Media Student Connects Muslims and Non-Muslims through International Multimedia Initiative
by Dresden Romero

After one conversation with Katie Cook, media, film and journalism studies graduate student, you know that she is passionate – passionate about her research and passionate about people.

Cook transforms passion into purpose by connecting unlikely individuals in diverse locales and facilitating an important dialogue.

In May 2015, she was awarded an AHSS Student Research Grant. The grant allowed her to help launch the Virtual Iftar Project (VIP) a part of the Virtual Dinner Guest Project and an international multimedia initiative that connects Muslims and non-Muslims around the world for open discussion and creative collaboration. The project is fueled by a single premise: It is harder to ignore, vilify or harm those with whom we have broken bread.

Throughout the summer of 2015, Cook traveled from Kosovo to the Netherlands, crossing the Serbia/Kosovo border overland, spending time in a squatter community in Slovenia and conducting more than 60 video interviews. She partnered with director and founder of Virtual Dinner Guest Project, Eric Maddox, to coordinate and produce four virtual iftar dinners between Europe and the Middle East during the holy month of Ramadan.

Maddox describes dinner as the oldest public forum. “It’s an opportunity to create community and talk about what’s going on in the world in a meaningful way,” he said.

During the dinners, two different groups in separate locations connect online through Skype and often a live stream. Participants share about their experiences and ask each other important questions about global issues.

VIP allows individuals to share their stories, without physically traveling across the world. Cook says the project provides a media platform to reach people in an unedited way, to offer alternative narratives. “A person-to-person experience, a human conversation, is often the only thing that creates deepened empathy and understanding and changes minds,” said Cook.

Cook and Maddox also conducted interviews on the street, and asked locals one poignant question: Do you think Europe has a problem with Muslim integration? The idea is for the media they collected – a compilation of street conversations and dinner exchanges – to be shared in the form of a short film.

Cook’s work aligns with her passion, and she thinks it’s critical for each of us to be exposed to diverse narratives. “Even if people know what the mainstream media presents [about Islam in the west] is not the whole truth, how do you access other truths, and hear other narratives?” she said.

Cook expressed her gratitude for the grant. “While we managed to travel very frugally, often staying with members of different communities, traveling on crowded and smoky overnight buses and eating more peanut butter and jelly sandwiches than I can count – a project like this still costs money,” she said, “The grant put a roof over my head and an extra spring in my step throughout our European Ramadan road trip.”

What’s next for Katie Cook? She plans to continue the project and work on the film. “Our work is not finished, even though the trip is over. Every day it’s more important to use media to share others’ stories, to escape the single narrative,” said Cook.

She is committed to expanding her worldview. “I don’t feel like I’m an expert; I’m passionate about learning and continuing to become educated about what is going on in the world,” said Cook.