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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## **“OPEN ARMS, OPEN HEART”**

### **BY ANGELES SCHJAER**

*CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.*



My name is Angeles but everyone calls me Churri, I was born in Cuba 43 years ago. My birthplace feels more like a lottery ticket because until I was 17 I was apatride. That's what wars do to you, when caught in the middle, you don't exist. When things settled, I became a Spanish citizen and engaged in solidarity work. I've helped in senior citizens centers, in Special-Ed camps, I've worked as an animal rescuer... I once begged the crew of the Rainbow Warrior to take me in but they sent me back to my school life.

When the massive refugee crisis hit the Greek islands, people in Spain mobilized to send over aid supplies and emergency material. Thousands were attempting to reach European shores with no possessions but their phones, if they were lucky. If they made it alive, the EU kept them in ill-named refugee camps: human dumps rather, where people live in appalling sanitary conditions, missing everything, from shoes to food.



*Photo by Juan Rodríguez.*

At that point, I did the first thing that came to mind: I am an antique art dealer and restorer by profession, so I filled my shop with rescue equipment to send over to Lesbos. Spanish firemen were shipping containers over and many individuals, voluntary workers and small NGOs organized supplies to provide for those who were either abandoned to their fates at sea or stuck in overcrowded camps. Every day, Roy (my dog) and I travelled back and forth to the containers with supermarket carts filled to the brim with medicines, clothes, covers, everything was in short supply.

After a while, I joined Open Arms, an NGO that specializes in surveillance and rescue missions of refugee boats in the Aegean and Central Mediterranean Sea. We also raise awareness about how people who try to reach Europe are fleeing from war, persecution or poverty, each one carrying inside an untold story.

I went on to work in Senegal with local authorities to inform people about the dangers of illegal immigration. I explained over and over how those who had exited their countries, without any information from traffickers, end up in the hands of the mafia, everything is stolen from them, they are raped, tortured and sold as slaves. [#VoicesforHope from Open Arms](#).

Most rescued people say that had they known how horrific the journey was going to be, they would never have done it. All the women without exceptions were raped many times over, men too but they're too embarrassed to say it. Either way, the people drifting at sea all have the same fear and desperation in their exhausted stares.





At sea, the sound and smell are ever present. The cries and exclamations of sadness or joy, the laughter, the cries and.. the smell of burned flesh, the stink of blood and urine, and above all the reek of **death**. Death here smells of sadness and pain, because they tried and they have failed, they left everything to die in the unknown. My life isn't the same anymore and neither am I. I feel like I have been living several existences in one since I have started working with Open Arms. All of us pay a heavy physical and emotional price for the work because we constantly see the best and the worst in human beings. But we are here because the best ends up winning.

*Photos courtesy of Santi Palacios.*





