FORA

FORGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFUGEES IN AMERICA



2021 IMPACT REPORT

LITERACY IS A HUMAN RIGHT.

KEY STATS FROM FY 20/21

6 MONTHS OF PROGRESS IN 2 MONTHS OF FORA SUMMER SCHOOL, AS MEASURED BY STANDARDIZED TESTS IN OUR ELEMENTARY SUMMER READING PROGRAM

30,000 HOURS OF VIRTUAL OR IN PERSON HIGH DOSAGE TUTORING IN FY20/21

4 NEW PROGRAMS

100+ NEW VOLUNTEERS

28: APPROX. NUMBER OF FAMILY INTERVENTIONS PER MONTH

9 AFGHAN CHILDREN WHO ENTERED FORA IN FALL 2021

71 REFUGEE SLIFE (STUDENTS WITH LIMITED OR INTERRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION) CURRENTLY SERVED

RECENT RESEARCH FOUND A 1%-10% HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE FOR SLIFE STUDENTS (ROSS & ZIEMKE, 2016). AT FORA, 100% OF OUR SLIFE STUDENTS ARE ON TRACK TO GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL

20TH TO THE 70TH PERCENTILE -- AMOUNT OUR KINDERGARTEN GROUP JUMPED ON NATIONAL STANDARDIZED TEST FOR EARLY LITERACY THIS SUMMER

11,676 LBS OF FOOD DISTRIBUTED TO REFUGEE FAMILIES DURING LOCKDOWN WITH PARTNERSHIP OF THE ISLAMIC FOUNDATION OF VILLA PARK

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THE CRISIS WE FACE.

A LETTER FROM FARAH NOOR CHEEMA, PRESIDENT OF FORA



Pictured: Simran Arora, Parent/School Partnership Program Coordinator; Kathleen O'Connor, Ph.D., Educational Programs Director; Farah Noor Cheema, M.D., President; Lauren Kearns, Chief of Staff

Dear FORA Family,

The past two years have been challenging, with most of us isolated in our homes. But we survived. We rediscovered unused exercise bikes, tuned into the most recent Netflix shows, and, after much struggle, mastered Zoom. And with 2021 soon ending, we look forward to turning the page on the pandemic and to beginning life anew, committed to resolutions to live joyously expansive lives.

I have learned how fragile we humans are and how we all live closer than formerly thought to societal collapse. And, of course, some of us live in societies that have actually – without exaggeration – collapsed; I can only imagine how women and girls now feel in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. While I was secure in my house, hibernating with my electronic gadgets, so many people were losing jobs, without health insurance, hungry, and dying. Others were literally losing their countries.

This reality focuses my attention on the most vulnerable – those without either a home or a country – our brothers and sisters who are refugees, fleeing for their lives to seek shelter in squalid, disease-filled camps.

Shockingly, in 2020, there were almost 21,000,000 U.N.-protected refugees. Although almost all these refugees face challenging futures, refugees who are illiterate face the direst fates. Potential host countries, simply put, are afraid to welcome the illiterate. And because of repressive governments who are using the denial of an education as a weapon of oppression, the number of illiterate refugees is immense and growing.

"Refugees who are illiterate face the direst fates. Potential host countries, simply put, are afraid to welcome the illiterate."

The top five countries from which refugees have fled – composing 36% of all U.N.-protected refugees -- are: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. All these countries face great social instability. Other than Syria, all these countries also face a disastrous literacy crisis. Afghanistan has an adult literacy rate of 43% (with an adult female rate of below 30%); Somalia has a 38% rate; and South Sudan has the lowest rate in the world at 27%. Meanwhile, the Rohingya -- forced out of Myanmar after purposely denied an education for four decades by the military junta — have a literacy rate of less than 20%! With 750,000 Rohingya trapped in the world's largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh for the past four years, international resettlement bureaucrats do not know what to do to help these most vulnerable members of our human race.

"If my family were in a refugee camp because of political machinations beyond my control, I would pray that good-hearted people would work on well-researched plans for us to escape to safety."

We, as a nation, are at a crossroads regarding this issue. The undecided among us reasonably asks, "what resources would we need to provide to these refugees to ensure that they thrive in the U.S.?" Many well-intentioned refugee-focused organizations try to avoid this question out of concern that our doors will be shut on these most persecuted of people if Americans knew that many refugees are illiterate.

But this is no time to play "hide and seek." This is a moment for honesty, ideas and solutions. The people of the U.S. deserve the truth about what supports will be needed for illiterate refugees. Moreover, refugees themselves deserve for all people of good will to be given accurate information so that all can work towards solutions regarding the refugee illiteracy crisis.

I am haunted by the fate of refugees. I know that if my family were in a refugee camp because of political machinations beyond my control, I would pray that good-hearted people would work on well-researched plans for us to escape to safety. I would appeal to the humanity of people I didn't even know for help to start life afresh. I would plead for compassion, justice and effective action. I would hope that somebody would hear my pleas. And I feel that this is what being human is all about -- calling upon each other when in need, listening for and to each other as brothers and sisters, and helping each other out of difficult circumstances. Of course, the issue of refugee illiteracy is only one of many important issues facing the world today. But is it the issue that most resonates with me, focusing my mind on what it is that we should expect of each other as fellow humans.

"What is so encouraging to me is that we can respond effectively to this crisis.

We can come up with scalable, replicable, pedagogically appropriate strategies to help a generation of persecuted, illiterate refugees thrive in America."

What is so encouraging to me is that we can respond effectively to this crisis. We can come up with scalable, replicable, pedagogically appropriate strategies to help a generation of persecuted, illiterate refugees thrive in America. Literacy is magical, but it is not magic. We were all once illiterate! And with a proper educational framework and dogged persistence, we can help illiterate refugees become literate, catch up to grade level, graduate from college or technical schools, get good jobs, and pursue their own American stories.

In the following pages, we provide a glimpse of what FORA does to make this refugee plea a reality. We work on the grassroots level, from the bottom up, but we also have both a vision regarding what the world, *writ large*, could and should look like and a tested strategy to move us forward towards such vision. I hope that you read on, that you are as inspired as I am, and that you give generously, of your time and of your resources. If you listen carefully, the most vulnerable among us are asking us to care about their present and invest in their futures. I am confident that the rate of return on our investment will be staggeringly large and reverberate through the generations. I am also convinced that this is, simply put, the right thing to do.

We, at FORA, truly believe in empowerment through education. It is, indeed, a slogan, but it is also our passion.

Sincerely,

Farah Noor Cheema

Farah Noor Cheema
President, Board of Directors
FORA





Double Your Impact!

Certain of FORA's board members are willing to match any donation that you make, up to $200,000, on or before February 15, 2022.

That means that your donation will have twice as much impact on a refugee child's ability to read, write and do math, and pursue her own American Story.

Ways to Give:

Credit or debit card online at www.refugeefora.org/donate

Check or Donor Advised Fund mailed to 5822 S. Blackstone Ave, Apt 2, Chicago, IL 60637

Stock donations or employer matched contributions (email info@refugeefora.org for more details)

FORA

SCAN TO DONATE

MEET FERESHTEH

"Honestly, for college they have services for everyone...but I'm not everyone. 'Everyone' means the people who were born here, who know the languages and know the education system. But I wasn't. I was unique. I did not know that much English. I did not know the systems. These systems were not enough for me. When I came, I didn't know the language and I didn't know anything about higher education – colleges and universities. Refugees need an organization to talk with us, to guide and help us to move forward and get into school. I have many, many refugee friends who never found this sort of organization to connect them to their education in the United States, so they stopped going to school. And they are so regretful of their decision, and they are so sad about that. I was lucky enough to find FORA, and now I am a junior at University of Illinois Chicago studying biology. I think there needs to be more organizations like this... everywhere."
-- Fereshteh

Twenty-three years old, Fereshteh has already lived in three countries, speaks four languages, and is a joyful fashionista and aspiring doctor. She was also an Afghan refugee — a status that has impacted her life trajectory since before her birth, when the Taliban forced her father out of his city under the threat of death. Barred from returning to their homeland, Fereshteh and her three younger siblings were born as refugees, living first in Iran and then in Turkey. However, neither country provided refugees with the basic human right to education, a right that Fereshteh's parents desperately wanted — as any parents would — for their children.

But even after being resettled in the United States, the dream of a robust education still eluded Fereshteh, who was 18 years old when her family emerged from the doors of O'Hare Airport into their new homeland. As she was too old to be placed in grade school with her younger siblings, her only other option was to enroll at the local community college, despite having been previously denied a consistent and meaningful access to education, which was all that most of her new peers had ever known.



Pictured: Fereshteh and her FORA tutor, Doug Burke

ADVOCATE FOR AFGHAN GIRLS



"I took the placement test and I started at Truman College as a freshman," Fereshteh explains. "The first year was very exhausting and very overwhelming. I did not know the language. I did not know the environment. I had to take full-time classes because I wanted to finish at the right time. But I did not know what classes I should take. I did not know that each score that I was getting was going to affect my final grade. It was very hard at the beginning."

"We cannot understate how inspiring it is to have young, world-changing advocates such as Fereshteh in our midst — showing us all every day the bright future that awaits when female refugees are restored the rights that are theirs."

However, in 2019 Fereshteh's family stumbled upon FORA in their neighborhood. Fereshteh was paired with a volunteer tutor, Doug Burke, who happened to be a STEM professor at Malcolm X College. Through daily, one-on-one tutoring with Doug at FORA, Fereshteh's grades, language abilities, and confidence soared. "A lot of things changed," says Doug, "but her dedication was one thing that didn't. She was so determined right from the beginning... and it made her so happy when she saw she could succeed."

A very humble person stepped into the gap and another's life was changed for the better. There is no "magic recipe." This is the only way it happens.

Two years later, Fereshteh had earned her associate's degree with honors — an incredible achievement further proving her tenacity. She was determined and ready to transfer to a four-year university to complete her bachelor's degree, and with support from two amazing FORA women who served as mentors -- and who were there for every application, essay, interview, and recommendation -- Fereshteh was accepted into multiple universities.

Today, Fereshteh is a junior at University of Illinois at Chicago and is a paid member of the FORA outreach staff, most recently playing an important role in translating for newly arrived Afghan students. Wanting to empower the next generation of refugee students to joyfully reach their academic potential in the way that she herself was empowered, Fereshteh spent this past summer as a Senior Educational Fellow at FORA, tutoring young students each day. And when at the end of August, Afghanistan heartbreakingly fell to the very oppressors that had driven out her own family, Fereshteh was not only the first to call for FORA to respond, but also served as FORA's media representative when we were asked by NBC News to speak on this issue. Closely familiar with the brutality of the Taliban and the injustice of denial of education being used as a weapon of oppression against women, Fereshteh's interview brought the FORA team to tears. (View interview at www.tinyurl.com/epvewsek)

Since the day FORA opened our doors, we have stood firmly in our belief that education and literacy are human rights. So, we cannot understate how inspiring it is to have young, world-changing advocates such as Fereshteh in our midst — showing us all every day the bright future that awaits when female refugees are restored the rights that are theirs.

WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE WE FACE?

REFUGEE ILLITERACY.

At FORA, we focus on serving refugees who come to the United States whose entire families are illiterate. Because receiving countries pick and choose which refugees they deem desirable, many refugees who are seen as "less desirable" (for example, those without an education or those who are sick) sit and wait, and wait and wait. And while they wait, their health worsens, and their children grow up without receiving an education. The bitter irony is that these "passed over" refugees are being overlooked precisely because of the abuse and denial of rights they suffered in their previous homelands.

Undeniably, welcoming illiterate refugees requires detailed preparation, especially because refugees arriving in the United States with extreme deficits in formal education are particularly vulnerable to school failure. Unlike newcomers who have had the benefit of education in their native languages and whose parents attended elementary school, students from illiterate families have to learn an understanding of how school works in addition to literacy and English. One recent study found that children with no or interrupted schooling are "20 percent to 50 percent less likely to meet proficiency standards on fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math tests, and... take over a year longer to test out of English language learner status [than students learning English who do not have interrupted schooling]."

And then we must consider the students' parents. Refugee parents, like all other parents, must be empowered to interact with their children's teachers and to understand what is expected of students after school hours and during the summers (as well as to help their very young children begin to read at home). But refugee parents are hamstrung if they do not speak commonly spoken languages in the United States or read or write in any language. Seventy-seven percent of adult refugees in the United States are characterized as LEP-upon-arrival ["Limited English Proficient," another way of saying 'functionally illiterate in English"], 19% more than in the 1980s. The situation does not improve much after arrival. Because refugees so often come to the United States focused, of necessity, on financially supporting their families, they have limited time for learning English or furthering their education. The logistics of obtaining essential educational inputs can be overwhelming. Just five to ten percent of refugees "advance their education once in the United States…. a sign perhaps of the U.S. resettlement program's heavy emphasis on" rapid employment, as well as limited support for refugee education and language instruction.













For adult LEP refugees, English-as-a-Second Language ("ESL") classes often are provided only during working hours, too far away from home, and without childcare. Meanwhile, many undereducated refugee children are in the demoralizing and untenable position of either being placed in grades far above their appropriate academic level or far below their age. Their refugee parents are often not able to help to fill the children's educational gaps or to navigate the bureaucratic maze required to provide basic family stability.

A review of the relevant literature makes two truths clearly apparent. First, refugees who arrive in the United States illiterate in their native language are at a severe disadvantage in learning English. Second, illiterate refugee children will arrive to encounter school systems that are not prepared for them and for which they are not prepared. These realities are reflected in the 2017 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) report, which concludes with a basic challenge – to "expand education and language-learning opportunities. Expanding these opportunities would require improving refugees' access to mainstream education…."

The research regarding the current challenges regarding mainstreaming refugee children provides an overwhelmingly bleak picture, as follows:

-- "Adjusting to school [is] one of the most difficult experiences for young refugees" and "[s]tudents with interrupted schooling have missed the staged development which occurs in formal schooling, have little age-appropriate experience in literacy, numeracy, use of print and multi-modal texts, limited content knowledge of the world and little experience of problem-based learning." (1)
-- "Lack of literacy in a first language may impede refugees' integration, as it indicates a lack of basic educational attainment – a needed foundation for building English language skills." (2)
-- "[T]he most significant variable in the rate of English language acquisition is the amount of formal schooling students have received in their first language." (3)
-- "In addition to significant deficits in content knowledge and English language proficiency, refugee students without stable previous school having poor organizational skills and time management." (4)
-- "Refugee students with minimal schooling lack the literacy skills to engage effectively with content in the academic subject areas…. and to scaffold their understanding and learning strategies to process content…. As a result of this and due to their past life experiences – for example, trauma, displacements, refugee camps and disrupted schooling – most teachers of refugee children are having to develop new ways and new classroom strategies to address refugee student needs and expectations." (5)

Few organizations, institutions or governments are contemplating any "new ways" that illiterate refugee students' needs and expectations might be met. But ignoring the problem does not make it vanish and does a great disservice to refugees themselves. We predict that the politics of receiving countries will only grow more hostile to desperate refugees from places such as Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, Somalia, the Central African Republic, Bhutan, and Liberia, unless and until we all start figuring out how to effectively welcome illiterate refugees.

FORA is stepping into this gap. This is our expertise, our niche, and we are not afraid to shine a light on this problem and to dare to address it. But this niche must be broadened and amplified if the reasonable hopes of hundreds of thousands of refugees are to be fulfilled. So, we need allies… many allies… in welcoming illiterate refugees and rallying a generation of like-minded individuals, organizations and politicians to our cause. That is what we are doing right now. As we at FORA rally more and more allies, we are building a community of direct action, and, as the saying goes, actions often speak louder than words. Actions are, of course, coordinated by strategic and tactical plans. Our plans are sound and our execution professional. To find out the details, read on!

(1) Maya Cranitch, "Developing Language and Literacy Skills to Support Refugee Students in the transition from Primary to Secondary School," Australian Journal of Language and Literacy 33, 3. (2010); 257.

(2) Randy Capps et al., "The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges," Migration Policy Institute, National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, June 14, 2017, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges (accessed on July 7, 2020), 2.

(3) Virginia P. Collier, "Acquiring a Second Language for School," Directions in Language Education 1, 4 (1995), https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED394301 (accessed on July 8, 2020)

(4) 29 Jenny Miller, Jane Mitchell, and Jill Brown, "Interrupted Schooling and the Acquisition of Literacy: Experiences of Sudanese Refugees in Victorian Secondary Schools." Prospect 20, 2. ResearchGate, August (2005),

(5) Naidoo, Loshini. "Developing Social Inclusion through after-School Homework Tutoring: a Study of African Refugee Students in Greater Western Sydney." British Journal of Sociology and Education, 30, 3, (2009), Taylor & Francis, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01425690902812547 (accessed July 8, 2020).



OUR CORNER OF CHICAGO

Why has a small corner of Chicago called West Ridge emerged as the hub of a national movement to address the unique challenges facing illiterate refugees?

And why shouldn't like-minded folk of good heart simply focus on working in their own neighborhoods to address this issue instead of investing in West Ridge?

In America, we have a pithy saying that says to "think globally but act locally." And we encourage you to think globally. Think about what is happening in Afghanistan to women and girls right now, with no international reporters there to report on the carnage and think about the 750,000 Rohingya housed in revolting refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, with virtually no one even knowing about their plight.

But when you want to act locally, you look around and you see very few Rohingya Muslims or Afghan girls or Nepali-speaking Bhutanese or South Sudanese refugees who need your help. And the reason why is that there are so few let into the United States in the first place. And when they are let in then they are intentionally dispersed throughout the country.

But what is amazing that is happening in our little corner of West Ridge, Chicago, is that so many of the refugees who have been deliberately scattered throughout the country are now coming to our very special, little corner of the globe.

They are coming to our neighborhood for a reason. Because West Ridge has abundantly invited refugees since the 1920s. First German refugees after World War One. Then Jewish refugees after the Holocaust. Then Pakistani and Indian refugees after the 1947 Partition. And on and on. Croatian refugees after the Balkan Wars. And now Rohingya refugees. While approximately only 8,000 Rohingya refugees have been let into the United States in the past 20 years, there are 400 Rohingya families living within walking distance of FORA's two empowerment centers. Approximately 2,000 people. Approximately 25% of all Rohingya in the United States are living in this neighborhood.

And that is why our local West Ridge, Chicago, issue is really a national issue. And – talking about bringing the world to our doorstep -- because of the presence of an already-established welcoming Muslim population, in recent weeks Afghans who have escaped their country's collapse are settling here as well.

"We will ensure that national and international politicians who are looking at our neighborhood come to understand that their cynicism about the prospects of illiterate refugees is misplaced because of what has been accomplished in this historic corner of Chicago called West Ridge."

"But what is amazing that is happening in our little corner of West Ridge, Chicago, is that so many of the refugees who have been deliberately scattered throughout the country are now coming to our very special, little corner of the globe (...) Because of the dense cluster of refugees located in this historic locale, politicians who specialize in refugee placements are closely watching West Ridge to see if these formerly illiterate refugees merely survive or thrive."

Because of the dense cluster of refugees located in this historic locale, politicians who specialize in refugee placements are closely watching West Ridge to see if these formerly illiterate refugees merely survive or thrive. We are not exaggerating as to the number of "eyes" on us. We regularly have visitors from all over the country and the world. In fact, the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees visited West Ridge before the pandemic and met local government and school officials as well as with some parents of FORA children specifically about their education.

We want to make sure (all our volunteers want to make sure) that these formerly preliterate refugees thrive, and we have a plan. We are proving concept and starting to scale up, and then we are going to demand to be noticed. We will ensure that national and international politicians who are looking at our neighborhood come to understand that their cynicism about the prospects of illiterate refugees is misplaced because of what has been accomplished in this historic corner of Chicago called West Ridge. We will not give up on the international politicians and will appeal to their better angels; they will, someday soon, see, with new eyes, the potential in the more than a million illiterate refugees now trapped in refugee camps around the world. They will see in these refugees what we see so clearly and obviously – that they are humans, like us, worthy of being given a fighting chance to resettle in a place in which they will be safe and can shape the narrative arcs of their own lives. Confronted by the obvious, how could anyone believe otherwise?



OUR ANSWER FOR CATCHING PRE-LITERATE REFUGEE STUDENTS UP TO GRADE LEVEL?

HIGH DOSAGE TUTORING.

"T" is one of my favorite students. He is bright, funny, and a hard worker. Like many of our students, he speaks five languages. Unfortunately, his reading skills remain low even though he has been in the United States and American public schools for a few years.

Students like "T" struggle because they missed years of foundational learning while refugees. Moreover, because of political oppression in their homelands, their parents do not read and write and, therefore, do not know how to traverse the U.S. educational landscape or provide needed at-home academic support. These students face inordinate difficulties. One of the few academic research papers investigating the status of SLIFE (Students with Limited or Interrupted Education) students found that less than 1% graduated high school (Ross & Ziemke, 2016).

We simply cannot give up on a 12-year-old who has so much potential. He deserves a fair chance to become fully literate. The oppressors who deliberately targeted his (Rohingya) ethnic group by denying schooling must not be allowed the triumph of another generation deprived. He, and all others like him, need and deserve an actionable plan to become fully literate.

High dosage tutoring (HDT) is a practical solution that can unlock the potential of millions of unschooled refugees. This tutoring is the heart of what we do at FORA. HDT is strongly associated with high rates of learning, so much so that recent research from the Annenberg Institute at Brown University recommends high dosage tutoring as the most effective response to address pandemic learning loss (Robinson, Kraft, Loeb, & Schueler, 2021).

In academic literature, HDT is typically defined as 5 or more tutoring hours per week at a ratio lower than five students per tutor. Because we at FORA serve the most marginalized of youth in the world, we go several steps further. Our HDT strategy is distinguished by: (1) at least ten hours a week of tutoring with (2) no more than two students per tutor, (3) using high quality, individualized, foundational curricula, (4) while testing regularly to identify educational gaps and to monitor progress, and (4) continued at least through high school. To our knowledge, we are the only organization in the United States delivering this high-power combination of HDT specifically targeted at refugee students.

This schedule requires a huge commitment from tutors and from the students and families, themselves, but the results are worth it. For example, after returning to in-person learning this summer, we had a super-charged, two-hour-per-day summer reading program for our elementary children. These children gained approximately six months of academic improvement in the eight weeks of the summer program! Low-income children typically suffer from summer learning loss, so our kids' outcomes are doubly impressive (Kim & Quinn, 2013).

But these remarkable results are not the full picture. What you can't see from just the data is the children's overwhelming joy. The best moment of the day for us is when the children arrive, so excited to be here with us. One student summed up for her cohort how they feel about FORA, saying "at FORA, we are safe; FORA is our second home." FORA's greatest strength is the relationships that our students build with their volunteer tutors and our staff. For our tutors and for our students, the friendships they develop usually feel like the most valuable result of their efforts. A focus on relationships is critical to sustaining student motivation through the years that are needed to catch up to their American peers and to flourish at grade level.

High dosage tutoring provides a realistic opportunity for kids like "T" to reach grade level and aspire to college. It also provides the time and space for tutors and students to learn from mistakes, appreciate the gains made, and build resiliency so that learning is transformed from a confusing wilderness into a joyous discovery of both the world around us and ourselves.



"High dosage tutoring (HDT) is a practical solution that can unlock the potential of millions of unschooled refugees. This tutoring is the heart of what we do at FORA. HDT is strongly associated with high rates of learning, so much so that recent research from the Annenberg Institute at Brown University recommends high dosage tutoring as the most effective response to address pandemic learning loss (Robinson, Kraft, Loeb, & Schueler, 2021)."



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OUR ANSWER FOR PROVING TO STUDENTS THAT THEIR HARD WORK IS WORTH IT? ROBOTICS.



Sisters, ages 7 and 8, learn the ins and outs of circuits

"I've been looking forward to this so long, I couldn't even sleep last night!"

That was how "J," a 9-year-old former refugee, greeted his robotics teacher on the first day of FORA's Sunday morning robotics enrichment program. Frankly, we were all excited that we all lost sleep the night before. So, FORA bought halal Dunkin' Donuts for all for a quick sugar rush!

The FORA robotics enrichment program is built around curricula created by TinkRWorks, an Illinois-based organization that develops STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) educational programs. The TinkRWorks curricula use hands-on activities to teach science and math concepts that are part of the Common Core curriculum that our students are supposed to master in their public schools. *To note, many people around the U.S. are not fans of Common Core (CC), and we understand why, but, for our students, CC is a lifeline because it allows us, at FORA, to rather easily pinpoint concepts missed (because of missed years of schooling) through rigorous testing.

Of course, when you say the word "robotics" to kids, they jump for joy. And for us volunteers, this is so much fun to see. So, most enjoyably, each child builds, from scratch, a new robot over each twelve-week period. Yes, every child builds four, ground-up, robots each year!

Three separate age groups work on different projects. For example, this summer, kids in the first through third grades designed and built art sculptures that incorporated movement, light and sound as they learned relevant lessons on atomic theory (really!) and electricity. Meanwhile, fourth through sixth graders created and programmed small weather stations, while seventh- through tenth graders constructed remote-controlled quadcopter drones. Yes, drones. Real, high-flying drones. The skies above West Ridge looked like a B-movie space invader set for several days.

To pull all of this off, nine volunteer teachers attend several days of training every three months to learn how to build projects, code computer programs, and teach STEAM concepts, building long-term capacity within FORA itself.

"Robotics is so much more than building toys," says Steve Bankes, head teacher for the middle-grade students. "Robotics brings together science, computers, and engineering, resulting in a small machine the student can actually communicate with through computer code. Realizing what they can create through computer code is surprisingly exciting for kids and even more so for the teacher." (A big shout-out for all that Mr. Bankes, a big child himself, does for our children!)

Enrichment activities, especially STEAM-focused activities such as TinkRWorks' robotics projects, are a significant addition to FORA's focus on the fundamentals of reading and math. Building and coding give students the chance to apply their academic skills in the context of creating and having fun. Our students, all multilingual, love to demonstrate their language-learning skills by mastering the language of computers, giving them a long-awaited chance to be stars in a science classroom.

We also incorporate English lessons -- such as dissecting the word "microprocessor," into the prefix (micro), the root (process), and the suffix (-or) -- which allows students to broaden their vocabulary as they create their own robots. This instruction in language arts will prepare students to succeed in higher-level science classes, where domain-specific reading skills -- so critical to academic success -- often prove to be the critical stumbling blocks preventing English-language learners from reaching their full potential and college success.



Research backs up the value of these types of project-based STEAM activities for students. For example, girls and minorities are more likely to persist in difficult high-school and college classes when they have experienced hands-on science activities. Participation in such projects is also associated with higher levels of growth mindset and critical thinking (Reid & Ferguson, 2014; Bertrand & Namukasa (2020).

Finally, robotics is fun. FORA's kids need and deserve to enjoy themselves after a week of school, high-dosage tutoring, and family responsibilities. Sunday morning robotics is a chance to use their hard-won skills to express themselves and make something totally cool. Their parents, all of whom missed opportunities to hang avant-garde macaroni art on the fridge, are delighted to see the tangible evidence of what their children accomplish as a result of the hours spent honing their academic skills.

Really, what is better than building real, honest-to-goodness drones!

Reid, K. J., & Ferguson, D. M. (2014, March) "Do design experiences in engineering build a "growth mindset" in students?," 2014 IEEE Integrated STEM Education Conference, 2014, pp. 1-5, DOI: 10.1109/ISECon.2014.6891046. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282722848_Do_design_experiences_in_enginering_build_a_'growth_mindset'_in_students

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OUR ANSWER TO THE REALITY THAT MANY REFUGEE PARENTS FEEL DISCONNECTED FROM SCHOOL, ISOLATED, AND UNABLE TO EMPOWER THEIR PRE-K KIDS?

A PARENT PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM.



Pictured: Simran Arora, Family/School Partnership Program Coordinator, with current and soon to be FORA students and their mom

After decades of protracted exile, surviving conflict and persecution, our families finally arrive in the United States, ready to re-build their lives. However, this new beginning is full of unimaginable bureaucratic hurdles and leads, almost immediately, to a sense of utter alienation in this new country. And for refugees who are illiterate, even filling out simple forms is a nightmare. If you think native-born Americans hate bureaucracies and red tape, imagine how much refugees dread them.

Schools become a “no go” zone for parents, as schools’ bureaucratic forms, procedures and customs are totally alien to refugees who never went to school themselves. Even physically entering a school is challenging to parents, as they are met by a locked door, a buzzer and an intercom, with a disembodied voice of a security guard demanding, “what is the purpose of your visit.”

These selfless parents have crossed borders and oceans to ensure their children's education; as one parent told us, "I am alive for my children." But the system falls short, again and again, because it is built for parents who can navigate online forms and notices, have email addresses, speak English and are literate.

The Family-School Partnership Program, led by Simran Arora with support from FORA's Community Relations Coordinator, Claire Holba, aims to cut through the fear and red tape in order to overcome the alienation and disempowerment that refugees feel when engaging with the education system. The program's core effort is to provide parents with a trusted professional partner who can teach them how to access resources and leap over every hurdle facing their families. With victories come confidence and with confidence comes more victories. But this takes time – often years. While the parents are learning how to help their own children succeed in school, the children are at risk; it is critical that the children have immediate and full access to an education. Therefore, while gradually empowering the parents, we also serve as a direct advocate for the children, working with their teachers, case managers, and principals to ensure that our students thrive.

Another important pillar of our program is Parent Discussion Circles. Transitioning to life in the U.S. brings with it feelings of isolation, lack of support from extended family, and the need to rebuild lives in a culture and society that is alien to them. Discussion circles are aimed at empowering mothers and, ultimately, increasing their confidence and capacity to be involved in their children's education. Through culturally responsive and trauma-informed discussions, mothers are encouraged to share and reflect on their individual struggles and challenges with raising children in a technology-centered society. Because trust is high, these circles are relaxed and supportive. "My favorite thing about these circles is how joyfully chaotic they are, with multiple languages spoken simultaneously and toddlers playing joyfully. Most importantly, there is laughter all around as the moms share their stories," says Simran.

"These selfless parents have crossed borders and oceans to ensure their children's education; as one parent told us, 'I am alive for my children.' But the system falls short, again and again, because it is built for parents who can navigate online forms and notices, have email addresses, speak English and are literate."

In the coming months, we will be starting an early childhood school-preparedness "Mommy & Me" program where young mothers will work on pre-literacy skills and school readiness alongside their children. Our vision is to encourage storytelling, play and reading as daily practices between mothers and their children. From reciting poems in Burmese or Rohingya, to practicing ABCs, to creating hop-scotch number lines on the sidewalk, we want to ensure that learning is experiential and joyful from an early age. We also want mothers to view themselves as educators, because, of course, they are. Importantly, our Mama & Me lesson plans are being co-developed and co-facilitated by refugee mothers from the community.

At FORA, we believe that parents are our partners, and they are the experts regarding their children. In all we do, we want to encourage the use of traditional Burmese and Rohingya and Afghan and Bhutanese practices while also introducing researched-based child development strategies. At FORA, it is imperative that we create and grow with the community we serve. Their agency and power are at the heart of all we do.

OUR ANSWER TO CONFRONTING OUR STUDENTS' PASTS BY CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR HEALING THROUGH WRITING?

THE TELLING ROOM.

"People who don't like cats can't be trusted." A bold, debatable statement, and oh so funny -- written on the very first day of FORA's storytelling initiative.

Many of our students and their parents, as former refugees, were subject to extreme government oppression (and, often, worse) and so understandably suffer from primary or secondary trauma. As a result, recounting nonfiction stories about the past is often avoided, while stories about the future almost immediately end in violence or tragic endings. Of course, this can have great negative consequences on a child's social-emotional health. It also has similar consequences on our children's willingness to write. For almost all children, initial forays into both drawing and writing are usually about stories of place and people -- of grandparents, parents, siblings, pets and friends and their homes, and parties and playtime. Many children who we serve, however, are afraid to pick up the crayon or pencil for fear of what thoughts and feelings might burst out of them . School teachers, meanwhile, are, wisely, also cautious about encouraging the children to write stories because the teachers do not feel qualified to properly process trauma. And in addition to these issues, grammatically correct writing is very difficult for our children and they are afraid of being ridiculed for their low grammar skills. It is no wonder that our FORA children are trailing in writing even as their reading and math skills are skyrocketing.

We at FORA spent a year talking with experts and scouring the educational landscape to find replicable programs that help traumatized children learn how to slowly, healthfully begin to story-tell in a supportive environment supported by professionals. We found the perfect program -- run by a group out of Portland, Maine. The group, called The Telling Room (tellingroom.org), is a non-profit literary arts organization that runs writing workshops for kids and teens, including for immigrants and refugees. Backed by the National Endowment for the Arts (with a recent surprise visit from former President Obama!), The Telling Room focuses on creating safe spaces for storytelling and providing lots of positive feedback and emotional support. The Telling Room gave three days of training to eight FORA staff and volunteers -- including social workers, family counselors and psychologists -- who were handpicked for their professional backgrounds and social-emotional expertise.

In the wake of such training, we at FORA are now running a twelve-week trial program with our students, in which Telling Room professionals are supervising (via zoom) the in-person interactions between our trained tutors and FORA students to ensure best practices. Over time, we will phase out Telling Room support, while maintaining the professional rubric.

We have been so pleased with this effort. For our students, we have seen, right from the first session, that writing their own stories brings about powerful healing, allowing them to develop perspective to integrate their families' pasts into a future in which these children have agency. For example, when given the prompt entitled "inside/outside," students wrote about: how their peers perceived them differently from the outside than how they felt on the inside; feeling afraid to participate in class discussions; and their mixed feelings regarding growing up.

Of course, they also wrote about house cats, chocolate pie, and how it feels to be warm and cozy when it rains outside -- the ordinary things of daily life that we Americans take for granted but that these children see as fascinating.

MEET OUR STUDENTS

These two sisters are like a wondrous yin and yang.

The younger sister is a witty, energetic girl, pranking tutors while diligently getting all her work done, with gusto. She runs to FORA every day, wanting to make it here by the start time of 7:00 p.m. sharp. Her favorite thing about FORA is the community and the people - "I love loving all of you," she precociously proclaims. When asked to name her favorite tutors, she starts with Julia and Simran…. and then continues to name nearly every tutor at FORA! Her enthusiasm is infectious.

The older sister is the kindest, most gentle of souls. She is an avid reader. She loves her Kindle account, and her favorite books are *The One and Only Ivan* and *Awkward*. When asked what her favorite thing about FORA is, she states "I get to work with amazing and hardworking tutors." She says she cannot pick a favorite tutor because she loves everybody. That response sums her up well; her generosity of spirit shines through in all she says and does.



CORNERSTONE AWARD



The day the Khan family found FORA three years ago was an incredibly fortuitous moment for our organization. In the time that has passed since then, the Khans have volunteered more than 1500 hours of their time…but it is not just this number that has made their family a true cornerstone of our community. Rather, it is in the way that they each contribute to making us a better and brighter organization, with Abdullah making FORA a place of laughter, Naba making FORA a place of goodness, and their mother making FORA feel like a home, with her loving, maternal eye often watching over the youngest of our students as they learn to read. The Khan family is a guiding light within FORA, modeling to us all how we can best welcome our neighbors, and we are so proud to call the Khans our colleagues, our friends, and our family. So it is with utmost gratitude that we grant them this award, for all that they have done and continue to do to change the lives of the West Ridge refugee community.

WHAT OTHER ENTITIES SUPPORT OUR FAMILIES?

More than 75% of our students are ethnicly Rohingya, and, despite the fact that we are a secular organization, more than 95% of our students are Muslim (because of current geopolitical issues). Almost all of our students had been denied the ability to embrace their cultures or practice their religions in their native homelands because of repressive regimes. For these families, a large part of reclaiming personal and intellectual autonomy and thriving in American civic life is choosing what to embrace and what to believe. We at FORA are not a cultural center and are not involved in religious matters at all, but we do honor what is meaningful to the families we serve.

Chicago's Rohingya Culture Center (RCC) in West Ridge is so important to our FORA families. The RCC is the cultural hub for the Rohingya we serve. The RCC provides countless services to newly-arrived Rohingya refugees, helping them find a robust community here in America. If there is one organization that is crucial to the success of the Rohingya community in America, *writ large*, it is, indeed, Chicago's RCC, just right down the street from us. Almost all of our Rohingya families consider it an essential part of their lives, and so do we. It has been a source of great joy for us to be able to collaborate through attending each other's celebrations, supporting grant proposals, and working together to ensure that our refugee community members are protected against COVID. To note, in large part because of the RCC, it seems that a large majority of Rohingya teenagers and adults have been vaccinated. The RCC has made a huge difference during the pandemic.

Best of all is when we and the RCC can work together to support our students' educational aspirations. This year we and the RCC, with RCC in the lead, worked together to ensure that a young Rohingya refugee woman, a recent high school graduate, will be able to pursue her goals to become a pharmacist. Before moving to the United States, she lived in Malaysia, where she was not allowed to go to school and study. Now, she is a recipient of the Hope Chicago Scholarship and a part of the inaugural Hope Scholars Cohort, making college affordable to her, and paving the way for future students in her community and beyond. We at FORA feel so fortunate to be able to work with the RCC to make our neighborhood of West Ridge a place of learning, understanding, and empowerment. If you are interested in finding out more or contributing to their work, please visit their website at www.rccchicago.org.



The Council of Muslim Organizations of Greater Chicago (CIOGC) has been a premier and active supporter of FORA, even providing FORA with a generous grant. Notably, the CIOGC is also a generous supporter of our friend and neighbor, the RCC. The CIOGC is the umbrella organization for more than sixty local organizations who serve members of Chicago's Islamic community, a community that is over 400,000 strong. The CIOGC has a generous fund, called the Zakat Chicago Fund, that supports local grassroots organizations like FORA and the RCC. You can learn more about the CIOGC's Zakat Fund at https://www.ciogc.org/zakat-chicago/. Please do go to the CIOGC website and see all the good it is doing, especially during this pandemic year while so many people are isolated and suffering.

And then there is the **Islamic Foundation of Villa Park (IFS).** At the height of the pandemic, it reached out to us, asking us to reach out to our FORA families to see if people who had lost their jobs were in need of food. In fact, they were. So, joyously working as a team, we and our new, distinguished friends at the IFS, distributed thousands of pounds of high quality halal dry goods and meat. Numerous FORA mothers helped select and distribute the food. Our own FORA students served as translators and helped deliver the very heavy boxes throughout the neighborhood, and the event was such a success that we, together, repeated it all again just weeks later. Of course, it had been obvious to the IFS that our children could not study well if they were hungry all the time. We owe such great thanks to them for their foresight and many efforts. The IFS' website is https://www.islamicfoundation.org.

"When our students see that they are embraced by a very kind and welcoming broader circle of organizations and individuals that are invested in their wellbeing and futures, the very part of our students' identities that was once a source of persecution becomes a source of joyful community."

When our students see that they are embraced by a very kind and welcoming broader circle of organizations and individuals that are invested in their wellbeing and futures, the very part of our students' identities that was once a source of persecution becomes a source of joyful community. It is a great honor for us at FORA to be able to view these growing connections. These organizations do things that FORA simply does not, and cannot, do, and we are grateful for their acceptance of us and our FORA families.



LETTER FROM A MOTHER

(Graciously translated from oral Urdu by Farah Adil)

Dear Friends,

I came from Nepal. We came here in January 2015 and we've been here in Chicago since then. In the beginning it felt so different, so different from my home. In the beginning it was difficult, all the rules and regulations, how to use things, how to navigate ordinary things like grocery shopping, the day to day business of living and most importantly, how to give my child a good education. That was the most difficult thing for me. It was very difficult, but slowly but surely I learnt how to cope and it got better.

In my country, my son was a good student, he got good marks. When we came here, he felt like he was out of his depth, he struggled. When he got homework from school, he would say he had no idea how to do it. At the time I felt very helpless because I couldn't help him, I didn't know how to. He didn't know the language. He didn't know how to read or write English. He couldn't understand what needed to be done. Because of this, it was very hard. We came to the US in 2015 but we moved to Chicago in 2017 and while living in the neighborhood, I would often pass by FORA on my way to and from the market. I'd see children studying, and I would see the teachers making such an effort to teach and guide each child. It was almost as if every teacher was teaching one on one...and this was not as if they were helping with homework. It was the teaching that impressed me. FORA is not homework help. They assess each child and based on their gaps in learning, they address the needs specific to that child. FORA makes it so that the child learns and effortlessly is able to work by themselves, whether it be homework or schoolwork. What FORA does is identify what the child doesn't know and focuses on teaching exactly that. They build that foundation from the ground up. Because of FORA my son speaks English fluently now. He writes and reads in English too and it makes me so happy. I can't believe how well he speaks now, he didn't speak at all before FORA. One day we went to meet his teacher and he conversed so beautifully in English, I felt very proud.

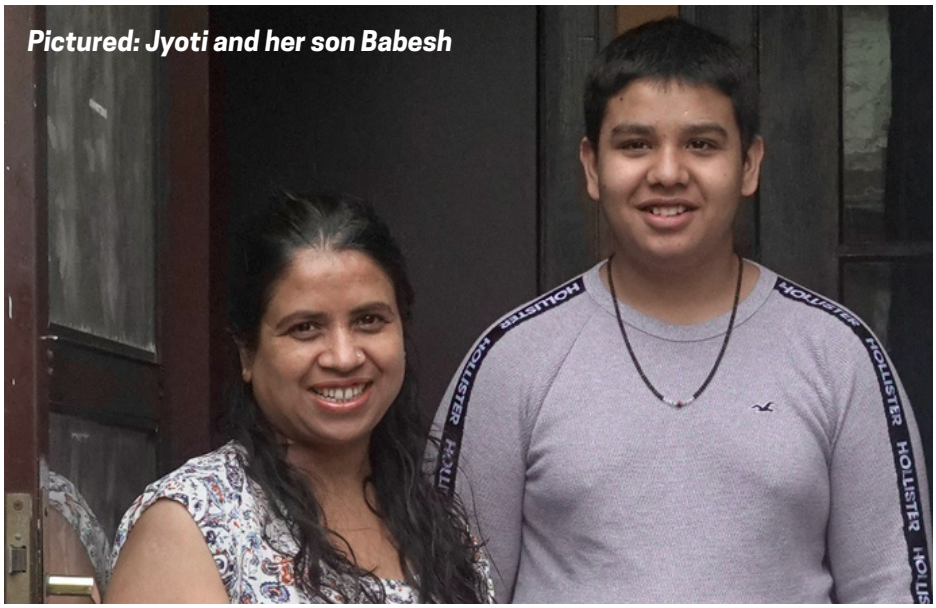
I am so thankful to FORA. In the beginning before Babesh joined FORA I had no idea how to approach the school or the teachers to discuss how I could help my son. I wanted to approach the school, I wanted to talk to them to see how best to help Babesh. But I didn't know English and I wasn't sure if parents even did this...so I was quite unsure...I didn't know if that was the done thing. But when Babesh started going to FORA to learn, Kathleen and Michael really stepped up to help. Every semester Kathleen takes me and Babesh to meet every individual subject teacher, and it is because of Kathleen that I am able to understand why Babesh didn't do well in a particular subject, where he needs to work harder or focus more to do better. And based on the recommendations that Kathleen makes, FORA fine tunes their teaching to meet Babesh's learning needs. I personally can't do much at home to help my son, so FORA fills that need. It's a huge help.

"A few months after I enrolled Babesh at FORA, my husband died. So FORA became a Godsend for me. Fathers play an important role. They are the role models for their sons. They teach them, they model good behavior for their kids to follow, they guide them. Now FORA has taken over that role in our lives. So I am very very thankful."

In the beginning, my son would get a lot of homework and I had no idea how to help him. And Babesh would tell me he had no idea how to do it either. So I was forced to pay to get the help he needed and it was very expensive...I just could not afford it. But my son's education was such a priority for me that I could see myself doing without certain things rather than denying him the best education I could get for him. That's why for the first few months I enrolled him in classes to help him, but it got increasingly hard. Because the focus was not on the child or the progress they made. When the hour was up, the hour was up. They taught for what they were being paid. I could not afford these private tuitions. It was very hard.

But ever since FORA has come into our lives, it's been different. I feel like FORA has given me a great opportunity. Since Babesh started attending classes at FORA, I am free of worries about his academic future. His grades are up, he's way ahead and for that I am so happy. It's because of FORA that I have no plans to move [away from Chicago]. I want him to continue learning. I cannot give my son what FORA has given him...the kind of education he needs. What FORA has done for my son, I have never seen or heard of anything like it...I have never seen or experienced anything like this. They teach with such dedication and caring that it feels like a family. FORA creates this environment where kids love to come and love to learn.

I've come so far to get to Chicago and I am not educated. So I want my son to be educated, to be successful...and I want to be able to give them a good educational foundation. Because of it I cannot leave here. My extended family that has left Chicago is of the opinion that I should join them but I cannot. I need the support of FORA, I need the educational support it offers until my son's education is complete. I am alone, I know I will struggle since I lost my husband two years ago, but my sons' education is now my priority. I know there will be challenges because I am alone but I am willing to cope with it for my son's education and his future. When the kids have a good sound education, they will take the lead and tell me where is best for us to move, depending on where their jobs are, where their livelihoods take us. Based on their direction, I will follow their lead.



Pictured: Jyoti and her son Babesh

I am a single parent. Even though I want to help him and I would like to help Babesh, I just don't have the time. If there was no FORA I wouldn't know where to start helping my son with his education...ever since he started at FORA I am completely at ease. I can see how bright his future will be...my son is going to do big things, make something of himself because he has FORA's guidance. For instance, he finished 8th grade and was poised to go to high school, so at the time I considered applying to this one high school and I thought to myself maybe I should speak to Michael and Kathleen first because I really don't know much. And when I spoke to them they said the school was not a good fit for Babesh. So they decided to change the school I had chosen initially in favor of a school which they thought was perfect for Babesh. They know my son's strengths and weaknesses better than me...They treat him like a son with love and interest in his well being.

"If there was no FORA I wouldn't know where to start helping my son with his education...ever since he started at FORA I am completely at ease. I can see how bright his future will be...my son is going to do big things, make something of himself because he has FORA's guidance."

FORA has been a gift from God for me and my family. I was desperate to get my child the help he needed at school. The day he was accepted into FORA I was so excited and so happy, I am unable to express it. It's the interest that FORA takes that I love. They treat your child like their own, you become part of their family. A few months after I enrolled Babesh at FORA, my husband died. So FORA became a Godsend for me. Fathers play an important role. They are the role models for their sons. They teach them, they model good behavior for their kids to follow, they guide them. Now FORA has taken over that role in our lives. So I am very very thankful.

Truly, Jyoti



HOW DO WE DO WHAT WE DO?

WITH OUR GREAT VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF -- SHARING A VISION AND OUR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.

How are we able to provide such an intensive and extensive program to restore the educational rights to pre-literate children when politicians and bureaucrats around the world have claimed that restoration is not possible?

The first and indispensable ingredient is that everyone who comes to FORA agrees that all children deserve an accessible, effective education. We daily, intentionally, ask ourselves, as the late, great, Selma civil rights hero, John Lewis said, “if not us, then who? If not now, then when?”

The second ingredient is the people — our incredible staff and volunteers. No adult can resist the joy of helping a child learn to read, and that joy resounds throughout the welcoming space that we have together created. Our FORA children immediately sense that FORA is a place to explore and grow, to make mistakes and to achieve victories. And then, gradually, over time, the children come to deeply believe that they occupy a safe space and a space that is theirs, to be themselves and to share. They also believe that they, their fellow students, and their tutors, share a mission in which no one is above or below the others. They end up believing that when pursuing a life of the mind, that kindness, somewhat ironically, counts above all else. These children and their families know full well that knowledge is power and power without empathy can lead to domination and brutality. They stand as sentinels of empathy for each other and themselves. The virtuous cycle is complete when tutors and staff see these children acting better than most adults and become inspired by the children they serve.

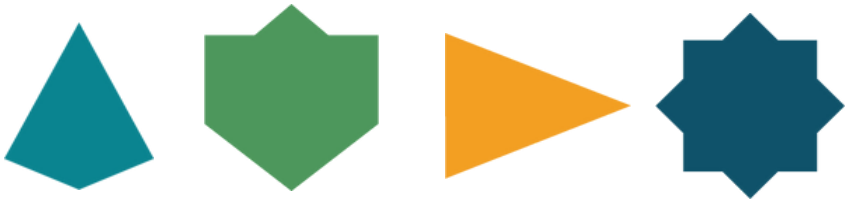
The joy spreads. To quote a classic film, "Field of Dreams," "if you build it, they will come." So true, in our case. We started out small, serving only twelve students whose parents had asked for our services, but over time volunteers literally found us, not vice versa, so we could expand, now to more than 70 children and their extended families. In the pandemic years, we have had more than 400 volunteers from all over the United States, from Portland, Oregon, to San Diego, California, to Miami, Florida, to Portland, Maine, to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Together, we have (accidentally? organically? are they the same?) ended up creating a robust and joyous platform for people from all over Chicago and the virtual community of the United States to meet, share, and empower each other.

These volunteers brought with them incredible expertise. For example, the number of retired ESL and reading teachers and Ph.Ds. who showed up for us and our refugee students astounded us. And our volunteers brought others to us, so that we did not have to reinvent the wheel when experts had already created state-of-the-art enrichment programs. We literally delivered best-in-class enrichment programming to our students, through: Illinois's TinkRworks' robotics program (https://tinkrworks.com), Maine's Telling Room's storytelling program (https://www.tellingroom.org), Connecticut's Westfield Academy, the premier Model U.N and debate program in the country (if not the world) (https://www.westfieldacademy.net), and the national Girls Who Code summer computer camp (https://girlswhocode.com/programs/summer-immersion-program). Each of these programs gave us huge discounts (and with Girls Who Code, they provided the program for free!) to make sure that we could deliver top-quality programming to our students.

"The first and indispensable ingredient is that everyone who comes to FORA agrees that all children deserve an accessible, effective education. We daily, intentionally, ask ourselves, as the late, great, Selma civil rights hero, John Lewis said, "if not us, then who? If not now, then when?"

And as our children fell in love with reading, they also fell in love with books and authors. So, we reached out to the authors that they and we love, and those authors visited us through the wonders of Zoom. During the pandemic, zoom visits were made by the following renowned authors: Peter Ho Davies, author of *The Fortunes*, winner of the Anisfield-Wolf Award, and the Chautauqua Prize; Katherine Applegate, author of *The One and Only Ivan*, winner of the Newberry Medal; and Saadia Faruqi, editor-in-chief of Blue Minaret, and author of the *Yasmin* series of children chapter books, which represents a Muslim American girl who imagines herself, at times, as a superhero. Ms. Faruqi's books are so popular that her publisher has signed her up for numerous additional books in the series -- so she asked our students to each submit a possible topic for her next book. Our staff thought that the best of the best was from a perspicacious third grader, with the suggestion of "Yasmin Battles Her Evil Clone."

To come full circle, the boy who suggested this sci-fi Yasmin clone adventure joined us in 1st grade, at which time he did not even know his ABC's even though he had attended public school kindergarten. Frankly, he was already so behind in kindergarten (think about this…. many of our children start kindergarten already a year behind in school! How can this be? If anything screams out for free public pre-K, it is this), that he was totally disengaged in kindergarten. Now, by the start of third grade (thanks to an exceptional, five-day-a-week volunteer) he is above the fourth-grade level in reading – and apparently – to our horror and delight – knows about cloning… and evil clones (they do exist, after all)!



We stand with the Black Lives Matter grassroots movement; our refugee students (most of whom who have suffered ethnic cleansing and attempted genocide) have viscerally understood the alienation that comes with systematic racial exclusion. We at FORA will never be able to do enough regarding BLM ("enough" will never be enough), but we are on a positive path. A highlight of the past summer was having Mary Cray, a Civil Rights Era activist, who was at the second Selma-to-Montgomery march along with Dr. King, and who was there arrested and jailed, spoke for hours to our children about the struggle for voting rights in the mid-60s. They were mesmerized, as were our tutors.

Every time a tutor or guest showed up, our students understood at little bit more how much we, citizens of the United States, value their presence in this country, and how this country is as much theirs as it is anybody's. They know that with ownership comes responsibility. Believe us. These children are so grateful to be here in the United States and to have so many supportive people around them. They embrace both rights and responsibilities like nobody else we have ever met, and we, collectively, have been working with refugees for scores of years.

"Every time a tutor or guest showed up, our students understood at little bit more how much we, citizens of the United States, value their presence in this country, and how this country is as much theirs as it is anybody's."

Our student's belief in FORA, *writ small*, and The United States, *writ large*, propels us. To admit the obvious, we – staff and volunteers – are all too human. We have our good days, and our very bad days. But even in our bad days, we put a smile on our faces and "fake it till we make it."

Numerous people have over the past years compared our grassroots' spirit and whole-person philosophy to that of Jane Addams's Chicago Hull House. We are so honored by the comparison. So, to end with a quote from Addams, herself: "[n]othing could be worse than the fear that one had given up too soon and left one unexpended effort that might have saved the world."

We are not giving up or going away. We are here to fight the good fight, till the good fight has been won.

Because we, at FORA, believe that literacy is a human right.





PICTURED: CARRIE AND STEVE BANKES

IN MEMORIAM OF CARRIE

Carrie Bankes, FORA's first volunteer, died in 2021, decades before we expected. We were not prepared.

Carrie, meanwhile, was prepared for everything; she, more than anyone else, lived a life of prepared hospitality.

Kindness is an attitude, and it can be extended with little preparation. Such is why we demand kindness from even little children. Numerous animal species can extend kindness.

Hospitality, however, is a virtue limited to human beings as it takes lots of planning and practice.

To extend hospitality, one must be prepared before the knock at the door or the call in the night, because the core of hospitality is to be prepared for all contingencies, to expect the unexpected.

Strangers are strange to us. We do not know what to expect from them. As such, hospitality extended to the stranger must anticipate without reference. Put this way, extending hospitality seems almost impossible. Indeed, it is almost impossible. As a virtue, it requires so much more intention and attention than other virtues, demanding intelligence, focus, commitment, joyful sacrifice and eternal vigilance.

One does not have to deny oneself to be hospitable, but one clearly must be willing to delay and divert one's own plans, over and over, again. Truly, Carrie lived a life interrupted. She was full of plans, goals and desires, but was always willing to lay them down to help others. She knew what to do, what to say and how to simply be… with others in need. She knew when to sit, silent and let others talk and when to take charge of a situation and make things right, and right now. She had extremely strong convictions but was always willing to lay those aside for a time to walk in another's shoes or at least to walk beside the other, in fancy shoes or bare feet – kings, queens and paupers, the same.

She was a friend to children, animals, plants, the elderly, noisy neighbors, a flamboyant spouse, conservatives, liberals, libertarians, fence sitters, sinners, saints, gourmets, gourmands, extroverts, introverts, omnivores, herbivores, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, atheists, agnostics and Joe Raschke. She welcomed all the same. And that takes practice, because she, like the rest of us, had impulses, opinions, and biases. But to extend hospitality, one must go beyond oneself, to step outside of one's own "feelings," to welcome the other as the other wishes to be welcomed. As such, hospitality goes way beyond the Golden Rule of "treating others as you would wish to be treated, yourself." Hospitality is treating others as they wish to be treated. And that takes a lifetime of planning and practice. Carrie was fully committed to hospitality, dedicating her life to it. She was prepared.

Carrie was not a mere example to us all, held apart. She was too close to us to be reflected on while here – so close, we could hear her heart beat -- the heartbeat of the FORA movement -- but now she is gone.

Remember the rhythm and carry on.

-- Michael O'Connor, Managing Director

MEET OUR STUDENTS

These two sisters are bundles of joy and strong, powerful girls who aren't afraid to speak their minds. The immediate impression they make on adults is that they must come from an amazingly supportive family, which is, indeed, true. The joy and confidence of the children is a consequence of the love continually poured into their lives by family and friends.



When the older of the two sisters started coming to FORA, her younger sister was too young to join. (We are legally not allowed to take preschoolers or else we would be considered a day care center). Every day for many months, the younger sister stood outside to pick up her big sister, eagerly awaiting the day she could start coming to FORA. And now, a big-girl kindergartner, she can and does!

She loves working with her tutors, reading the epiphanic early-reader masterpiece, *Pete the Cat*, and working on the online, award-winning, Dreambox learning program. She also loves participating in "old-school" sharing at circle time. Who knew that circle time would be such a big hit? But these children, whose families have been silenced for so long, simply love getting up and individually describing their favorite superheroes, movies and ice cream flavors. Both sisters are going to be amazing public speakers. They are bravely articulate, focused on facts but with a flair for the dramatic.

WORDS FROM STAFF

"History is full of a lot of horrible things, and I can't, in retrospect, do anything about that. There were people during the Holocaust who needed help and they didn't get help they needed, and this is true of every atrocity through history. And I think that's one of the things that really struck me when I first found out about FORA -- that there is an ongoing atrocity, a genocide, and I have an opportunity to do something about it. And I don't see how I could turn that down. The number of refugees in the world and the hardships they endure -- I don't have to sit on the sideline and do nothing. I can actually do something here, and so I wake up every morning eager to get to work. And I think it's the best and most defining thing about FORA -- we're standing right here in the middle of history and we're doing, each of us, what we can do, what little contribution we can make."

-David McKenzie, Chief Administrative Officer

Grants in 2021

This year's expansion of our work during a time of international crisis would not have been possible without the generous support of organizations and individuals — both in our neighborhood and across the country.

In February 2021, we were incredibly grateful to receive our first-ever grants, when the world-renowned **Annenberg Foundation** recognized the importance of what we do at FORA, and the leaders of two of its initiatives, the **Metabolic Studio** and **GRoW at Annenberg**, made the decision to generously support our organization. By funding our access to Zoom, the Annenberg Foundation powered FORA through months of fully virtual high dosage tutoring (read more about HDT on page 13), providing the key connector and lifeline between our refugee students here in Chicago and their daily tutors who arrived each day virtually from all corners of the United States.

Later in February, we were further honored to receive a grant from the **Howard and Abby Milstein Foundation**, enabling us to launch our Family/School Partnership Program this summer, which has so far been met with resounding and encouraging success (read more on page 17). The Milsteins have, over and over again, supported organizations that stand against ethnic and religious hate and stand for generous inclusivity. Without this challenge grant, we would not have this program, which has transformed so much for the better how we view, approach and interact with the parents with whom we partner.

Also in February, FORA was awarded a grant from **The Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago (CIOGC)**. Through their Zakat Fund, which is made up of contributions from individuals in the Chicago community, the CIOGC empowers local organizations, and we were genuinely honored that our efforts were deemed worthy of the CIOGC's support. In compliance with Zakat specifications, we put this funding toward our top notch educational software, classroom supplies, iPads, and many new library books that celebrate the cultures and traditions of our students.

Furthermore, over the summer, we were so grateful to receive funding from the **Albert Pick Jr. Fund** in Chicago and the **Society for Science** in Washington D.C. Both foundations fund grants for nonprofits that provide engaging STEM education to minority youth populations, and we were thrilled to use their support to launch our first ever robotics program (read more on page 15). Our robotics program is many of our students' greatest joy.

Finally, this year FORA received a grant from the **ALDI** grocery store corporation to supply the "brain food" that students receive when they arrive at FORA each day — apples, oranges, bananas, and granola bars, which make all the difference in ensuring that our students are focused and nourished during their two hours of daily tutoring.

And of course, **Pentwater Capital** and the **Halbower family**, our first and largest supporters, continue to give generously, year after year. FORA would not be FORA without you.

We are so grateful for the support of these organizations and individuals in ensuring that our empowerment center is a place where mere dreams are turned into realities. As we continue to expand in ways that would have seemed unimaginable three years ago, we look forward to furthering such connections in the new year!



Why I Give to FORA, from Zainab Baig, M.D.

"The refugee crisis is the crisis of our century. Whether we understand each and every aspect or not, it is going to impact everybody. So sooner than later, we need to help others so that in the long-term, all of us can live in a better world.

I know I'm not being whimsical when I say this, but I can see FORA becoming an organization from which our future professionals, our future Nobel laureates, our future Pulitzer prize winners come out, because I think FORA is a place that not only empowers refugee children, but provides access to continue to enrich their lives.

That's why I will put my resources, be it my money, my time, my social equity, my Rolodex, to FORA — because they help make a difference in the world."



WOULD YOU PLEASE MAKE A DONATION TODAY TO FORA?



You could be the reason that another pre-literate 6th grader gets accepted into our program, learns to read and write, catches up to grade level, and gets on track to college and beyond.

And all importantly, because certain of FORA's board members are willing to MATCH any donation that you make — up to $200,000 of donations on or before February 15, 2022 — your donation will have twice as much impact on a refugee child's ability to read, write and do math, and pursue her own American Story.

Give now if you can, and double the life-changing impact of your gift. If you can give, give what makes you joyous!

Every donation is appreciated and is an affirmation that the work we do together is life-changing.
Would you please give now?

SCAN TO DONATE

HOW TO DONATE



Credit or debit card online at *www.refugeefora.org/donate*



Check or Donor Advised Fund mailed to 5822 S. Blackstone Ave, Apt 2, Chicago, IL 60637



Stock donations or employer matched contributions (email info@refugeefora.org for more details)

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Farah Noor Cheema, President, was born and raised in Pakistan, where she earned her medical degree with honors at King Edward Medical University. After immigrating to England, then the US, Farah was moved by a common theme: the unifying, cyclic benefits of community service. She became impassioned to promote self-sufficiency and empowerment through educational advancement. Thus, over the last decade, she has held volunteer leadership positions at various institutions, including the Avery Coonley School, the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, the Muslim Leadership Academy at the Islamic Foundation of Villa Park, the Islamic Council of North America, and many interfaith community unification endeavors between Muslim, Christian and Jewish places of worship. She has served on the board of the US branch of the Hunar Foundation, and collaborated with both Viator House of Hospitality and the Human Development Foundation.

Melike Oncu, Vice President, was named General Counsel of the International Code Council in January 2013. Ms. Oncu joined the International Code Council in October 2008 as Assistant General Counsel. As General Counsel, Ms. Oncu serves as a member of the ICC Senior Management Team and oversees all legal affairs for ICC and the ICC Family of Companies. Ms. Oncu holds a juris doctorate from George Washington University, and a bachelor's degree from Lafayette College. She began her legal career as a corporate attorney with the law firm White & Case, LLP. She also served as Of Counsel for the law firm of Bingham McCutchen, LLP. She currently lives in Chevy Chase, MD with her husband, two teenage daughters and her dog.

Wendy Kaplan Miller, Treasurer, attended Amherst College where she co-led the Cambodian Refugee Tutoring Project. She taught fourth grade at the Bullis School in Potomac, MD. After graduating Harvard Law School, she served as an AmeriCorps attorney doing domestic violence work at Western Mass Legal Services and a housing attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services. She has been on the boards of Raising A Reader Massachusetts and the Cornelia de Lange Syndrome Foundation. She has been on the selection advisory committee for the GreenLight Fund and co-chaired a philanthropic giving circle at the Palo Alto Jewish Community Center. She volunteers in the Ravenswood School District. She currently lives in Palo Alto with her husband, two sons and two dogs.

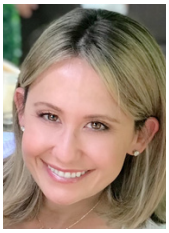
Kathleen O'Connor, Educational Programs Director (Volunteer), has spent her entire adult life teaching in diverse educational settings. She graduated magna cum laude from Amherst College with a degree in History. Afterwards she taught math in the Washington D.C. public schools, before earning a Masters' 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.

Michael O'Connor, Managing Director (Volunteer), 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.










Seth Rigoletti, Board Member, was for the first fifteen years of his adult life an English and theater teacher at a private high school. He started and ran his own outdoor theater company for a few years in his early thirties and served on the board of two different non-profit organizations that worked with teenagers using theater-based learning. In 2010 he left the career of teaching behind to start his own company. He became a leadership coach who focuses on helping leaders and teams communicate with clarity and a greater impact. His passion is in helping leaders and organizations create cultures that engender trust and collaboration that improve the lives of all stakeholders. He's grateful for the opportunity to work with FORA and to be back in the world of education. What he most admires about FORA is that it is an organization that fosters genuine relationships with students and their families to change the trajectory of their lives. He spends his free time exercising virtually with Michael O'Connor, hiking with his wife and being teased by his children.

Shaik Kaleem, Board Member, was born and raised in India, where he earned his Bachelor's Degree in Electronics and Communications Engineering from University of Madras. In 1985 Kaleem migrated to the United States of America to pursue his master's degree in Computer Engineering from Wayne State University, Detroit. Since then, Kaleem has been working in the Communications and Technology Industry and has worked for Interface Electronics, Hughes Aircraft Company and for the last 26 years at Cisco Systems, Inc. He is currently the Senior Director, Global Business Development for Cisco's IoT Business. Kaleem is responsible for driving the market expansion and growth of Cisco's IoT products across multiple industry verticals such as Manufacturing, Energy, Transportation and Public Sector. In addition, Kaleem successfully led GTM teams that took multiple start-up businesses in Cisco to multi-$B businesses. Kaleem has been associated with Islamic Foundation for the last 25 years and has served as one of the Board of Trustees and is the chairperson for Technology & Communications Committee. Kaleem lives with his wife in the Chicago and has been passionate about Giving, Community Service and Refugee settlement and has successfully organized various community fundraising drives.

Natasha Yaqub, Board Member, holds a Bachelor's in Psychology from Loyola University in Chicago, as well as a Masters in Community Counselling from Argosy University. She is experienced both in the sectors of social work and mental health care, having led a program advocating for children in long term foster care, in addition to having worked as a foster care case manager and a therapist at a behavioral day school. She has also previously volunteered at a hotline for domestic abuse and a support program for teen mothers. Originally from Michigan, Natasha has lived in the Chicago area for the past fifteen years, now residing in the Hinsdale suburb with her husband and their two young children. In her free time, Natasha enjoys cooking, cycling, yoga, reading, and travel.



FORA'S SUN FLOWERS

"We lived in Kosovo during the Balkan wars, and we frequently drove to Macedonia where we could get a hamburger and visit a movie theater. Along the way we drove through fields of sunflowers that stretched out as far as we could see, their faces always turned towards the sun. Our students are like those flowers in that they automatically turn towards brightness, again and again...they want to learn, to understand, to participate fully in the culture around them, so they turn towards the opportunities to learn, every day."

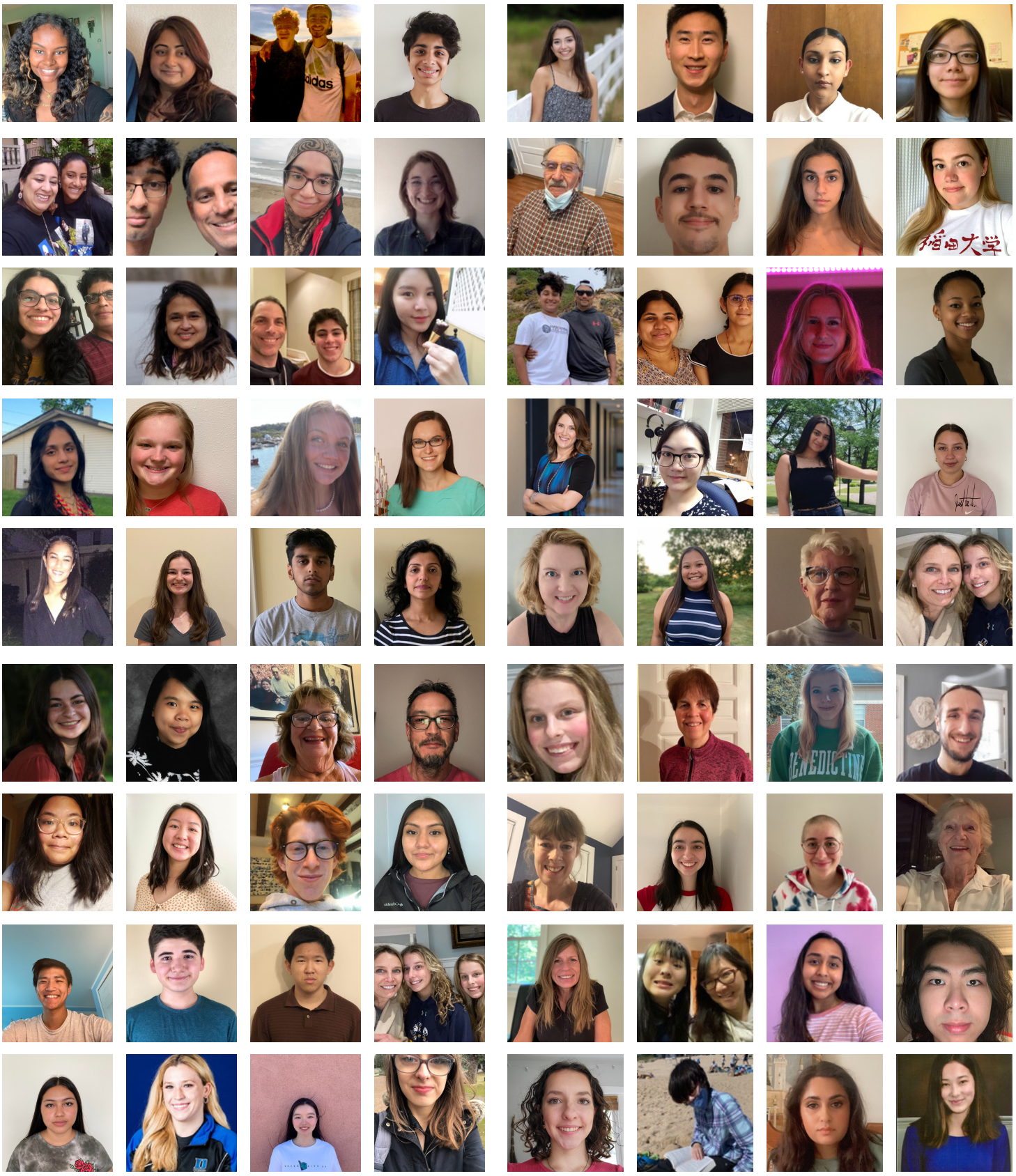
-- Kathleen O'Connor, Ph.D.,
Educational Programs Director, and
Michael O'Connor, J.D., Managing Director

FACES OF A MOVEMENT

All our volunteers at FORA are setting the standard for welcoming refugees who are pre-literate to the United States and are rallying a generation of like-minded allies to our cause. As FORA gains more and more national attention, we all should continue to remember that "the larger the tree, the deeper the roots," and we are all rooted by the relationships we build, one by one. First and foremost, FORA is about connecting individuals -- students and tutors -- who build relationships around learning. These relationships are the building blocks of a community that will help change the course of lives, and, therefore, of history. Be encouraged.



FACES OF A MOVEMENT



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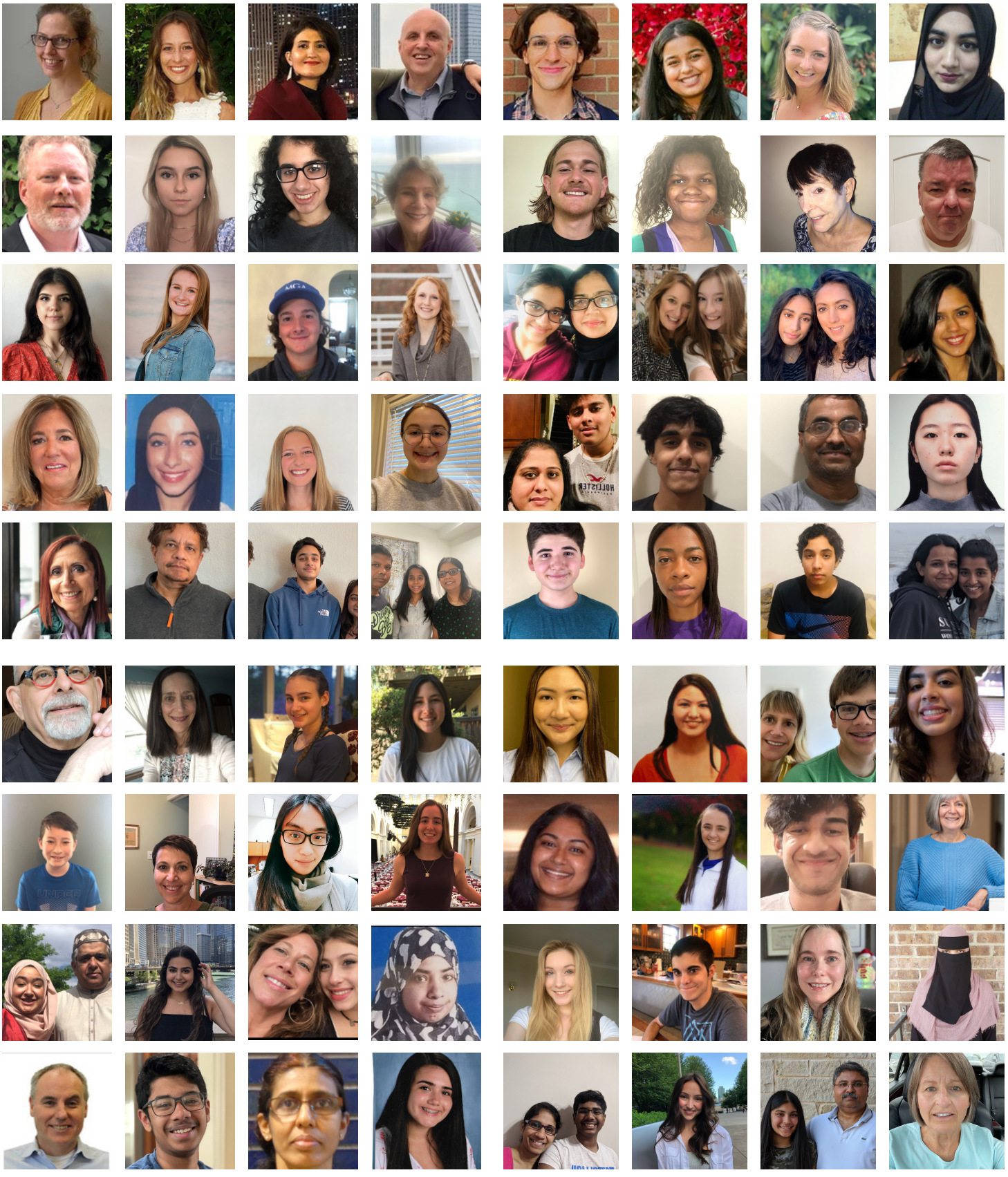

FACES OF A MOVEMENT

