivor. I could feel that my parents were grieving, but they would just tell us to go do our homework and wouldn't tell us what was going on because they



Dr Kalayjian donating a set of all her four books on trauma healing and forgiveness to every university and community center

thought they were “protecting” us.

In addition, there was war with Israel. And when there is war in these small countries like Syria, every house actually feels it. Our windows would be shattered frequently, because the enemy military airplanes would fly so low. We would have to run into sub-basements for shelter and later on struggle to replace the glass of our broken windows. It was traumatic to say the least, so I made a commitment to myself on some level that I wanted to heal myself, my family, and the lives of people who are traumatized around the world. Because I felt a lot of my parents’ anger and sadness, I wanted to make sure that generational trauma is transformed and not transferred to other generations.

Could you tell me a little about your humanitarian mission experiences?

This is a challenging question, because each mission has been so unique, but I could generalize by saying that they have all been invigorating, transformative, and beautiful in different ways. We have organized humanitarian missions in more than 45 countries and many states in the USA,

and we recently returned from our 11th humanitarian mission in Haiti, where we started immediately after the devastating earthquake in 2010 that killed more than 275,000 people and left many with lifelong injuries and handicaps. We routinely go to at least half of the 45 countries every year or every other year. Each mission is so unique in its nature and culture, because the members in the mission group create their own organic culture. For example:

- We have had groups in which the members were students or new graduates who were unclear about their career path—but two-and-a-half weeks later, they were able to choose their career path easily.
- We have had people who had gender issues. They weren’t sure if they were gay, transgender, bisexual—but at the end of the mission, they had a clear grasp on who they were.
- We have also had people who were in dysfunctional, stale, or stagnant relationships who didn’t know if they should leave or work on it—once again, after the mission, they were clear about what direction they needed to take.

I think that this effect is another interview or a paper in itself. I have also witnessed a growth in our partners in the field. Again, to give examples from the latest mission to Haiti, the partners with whom we started working in 2010 didn’t even have masters programs in psychology nor in social work. Now, six years later, these partners have both programs. They have started collaborating with more partners in the United States, the United Kingdom, and around the world. They also have international conferences now, turning the tragedy of an earthquake into the opportunity to learn, transform, and share.

Why should Psi Chi chapters take part in humanitarian missions?

Psi Chi has become international, and humanitarian missions are a wonderful international venue to expand on in addition to international research. In terms of learning and sharing knowledge, we have been doing joint research projects with Africa, Armenia, Haiti, Palestine, Pakistan, Romania, and other places to help them engage in research practices, ask pertinent research questions, work with the statisticians, and publish findings. I think humanitarian outreach adds to the visibility of the organization and helps the psychology profession in general, which is so young and growing in many developing countries.

When we started working in Pakistan in 1998, they had about five psychologists and 300 psychiatrists for 30 million people. Although family is a wonderful support system, it can be a source of conflict as well, so there is a great need for people to be able to communicate their feelings to a professional. Humanitarian missions have been very valuable in that way for teaching and learning about the role of psychology and mental health for nurturing peace and happiness.

How can chapters help get students excited about participating?

There are many aspects of humanitarian relief work that are exciting to students including but not limited to travel, fun, learning, expanding the heart and the mind. Anything that a university can use to attract people for study abroad can be



Peaceful Warrior at the end of each training program, to reinforce using positive words instead of fists.

used for humanitarian missions as well. It is a wonderful resumé builder, because students not only find out about themselves but also about other cultures. It is also a wonderful way to cut the emotional cord from family and other attachments, because we have very little time when we are on missions to socialize with our networks, families, significant others, etc. We leave our comforts in every way and emerge in an uncertain and new situation, always being in the moment. The new networks that we develop could also last a lifetime.

What knowledge or skillsets might Psi Chi members gain by participating in humanitarian projects?

In terms of skillsets for the volunteers, **time management** is huge. This does not just take place during the mission; it also occurs before and after the mission. Six months before any trip, we usually start the process of translating our seven-step integrative healing model specially designed for humanitarian relief work, which incorporates mind, body, spirit, and ecology. We also have research tracks to survey individuals' level of trauma and how *forgiveness* and *meaning-making* impacts their levels of trauma. We usually have our

research instruments translated and back-translated twice. We also invite the local translators to examine the translations and give feedback.

About two months before any mission, we have weekly teleconferences with the whole team to delegate the responsibilities. Someone will research the culture, religion, belief systems, and wellness. Someone else will research the disaster itself or the crisis that the country is going through. Another person will research about donation needs, such as donations for children in orphanages, teaching tools, etc.

Humanitarian missions are not two-week vacations. We do daily debriefings during the mission and weekly debriefings when we return. Everyone has a responsibility: writing a summary of our mission, putting photos together in PowerPoint for presentations at conferences, or making a short film for educational purposes at a variety of local, United Nations, and international conferences.

Other skillsets include **learning to adapt to unknown environments and team play**. In our last mission in Haiti in June 2016, we set up a workshop at the University of Haiti through e-mail six months in advance. But we visited the university Friday before the workshop only to be faced with a

Dr. Kalayjian's Schedule for Maintaining Self-Care on a Humanitarian Mission

- ✓ When we first wake up around 6 a.m., we engage in what we call Soul-Surfing exercises that integrate mind, body, and spirit as well as electromagnetic field balancing, yoga, and tai chi, combined with positive affirmations, essential oils, and breathing.
- ✓ We have breakfast together where we set out our SMART goals, both professionally and emotionally, for what each of us is working on that day.
- ✓ From 8 in the morning to 5 or 6 in the evening, we go to work in refugee camps, universities, orphanages, community centers, seminaries, etc.
- ✓ If we are not going to an orphanage or meeting with a local collaborator for dinner, we have dinner by ourselves.
- ✓ After dinner, we spend time debriefing and writing a description together of what we did that day and sharing our feelings. We give one another constructive criticism, compliments, and ways to improve.
- ✓ We give each other quiet time to journal, meditate, and relax.
- ✓ We prepare for the next day in terms of what we need for our work and for self-care like water, potassium, supplements, insect repellents, pens, crayons, paper, instruments for research, gifts for our collaborators, etc.
- ✓ We finally go to sleep.



Training physicians, nurses, and hospital administrators in the 7-Step Integrative Healing Model

blockade where students were boycotting the professors. They had taken all the air out of car tires, and more than 100 desks were piled up at the doors to prevent faculty from bringing their cars in or out. Once we found out that we would be unable to do the workshop, we were able to visit an orphanage instead, which we would not have been able to do otherwise. There are a

lot of unknowns in humanitarian missions, so you need to be flexible in response to change and have a plan B.

Not only do we educate others, but **we are also educated** about others' culture, understanding, and blind spots. The two-and-a-half weeks is often more effective for learning than a semester of classroom education. This is because humanitarian service causes you to use all of your senses—not just your sight, hearing, and maybe notetaking skills. In a mission, you use your sense of smell and the experience of touching and being immersed in a different country, 24/7, which is very different from going to a classroom for three hours a week. Humanitarian service members merge intensely in the new country, which expedites the shift, facilitates the transformation, and reinforces learning, integration and application.

In addition, members gain **extreme appreciation and gratitude** for their comforts and rights, and also a deeper understanding of what humanitarian service is about. This new insight into human relations strengthens their sense of empathy and helps them gain a better appreciation of their own comforts, amenities, and rights. We enjoy many rights in the Western world such as expressing feelings freely, expressing gender

orientations, enjoying human rights, etc. For example, in some countries, like in the Middle East and Africa, you would be imprisoned for expressing your feelings or a gender orientation that does not fit with the religious or governmental laws.

After I returned from Haiti, I went to my regular yoga class. I was looking up at the ceiling in amazement, my hands opened in gratitude, when my colleagues laughed at me and asked, "Why are you looking up with your hands open?" I said, "I am grateful for air-conditioning, I am grateful for electricity, and I am grateful for running water and flushing toilets."

What factors should chapters consider when selecting a suitable mission?

Selection of a location is closely related to one's connections and partners. In some areas, the partners are very responsible and will let you know what is going on ahead of time. We choose locations where we have strong and committed partners.

However, the most important question is will you choose a country that is easiest for you to reach? Or will you choose a country where you are most needed? I recommend balancing the two. For example, we go into areas when and where there are humanitarian or natural disasters after wars, genocides, hurricanes, earthquakes,

Hurricane Matthew

Haiti has had another big trauma in the form of Hurricane Matthew, which devastated the country, killing more than 900 people and leaving large communities under water. The MeaningfulWorld team has been in touch with collaborators, and we are making all efforts to support Haiti financially until we return there in June. We have a "Sponsor a Child in Haiti" project, kindly take a moment to visit <http://www.Meaningfulworld.com> to give your tax-deductible donation securely online. We will personally ensure your donation reaches Haiti. Remember the MeaningfulWorld motto:

**When one helps another,
BOTH become stronger.**

and so forth. When the need is heightened because of a crisis, people are often more open and ready to shift, to learn the lessons, and to transform.

The location is important in terms of logistics, because we've been in places under tents, using outhouses, and without daily comforts. This can compromise the mission if one of the team members gets sick and then you don't have a solid team to work with. You need to balance comfort for the team members with the need.

Everywhere, no matter how poor, there are hotels—you just need the funding to be able to go and reserve these rooms. In the beginning, we weren't able to do that, because volunteers had to raise funds through their own networks, social lives, Kickstarters, or online fund-raising modalities. They weren't able to raise more than their airfare, so we had to stay in compromised places. But for the last two years, we have made commitments to ask people to raise a little more money so that they have the comfort of \$50 a day for a good room with air-conditioning so they can at least sleep well at night.

What challenges might a Psi Chi chapter face when creating or participating in a humanitarian mission?

There are many challenges. The most important is differences in communication style and timing: Some countries like Haiti and parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East don't have the same emphasis on communication. Therefore, we sometimes have to call people on the phone or text them instead of e-mailing, as they don't read e-mails daily. SMS seems to be the best way to communicate in these developing countries because they don't have Wi-Fi or electricity in a consistent and reliable way.

Schedule changes are always happening, so again, you need to have a plan B. In Kenya, two other organizations' volunteers were kidnapped by al-Shabaab. In Palestine, our camp was bombed by Israeli military. There have been military coups and a death threat to my life in Turkey. I can go on and on. I am sure you are not going to select highly volatile countries, but still, so many things can happen.

One time in Haiti, we came out of an interview at a radio station and saw hundreds of people in neon T-shirts with



the number 69 on them running like a huge mob. They were running fast in anger, and some were rolling tires that they were going to burn later. Our friend who was driving us yelled in distress, "Get in the truck! Get in the truck, hurry up, immediately! You're going to be trampled!" We had to get all of our members in the car quickly, because the situation was uncontrollable. Apparently, they had so many presidential candidates in Haiti that they numbered them. But, nobody seemed to know what 69's name was or what issues he stood for. Later on, we took pictures of them burning tires and causing a lot of havoc to get attention. This was negative attention-seeking, but these things happen out of frustration, not having Emotional Intelligence, and not working collaboratively. In these missions, as always, you should be vigilant and aware of your surroundings and safety, and always be in a group.

I can't stress that enough: Always go places in groups. This is how we have been fortunate to not be affected in a major way; we always travel together. There are four or five people on our team—and there is one interpreter and one local driver. We always protect one another.

There are also challenges with health issues. During the day, we have no control over our teaching sites. Sometimes we are under tents or in no-electricity zones, so we might also perspire until a few of us



Meaningfulworld teams distributing handmade dolls called "Heart-Hug Dolls." The heart is a pocket, where we place positive and uplifting messages to the children to read and feel happy. Dolls are handmade by our Coordinator Lorraine Simmons.

become dehydrated. We make sure that we always bring supplements and electrolytes, and take care of our team so that we can be sustainable.

To help us prepare, we have a premission meeting and deployment application where we ask volunteers what kind of illnesses they get when they are under stress. Is it the common cold? Is it diarrhea or constipation? This helps us and helps them be prepared to bring preventive natural supplements along to help members overcome those kinds of personal challenges. Of course, we also empower each volunteer to be prepared for self-care. During the last several years, there have also been times that the State Department cautioned us about visiting a place, because



Upper, left: Luggage full of donations for orphanages and gifts to our collaborators. Upper, middle: Meaningfulworld providing gloves and recyclable trash bags to clean the environment around their camp! Upper, right: Children of refugees sending love to DR who forced them out of their homes! Reversing the cycle of violence and affirming: I open my heart and send love to those who have caused me pain! Lower, left: Teaching EQ to children and staff in orphanages. Lower, right: Meaningfulworld Team training the center for Addiction staff, psychologists and clients.

of cholera, malaria, chikungunya, Zika, or something else; well, Haiti had all of these.

What successful strategies should chapters implement to raise money?

We have done Kickstarters and Indiegogo campaigns, but raising money is all about word of mouth—breathing, talking, thinking, dreaming, and daily reminders. If we are going to Haiti, we have to start letting people know and showing previous work, summaries, and research findings months in advance. Let people know that it is okay if they can't go with us, because they can still be a part of the humanitarian mission in a different way by sending a check or clicking a donate button on a website. Personal outreach has been the most successful strategy.

In your opinion, how do you know that a humanitarian project has been a success?

Wonderful question! We have several ways

that we know our mission is a success. One is our research: We survey people about their levels of trauma and symptoms of PTSD, so that we can compare these data with data from previous missions. We have consistently found that those who are taking our workshops feel much less trauma, and their levels of *forgiveness* and *meaning-making* increase.

We have also received many anecdotal and personal statements about how participants felt that our work is helpful and making a difference. They often show appreciation that we have left the comfort of our homes to share our knowledge. Here are just a few examples from Haiti that are fresh in my mind:

- “I never knew I could feel. You opened my heart, and now I can feel.”
- “I’m not sure if you knew, but you were really talking about me and everything I’m going through.”
- “MeaningfulWorld is the cure for Haiti. Doctors take care of the body, psychologists take care of the mind and

emotions, priests and religious people take care of the spirit, and voodoo priests take care of the environment. But you and your team address all of those and the ecology as well. That’s what we need for Haiti.”



Ani Kalayjian, EdD, BC-RN, BCETS, DDL, was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Science degree from Long Island University (NY, 2001), recognizing 20 years as a pioneering clinical researcher, professor, humanitarian

outreach administrator, community organizer, and psycho-spiritual facilitator around the globe and at the United Nations. She is the recipient of the 2010 Human Rights Award from the American Nurses Association, the Mentoring Award from APA's International Division, and the Humanitarian Award from University of Missouri, as well as 2016, Medal of Distinguished Lecturer from Fordham University. She is the author of *Disaster and Mass Trauma* (1995), chief editor of the international book *Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (2010 Springer), chief editor of two volumes on *Mass Trauma & Emotional Healing Around the World: Rituals and Practices for Healing and Meaning-Making*, a guided meditation CD called *From War to Peace: Transforming Generational Trauma into Meaning Making*, and nine films on humanitarian missions around the globe.