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FORA's 2024 Restorative Justice Internship

Re: FORA's 2024 Restorative Justice Internship

From: Julianna Larson, Chief Outreach Officer
Gowri Rao, Director of Communications
Nicole Chase, Chief of Staff
Kathleen O'Connor, Educational Programs Director
Michael O'Connor, Managing Director

We at FORA are honored to invite you to help us spread the word and/pr apply for our **2024 Summer Internship Program**. The summer of 2020, we ran our first internship program with great success, welcoming undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. level interns from Northwestern, Johns Hopkins, Loyola, Amherst, Wellesley, and more. The positive atmosphere of our learning center cannot be described succinctly, but it is telling that we regularly attract visitors who are drawn in off the street as they pass by. The happy energy and active learning are palpable even through the windows of our storefront, with visitor after visitor saying that our storefront "glows." Nobody can resist the joy of helping refugee children learn to read — and that joy resounds throughout the welcoming space that we have together created.

Since 2020, we have revamped the structure of our internship program to ensure the program is both holistic and accessible to young professionals juggling outside jobs and education. Summer interns will have the choice between a half and full day opportunity. Full day interns will work directly with our students and assist in administrative projects to understand the daily operations of our grass-root movement. Half day interns will work primarily with our 103 refugee students.

I. INTERNSHIP INFORMATION

General Position Description: Interns will deliver cutting-edge High Impact Tutoring ("HIT") to over one-hundred formerly pre-literate SLIFE (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education) refugee students in grades K through 12 from over 12 countries including Myanmar, Afghanistan, Syria, and Bhutan. Interns will also work alongside our administrative departments to learn the daily operations of a grass-roots non-profit organization.

FORA is made possible through our staff's work in grant writing and fundraising, volunteer recruitment, educational strategy and bridging the gap between Chicago Public Schools and students' families. Full day interns will have the opportunity to lead and assist an array of projects with operational departments.

Zoom Information Session: We will host information sessions on the following dates and times:

Monday, February 12 at 5:00 p.m Central Time

Wednesday, February 28 at 7:00 p.m Central Time

Thursday, March 14 at 6:00 p.m Central Time

Philosophy: We are a community, and we invest in each other every day. We want our interns to have robust experiences at FORA and to help them on their journey as they search for and discover their life calling. We elevate people who show talent and dedication, regardless of age or resume. For example, a FORA volunteer college intern was hired full-time after graduating to the job of Director of Outreach. Within months on the job, she was elevated to Chief of Staff despite the youngest person on staff.

Location: The site of FORA's empowerment center, 6431 N. California Ave., Chicago, IL, 60645. This is in the West Ridge neighborhood, known as one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the United States, with 43 percent of the population foreign-born, with 40 different languages spoken, and with more than 60 percent speaking a language other than English as their home language.

Qualifications: As you will be teaching reading in English to preliterate students, you need to be able to fluently read in English. If you can read well in English, you have the educational qualifications for this job. Desired skills are experience with Google Workspace, organization, and community outreach. We value patience, kindness, wellness, intercultural connection, a passion for learning and a determined resilience... and modeling these values for others. All tutors must undergo a formal background check to work with the children.

Recommendations and Awards: If you meet the necessary criteria, FORA will nominate you for a prestigious Presidential Volunteer Service Award. We also endeavor to truly get to know each of our interns so that upon completion of internship, we can write robust letters of recommendation for future jobs and grad school applications.

Application Process and Deadlines: Please apply through our online portal at <https://refugeefora.org/internships>. We have limited spots and will consider applications on a rolling basis until April 15th.

Further Information:

2023 Annual Report:

https://issuu.com/refugeefora/docs/fora_2023-impactreport_final_highres

FORA Overview Video: <https://vimeo.com/657683229>

A Message from Michael O'Connor, Managing Director: <https://vimeo.com/657684983>

II. LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning Outcome #1: Intern will learn how to view and deliver educational services through a social justice lens that values not only solidarity but also subsidiarity and sustainability.

Learning Outcome #2: Intern will learn how to implement High Dosage Tutoring (“HDT”) strategies, a form of tutoring that has recently been recommended by numerous institutions to accelerate student learning.

Learning Outcome #3: Intern will learn how to support and empower refugee students. Most of the students with whom we work are Rohingya students from Myanmar. The Rohingya have been subjected to ethnic cleansing and/or genocide and have been identified by the United Nations as the most persecuted minority on Earth. However, they are also not only resilient but also highly motivated to obtain a robust education.

Learning Outcome #4: Intern will become familiar with and involved in the inner workings of a quickly growing nonprofit organization, as afternoons at FORA are spent working on all of the “behind-the-scenes” aspects of running an organization, including administration, program development and implementation, outreach, fundraising, data collection and analysis, recruitment, and more.

III. WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE DO, AND WHY

From the day that we opened our doors, FORA has existed in response to the fact that, around the world, oppressors have used and continue to use denial of education as a means of keeping minorities oppressed. And, as a result of this systematic denial of education, many refugees arrive in the United States both having never been to school and unable to read and/or write in their own languages. The acronym used to describe this population is SLIFE (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education) refugee students, and we are a Chicago nonprofit laser-focused on ensuring that these children have a fair shot at succeeding when they arrive in the United States.

Although we welcome refugee students from all countries, the vast majority of our current students are Rohingya refugees, a Muslim ethnic minority from Myanmar that the United Nations has called the most persecuted minority in the world. Considered non-citizens within their home country, the Rohingya have not only been denied access to school, but also essentially every other right or privilege afforded to citizens, such as healthcare, passports, and the ability to work and marry. Decades of persecution culminated in 2017, when the Rohingya were subject to brutal ethnic cleansing and genocide by Myanmar’s military junta, with thousands killed and

village after village burnt to the ground. Today, nearly one million Rohingya live in refugee camps across the border in Bangladesh, and with only 17% of males and 6% of females able to read and write in their primary written language, the Rohingya, as an ethnic group, have a lower literacy rate than that of any country in the world.

When hundreds of Rohingya refugee families were resettled in Chicago in the mid to late 2010s, FORA opened to meet their educational needs. In late 2021, the world watched as the Rohingya refugee crisis was heartbreakingly echoed in Afghanistan, where, among other offenses, the Taliban has denied women of their right to education, thereby ensuring that they are oppressed. FORA has so far welcomed nine Afghan refugee children into our program, and as more Afghan families arrive in our neighborhood, we will welcome them robustly. At FORA, we believe that we are all responsible for helping each other, and **when we can make a difference, we must.**

Refugee children who have lost years of education are already highly vulnerable to failing in school when they arrive in the United States, but the direness of the situation is exacerbated for refugee populations who arrive in the U.S. illiterate, which puts them at an extreme disadvantage in learning English. As a result, many SLIFE refugee students are put in the discouraging position of being placed in a grade level that matches their age but is far beyond their academic level. Furthermore, their parents are unable to help their children catch up as they themselves have never received an education. Out of sheer determination to create a brighter future for their children, these families have escaped horrific circumstances, and yet the heartbreaking reality is that the lack of foundational educational and literacy skills makes it seemingly impossible to access the education and future that they have dreamed of achieving in their new homeland. FORA steps in to fill this gap. With very few organizations or governments considering new approaches to address the education of SLIFE refugees, we are now at the forefront of a movement to show that there is a viable path forward for the millions of SLIFE refugee students around the world. By combating the notion that these children are “beyond help,” we allow for authentic dialogue to take place on how we as a nation can welcome others in their same predicament. Many countries simply do not want to accept illiterate refugees, and adding Islamophobia to the mix, most countries bar their doors completely. This must be counteracted by showing not only how horribly these refugee populations have been treated, but that there is a viable path forward for them here in their new homeland. By taking the research-backed practice of high dosage tutoring (HDT) and making it responsive to the needs of the refugee community we serve in Chicago, FORA is serving as not only a thought leader in this field, but also as a model for other more-powerful NGOs and for school systems themselves — demonstrating that these pre-literate refugee children deserve specially tailored interventions, and that if they are provided with such interventions, that they will thrive.

Our solution is to provide each of our sixty-five students with two hours each weekday of one-to-one tutoring, for a total of over 2600 hours of tutoring provided by FORA volunteer tutors

each month. This investment in individual tutoring is cutting-edge and has recently been termed “high impact” or “high dosage” tutoring (see, for example, [Nickow, Oreopoulos, & Quan, 2020](#); [Mahnken, 2020](#)). We have been using this approach since 2018, and in November 2020 the Annenberg Institute at Brown University endorsed this educational strategy as the best response to COVID learning loss ([Kraft & Falcen, 2020](#)).

We at FORA focus like a laser on the critical skills of reading and mathematical understanding. This strategy helps our students to advance their academic as well as social-emotional development. While children build up skills and confidence at FORA, their new abilities allow them to participate more meaningfully in their classrooms. We also liaise with students’ teachers so that we can provide to targeted students some components of “sheltered instruction,” a pedagogical strategy that involves “pre-teaching” students’ upcoming classroom lessons. This method allows non-English speaking students to make better use of classroom instruction and has been shown to be effective for SLIFE students (See for example, [Hanson-Thomas, 2008](#)).

Because of the tenacity and hard work of the students we serve, our results have been breathtaking. In July 2021, FORA switched back to in-person tutoring, with fantastic results. To catch up young refugee students in kindergarten through third grade suffering from Covid learning loss in reading, FORA held an “Early Readers Summer Intensive Reading Program,” where each child read two hours each day for eight weeks, one on one, with a trained tutor. The standardized test results were exceptional; in less than two months, *our 1st through 3rd graders gained approximately six months of reading ability and our kindergarten students increased 27 percentile points, both against national norms.*

As an overview of past results, our start-of-program testing using the University of Oregon’s nationally normed reading and math measures showed that all but two of our students initially scored below the 50th percentile in math, and nearly a third scored below the 20th percentile. Last spring, 60% of our students who were retested scored above the 50th percentile math. Two-thirds of our students doubled the expected rate of gain in reading fluency during their first year. Three students saw triple the expected rate of gain! In addition to our internal testing, we also have data on standardized tests (NWEA MAP tests) administered by Chicago Public Schools. The median rate of gain of FORA students made in the year before they joined FORA was in the 40th percentile nationally. Nine months after joining FORA, the median gain for reading was in the 76th percentile, and in math, the rate of gain was in the 99th percentile for mathematics. Such advancements completely change the experience of school for our students and mean the world to their parents, and most importantly, our students feel more confident and happier in their classrooms.

In addition to high dosage tutoring, in Summer 2021, we deepened to include a family/school partnership program and a weekend robotics program, and, in Fall 2021 we launched a

storytelling program with a curriculum specifically designed to help refugee students work through past trauma and find their voices. We also just this summer expanded to open a second empowerment center around the block from our main office, which in the short term has been important for socially distancing our students, and in the long term will allow us to continue to grow. But even as we grow, at our core we remain the same: our vision is a world where refugees in need are welcomed and empowered. Our mission is to *ensure that refugee families are provided access to an education sufficient to prepare them to become economically self-sufficient and robustly engaged in American civic life*. We value patience, kindness, wellness, intercultural connection, a passion for learning and a determined resilience... and modeling these values for others. And we strongly believe that literacy is a human right.

IV. FORA LEADERSHIP BIOS

Michael O'Connor, Managing Director, attended Amherst College and Harvard Law School, where he was President of the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau. While in school, he worked for Cesar Chavez and the U.F.W, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the Southern Center for Human Rights, D.C. Public Defender Service, and the United States Department of Justice, Office of Policy Development. In the mid-to-late '90s, he was a Senior Trial Attorney for the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice and an Associate Counsel to the President of the United States at the White House. He then was an international field worker for Catholic Relief Services in war-torn Madagascar and Kosovo and then served as Regional Director for South Asia for International Justice Mission, in which capacity he testified to a U.S. House of Representatives' committee on issues of international human trafficking. Since 2007, he has been a portfolio manager in the financial industry.

Kathleen O'Connor, Educational Programs Director, has spent her entire adult life teaching in diverse educational settings. She graduated magna cum laude from Amherst College with a degree in History. Afterwards she taught math in the Washington D.C. public schools, before earning a Masters' in Education from Harvard University. She went on to earn a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Vanderbilt University where she worked developing math curricula and teaching both under-privileged middle school students and Vanderbilt undergraduates. She was awarded the Provost Fellowship in Educational Technology and the prestigious Master Teacher fellowship, which she used to study equity in undergraduate teaching. Upon graduation, she was awarded the Jules Seaman Award for scholastic, personal and professional achievement, and the Tennessee State Volunteer Award, recognizing her work with students from low-income families. She then moved to Madagascar where she worked as a volunteer English teacher with Malagasy orphans and as a full-time math and science teacher at the American School of Antananarivo. She later worked as an educational consultant in Belgrade and spent several years as an assistant professor of psychology at Dominican University, where the majority of her students were first generation college students.

Nicole Chase, Chief Financial Officer, is originally from New York but has called four countries and five states home before settling here in Illinois. She obtained a Bachelors in Politics and Latin American Studies with a concentration in Peace and Conflict Studies from Oberlin College. She has spent the last several years working in nonprofit administration for organizations such as the New England Innocence Project and Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights. Nicole is passionate about working towards creating a country that lives up to its founding ideals of freedom and equality.

Giulianna Larson, Chief Outreach Officer, is a current undergraduate student at Loyola University Chicago studying multimedia journalism, Spanish, Arabic and political science. Although she began her journey at FORA as a Work Study tutor, she later participated in FORA's summer internship and was hired at FORA's Chief Outreach Officer in August of 2022. As of this winter, Giulianna recruited over 500 tutors and led over thirty interns during the summer of 2023. When not at FORA, Giulianna can be found around Chicago amplifying community voices through photojournalism.

Gowri Rao, Director of Communications and Fundraising Assistant, was born in Florida and grew up moving around a lot. Besides Florida, she has lived in Georgia, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois as well as in India and the UAE. She graduated magna cum laude from the University of Chicago with a B.A. in Linguistics and a minor in History. Prior to joining FORA, she worked as a volunteer English teacher with the Indian Development Foundation, a research assistant in various linguistics labs at her university, and a virtual English and math tutor for children in elementary through high school. She loves working with children and watching them learn and grow and is passionate about expanding access to education. In her free time, you will probably find Gowri reading a fantasy novel, walking along Lake Michigan, or hanging out in her apartment with her roommates and friends.