

[DONATE](#)[Media centre](#)[Refworld](#)[Statistics](#)[Careers](#)

# **Efi Latsoudi** on Lesbos wins Efi Latsoudi 2016 **Nansen Award**

[ABOUT US](#)

Efi Latsoudi named as one of two winners of the 2016 Nansen Refugee Award for her tireless work helping refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos.

[EMERGENCIES](#)[WHAT WE DO](#)

By: Kate Bond and Gordon Welters in Lesbos, Greece | 6 September 2016 | [Français](#)

[NEWS AND STORIES](#)

**GOVERNMENTS AND PARTNERS** p fresh milk at home. With so much

**time spent helping refugees, there's never chance to use it.**

[GET INVOLVED](#)

**It's dried, I hope that's okay," she says, apologetically, stirring powder into coffee.**

Today is a rare morning off from her work at "PIKPA village", on the Greek island of Lesbos, where Latsoudi has been helping vulnerable new arrivals – including children, pregnant women and people with disabilities – find sanctuary since 2012. At the height of the influx in 2015, when more than 10,000 people per day were reaching the shores of Lesbos, her volunteer-run initiative became a lifeline for thousands. Now, having been named one of two winners of the 2016 [Nansen Refugee Award](#), her extraordinary efforts are finally receiving the recognition they deserve.

"2015 was overwhelming," recalls Latsoudi. "It was one incident after another. We did a lot of work and we covered a lot of gaps. After that, the authorities understood that they needed to do something."

PIKPA is a former residential holiday center that now offers temporary shelter to vulnerable refugees. Its legions of volunteers offer access to medical care, education, legal assistance, food, clothes and, crucially, a sense of dignity and respect.



'Safe haven' for refugees in Lesvos - joint winner Nansen Refugee Award 2016

Latsoudi, 48, is the softly spoken but quietly powerful human rights activist behind PIKPA. Originally from Athens, she studied psychology, working with people with disabilities, young offenders and other vulnerable people before moving to Lesvos in 2001. There, she quickly became a leading voice in the community, campaigning to protect local wetlands and hosting a weekly radio show.

By 2006, the number of refugees and migrants crossing to Lesvos had increased – and with it the number of deaths at sea. Latsoudi watched, horrified, as the death certificates piled up. “I thought, it is not possible that this is happening next to us and we don’t know anything,” she recalls.

**“2015 was overwhelming. It was one incident after another.”**

Determined to highlight the mounting tragedy, Latsoudi formed a small activist group, regularly visiting the existing hosting facilities on Lesvos and helping refugees with their daily needs. But, by 2012, the crisis had worsened. The island’s facilities were overwhelmed, and thousands of refugees and migrants began sleeping in the parks, streets and main port of Mytilene. Latsoudi knew that a place urgently needed to be found for the most vulnerable among them – those with disabilities and those who were sick, pregnant, young or old – whose needs were rapidly rising.

PIKPA site, a maze of wooden buildings and tents shaded from the sun by pine trees, opened to refugees later that year and immediately became a focal point for volunteer efforts on Lesvos. By

2015, it was hosting around 600 refugees a day, well above its capacity of 150. It offered language lessons, children's activities, livelihoods opportunities and more, fostering a strong sense of community and distributing over 2,000 meals each day. Latsoudi estimates that up to 30,000 refugees have been supported at PIKPA since 2012.

Latsoudi also helped to arrange dignified burials for those who had lost their lives at sea.



Efi Latsoudi at PIKPA camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. © UNHCR/Gordon Welters

"I didn't stop," she remembers. "I was talking to the coroner, I was talking to the person at the cemetery, I was going to the coastguard, going to the hospital, meeting with donors. I was at PIKPA from morning until evening. I remember from June to August in 2015 we had funerals every day. It was something inhuman – I don't know how I did it."

# “There is a face of Europe that is very human and it’s amazing.”

“There is a face of Europe that is very human and it’s amazing,” says Latsoudi, who juggles the relentless demands of PIKPA with her 15-year-old son, Mihalīs. “It can do miracles. And this is a miracle.”

For thousands of men, women and children who have risked everything seeking safety, the shelter and support on offer at PIKPA shows that Europe is capable of providing refuge. Latsoudi’s unshakable compassion changes lives and restores hope to those who have already lost so much.

Solidarity is key, she insists. But it is not the answer. “I think it’s a very simple human thing we have to do, and if we do it things can be very different,” she says. “Solidarity saved lives here. But solidarity is not enough. There should be political decisions so that we won’t experience this again.”

## Related news and stories

---

### VIDEOS

‘Safe haven’ for refugees in Lesbos - joint winner Nansen Refugee Award 2016

### STORIES

Heeding cries for help lands Hellenic Rescue Team 2016 Nansen Award

### VIDEOS

Greek volunteer sea rescue team - joint winners Nansen Refugee Award 2016

---

### VIDEOS

Greece: The refugees waiting for a future

### NEWS

Displaced athletes to make historic debut at Paralympic Games in Rio

### VIDEOS

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi visits a children’s shelter in Greece.

© UNHCR 2001-2016

[Media centre](#)

[Emergencies portal](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Statistics](#)

[Terms & Conditions](#)

[Careers](#)

[Refworld](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Get involved](#)

[Business](#)

## STAY CONNECTED

[Subscribe to our newsletter](#)

Follow: