

FORA
FORGING OPPORTUNITIES
FOR REFUGEES IN AMERICA

2026
Impact Report

Anisah, 12, is curious about Malaysia. Her parents, Rohingya, who fled from Myanmar, had Anisah in Malaysia. She was only two years old when she left with her parents. "I want to see how Malaysia looks, but we have never gone back," she said. She is fully focused, however, on looking forward. FORA has helped her build her life in America.

Having received tutoring at FORA since she was seven – "I don't remember my time before FORA" – over time she has been able to read more challenging books, improve her writing and grammar skills, and learn multiplication quickly. By sixth grade, her grades began noticeably improving. She earned all As and Bs this year on her report card.

And the opportunities have gone beyond the classroom. Through FORA, Anisah has been accepted to the prestigious Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University and has joined the Girl Scouts. "I never thought I would get to be in Girl Scouts, but with FORA I get to be," she said.

Anisah is now going into seventh grade. Her immediate goal is to get all As, but she is thinking beyond that.

"I want to go to an Ivy League college and go abroad during school," she said. Then she wants to study medicine and become an anesthesiologist but also hopes to take creative writing classes. Before she becomes a doctor, she wants to "have fun and do lots of traveling." Meanwhile her standardized test scores have skyrocketed.



Give Today. Unlock Their Tomorrow.

Every day, children who have fled war and persecution arrive at FORA filled with determination. More than 200 refugee children are still on our waitlist, longing for that opportunity.

Education is the key to their future, and you hold that key.

Your gift can open the door to possibility, to belonging, and to a brighter future. Together, we can ensure that every child has the chance to learn, to grow, and to thrive.

WILL YOU PLEASE GIVE TODAY?



Dear FORA friends,

Over the past year, I have seen a stream of news reports warning us not to forget girls in Afghanistan who cannot access education under Taliban rule. I have also been privileged to stand beside humanitarian aid workers calling attention to the forgotten plight of the Rohingya children in refugee camps with no education services at all. So often these issues feel out of reach and beyond our influence.

For decades after World War II, and until quite recently, the United States led the world in refugee resettlement. The leadership was a testament to our commitment to human rights and individual liberty. For that commitment to be true, it must hold even, and perhaps especially, when those rights and liberties have been violated most profoundly.

Chicago sits at the heart of a major resettlement corridor in the United States, welcoming communities displaced from around the world. The work we are doing to secure the future of these families is how we make good on the promise our country extends when it offers refuge.

For that promise to be real, we must be prepared to meet extraordinary needs with all the means at our disposal. We will meet resource precarity with generosity. We will meet fear of strangers with kindness and care. We will meet academic struggles with sustained, personal attention to each child's academic growth.



This is work of global magnitude, yet it is right at our fingertips. Here in Chicago, in our classrooms, our neighborhoods, and our relationships, we have the opportunity to answer the consequences of displacement and oppression and to make a national promise real.

For each of the refugee students we serve, the odds have never been in their favor. In so many ways, the world has actively worked against them. FORA's success is built on the incremental accumulation of time, attention, expertise, and resources applied with conviction and with precision. This investment is the difference between us and every other refugee education organization. It is the difference that moves these families forward. You are a part of that success, and I hope that you will continue to be a part of the work that is required to sustain it.

With gratitude and resolve,



Rebecca Clendenen
Chief Administration Officer
rebeccac@refugeefora.org

Because of you, our community grows stronger.

Our 120 refugee children, their parents, who have had little or no access to formal education, and the children's younger siblings are receiving the support they need to thrive as active, joyful members of our community and build futures filled with possibility and hope.

Refugee families look forward to life in America, hoping for relief from years of displacement, poor housing, unstable work, and uncertain support. When they arrive, they find some measure of peace, but quickly encounter a whole new set of obstacles. Someone will tell them that their children must go to school, but neither the parents nor their children have ever stepped foot in a classroom, they do not speak English, and they do not yet read at all. They have little ability to find information independently, and even if they could, the time, effort, and attention required to learn the school system well enough to navigate it would be nearly impossible to find amid the sea of other systems they are learning all at once: transportation, housing, health care, employment, child care, food, clothing, and everything else.

They send their children to school in hope and with a prayer, trusting that the children will be safe and knowing little of what to expect. The children, who may never have been to school themselves, then face the daunting task of quickly developing English proficiency while navigating the strange and intense experience of childhood and adolescence in American public schools. And through all of this, no one seems to understand why they do not understand.

It is hard even for us to wrap our heads around the scale of the culture shock these families are navigating, right out of the gate and with all the baggage that comes with forced displacement and oppression. It is harder still for an overworked teacher to stop long enough to understand the obstacles these students are facing and then to address them.

Globally, nearly half of the approximately 13.1 million school-aged refugee children are missing school because of their displacement. These children were forced from their home countries by violent, oppressive regimes. For many of them, their schooling is not interrupted because it never even began. These children have never learned to read in any language, and in most cases their parents haven't either.

These students represent a very specific category of educational need: Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE). This status marks the fact that they are beginning their educational journey years behind students their age in schools around the world.

After these families are resettled in the United States, they are assigned to classrooms based on their age rather than their education level. A fourteen-year-old who has never been to school must suddenly pass high-school-level math. A twelve-year-old who can't read must find a way to complete reading assignments.

Because Chicago is located in a major refugee resettlement corridor, the Chicago public school system has one of the largest populations of SLIFE refugee students in the country. While there are well-developed systems of support for language learning, there are no systems of support to help these students bridge their foundational learning gaps. They are left to fend for themselves, and few are able to successfully complete even a high-school-level education.

FORA begins with the conviction that the SLIFE designation describes a student's educational history, not their capacity. These children can thrive, but they require sustained, specialized support to do so. They need people who understand where they are starting, a place where they have the time and space to learn, and instruction tailored to their current skill level.



120 Refugee Children =



50,000+ Hours of Individualized Tutoring a Year



That is what FORA provides. We address a specific educational deficit with precision and joy, giving students the personal attention they need to make up years of missed learning.

Every year, our volunteers provide more than 50,000 hours of individualized tutoring. The results are evident not only in students' academic growth, but in the confidence with which they begin to participate in school and take ownership of their learning. Although they entered FORA as Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education, most are now on track to graduate from high school and prepare for college. For our 120 students, FORA provides more than help with schoolwork; we provide an educational foundation sufficient to support whatever they choose next.

Our tutoring program is made possible by your generous donations and grants from the W.C. and E.J. Thornton Foundation, the Patrick and Anna M. Cudahy Fund, the Peter and Judy Blum Kovler Foundation, the James B. Boskey Memorial Foundation, the Naperville Rotary Charities, Inc., Society for Science, Chicago Cosmopolitan Rotary Club, The New Frontiers Foundation, the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, the Lohengrin Foundation, the Caerus Foundation, the State of Illinois, Lewis-Sebring Family Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, the Helen Brach Foundation, the W.P. and H.B. White Foundation, and the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. This work is not possible without the sustained commitment of this generous support. We are so grateful.

Shah and Syafiqah, 13, who are fraternal twin sisters, were born in Malaysia—their mother's homeland and their father's temporary refuge from persecution in his native Myanmar.

They didn't want to stay in Malaysia, where Rohingya refugees face severe limitations. "They didn't let us study," Shah said. For a time they attended a U.N. school for refugee children, but even so, she said, "we didn't have a lot of education."

Their parents spent 13 years on a waiting list to come to the United States. Then came the day when they got a phone call: "They called us and said we can come to the U.S.," Shah said. "Everyone was happy." "Except us," Syafiqah said. "We were sad. We had friends there, and a cousin." "And we had our language," Shah said. "Now we have to learn English. It's not easy to learn a new language."

The family arrived in Chicago in 2024 and began to settle into their new home. "We were really excited to see snow," Shah said. "In Malaysia, we never had winter."

School, however, was less fun. The sisters did not get a warm welcome from their new fifth-grade schoolmates. "They were bullying us because we don't know how to read," Syafiqah said. "They were making fun of us," Shah said. "I did not understand anything. I was struggling." But in sixth grade, Syafiqah and Shah got off the waitlist to enroll in FORA. With FORA's intensive tutoring, their reading and math skills skyrocketed.

"FORA helped us a lot," Shah said. "We can ask any question without waiting. I'm getting better and better in reading." "I learned how to do math; I didn't know how to do math before," Syafiqah said. "FORA is our second school," Shah said.

By seventh grade, their feelings about school had transformed. "It's perfect!" Shah said. "I love it. I understand what the teacher is saying. I have friends; I play sports; people know me. I don't want to graduate now!"

Shah has gone from earning Bs, Cs, and Ds to nearly all As, and Syafiqah made it onto the honor roll. Shah is still amazed. "I don't understand how my English got so much better so fast," she said. "My English in sixth grade was zero. In one year, I learned." Which has meant another big change at school: "No more bullying," Shah grinned.

Because of you, our students' core academic progress has been extraordinary.

At FORA, we measure students' progress using nationally normed Star Assessments. Students who maintain the same percentile rank from year to year on these tests are keeping pace with their peers across the country. FORA students are exceeding that benchmark—they are gaining ground.

Since their initial intake at FORA, our students have gained a median of 23 percentile ranks in math and 20 in reading. That gain represents growth over multiple years. The median time students were enrolled prior to being tested in spring of '26 was 3 years. Mean gains were even larger: 28.1 percentile ranks (SD = 24.56) in math and 25.8 (SD = 22.08) in reading. More than 61% climbed at least 20 percentile ranks in math, and nearly a quarter gained 50 or more.

From spring 2025 to spring 2026 alone, the median student gained 7 percentile ranks in math and 6 in reading. Forty-three percent gained at least 10 percentile ranks in math and 38% in reading, while nearly a quarter gained 20 or more ranks in math.

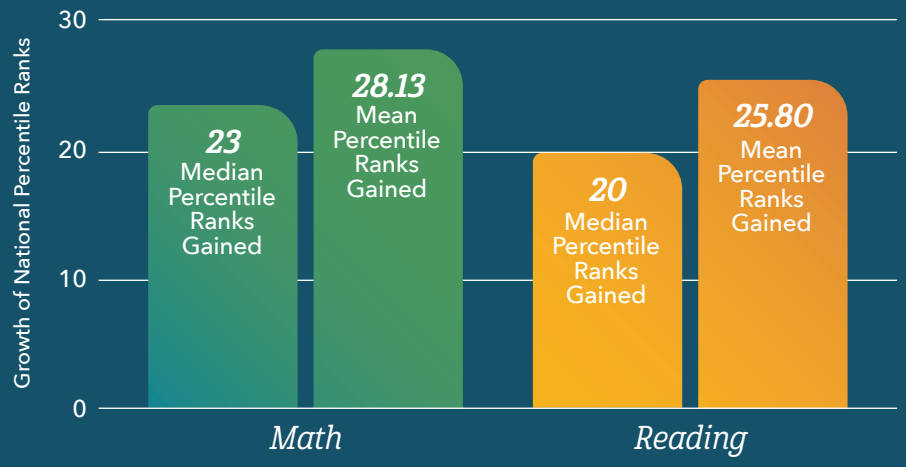
Of course, test scores are only one part of the picture. This summer, 16 FORA students qualified for and enrolled in Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development programs. Every day, we see these gains reflected in students' pride, confidence and determination.

Your support has helped unlock our students' extraordinary potential—through tens of thousands of tutoring hours and astounding generosity. Thank you.

Growth in Percentile Ranks from Entry to Spring 2026

Analysis includes 92 students who completed both Star Math and Star Reading assessments in spring 2025 and spring 2026.

Initial intake assessments were taken anywhere between 2021 and 2025; the median time between intake and spring 2026 is 35 months. The mean was also 35 months (SD = 17). The estimated median amount of time students were in the country prior to intake at FORA is approximately 2 years.





Nurulnisa knew that the only way her daughter Suhaida, 12, was going to get an education was if the family left Malaysia—the only home Nurulnisa had known.

"Rohingya children were not allowed to go to school in Malaysia," she said. "Everyone I knew began moving to the U.S."

In 2015, her family, including one-year-old Suhaida, joined the others who had left. Suhaida began her schooling in Chicago—but not easily. She struggled with the new language. In second grade, she began receiving tutoring at FORA. She quickly grew more comfortable communicating. "Speaking English with my tutors helped me learn the language," she said.

The family has grown in Chicago; Suhaida is now the oldest of five. Two of Suhaida's younger siblings have joined her at FORA.

Suhaida is heading into seventh grade, feeling a little nervous but also ready with FORA's encouragement. Her schooling will now offer more challenges and opportunities. With support from FORA's Family-School Partnership team, she enrolled in a new school with a specialized STEM-focused curriculum. It was FORA that sparked her interest in STEM, she said. "FORA taught me to love math."

Nurulnisa considers FORA crucial to her children getting the education they would have been denied in Malaysia. "FORA has been a very, very big help," she said. "Everything has gotten better for my kids. It is helping them with everything."

Suhaida dreams of going to medical school and becoming a cardiologist, a career she was introduced to through a career talk at FORA. "I want to do medicine because I want to help people," she said.

Because of you, FORA equips refugee parents to take the lead in their children's education.

Refugee parents may finally make it out of the chaos and danger of displacement only to find themselves inside a new system that is complex, unfamiliar, and difficult to navigate. They have brought their children here hoping to help them build safer, happier lives and pursue opportunities that the parents themselves were denied. Yet when a child begins to struggle in school, parents may have no way to understand what is happening or how to intervene. We have witnessed the despair this creates. After being made to feel helpless during displacement, parents can be made to feel helpless again after resettlement. We cannot accept that.

That is where FORA's Family-School Partnership (FSP) program comes in. Made possible through the generosity of the Jewish United Fund, the Helen Brach Foundation, the W.P. and H.B. White Foundation, and donors like you, we change this reality.

FORA honors the sacred love parents have for their children and the dignity parents deserve in supporting their children. Our role is not to replace parents or make decisions on their behalf, but to give them the information, language access, tools, and relationships they need to lead. Our FSP team helps parents understand and navigate American schools. We attend parent-teacher conferences for every child. Sometimes we provide translation. Sometimes we coordinate our student learning plans with the needs identified by classroom teachers. We help families navigate the bureaucracy of enrollment, registration, and forms, as well as the less visible politics of school administration. We work collaboratively with schools, but through all of it, we carefully follow the parents' lead.

During the last school year and summer program, FORA's FSP team recorded 2,003 activities supporting students and families. These included 616 academic support and advising meetings with students, 212 parent meetings, 207 parent-teacher conferences, 27 admission and registration meetings, and 35 support interventions. The team also tracked students' progress through 323 grade summaries and 175 academic updates, reviewed FORA attendance 229 times, and made 179 learning-plan changes. Together, these activities show how FSP connected ongoing academic monitoring with direct support for students and engagement with their families and schools.

The work of our Family-School Partnership team ensures that the process of educational growth for FORA students does not come at the expense of family bonds. It is the point at which refugee parents can find relief long enough to experience real hope for their children. Your generosity allows us to continue breaking down barriers and creating a supportive network where every child has the chance to thrive. Please help us continue this important work.

Zainab and her three sons, Zahirman, 13, Shahir, 11, and Ameran, 9, came to America as Rohingya refugees from Malaysia in 2022. "For my kids," she said. "For my kids' future. The future is not good there."

FORA has become key to that future. Shahir heard about the group from friends. All the brothers are now receiving tutoring. When Shahir started coming to FORA, "I was very happy," he said. "I learned reading, writing, math, spelling, and listening." Now he is reading Percy Jackson books.

FORA helps their mother, too. Staff explains information packets sent home by the schools, Zainab explained, and has helped her register her children for school.

Most of all, her children are on their way to the future Zainab intends for them: "university." It is a word echoed by many FORA mothers—reflecting their hopes, their knowledge of their children's potential, and their confidence in FORA itself.


adidas

Because of you, students are learning beyond the classroom.

FORA's supplemental educational programs give students the opportunity to put their classroom learning into practice through extracurricular activities, while also building essential soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and problem-solving.

FINDING YOUR VOICE

This public speaking program guided our kindergarten through fifth grade students through activities and workshops designed to help them develop their voices. Students built confidence, strengthened their communication skills, and learned to clearly articulate and defend their ideas and opinions.

GIRL SCOUTS

This past winter, FORA launched Girl Scout Troop 6435, bringing together girls, kindergarten through twelfth grade, from both FORA and the surrounding neighborhood. The troop meets one Saturday each month to complete activities that help the girls develop new skills and earn a variety of patches. Most recently, the Scouts have been working towards patches and badges in financial literacy and engineering! Additionally, in its first cookie season, the troop sold more than 1,200 boxes in just two months, showing their entrepreneurial skills and dedication.

SCOUTING AMERICA

Scouting America (formerly Boy Scouts of America) prepares young people for lives of impact and purpose through character development and values-based leadership training. The program complements FORA's mission by giving students hands-on opportunities to build leadership skills, gain educational experiences, and engage with their community. FORA's Scouting America troop is committed to creating a welcoming, safe environment where Scouts can express themselves, share their experiences, and learn from one another.

ECHOES OF HISTORY

This introductory archival research program, developed in partnership with the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, helped students become archivists of their own history. Students visited the Sulzer Regional Library and Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection to explore Chicago's history through microfiche photographs and other archival materials, learning how primary sources can bring the past to life.

ROBOTICS

Throughout the fall and winter, our VEX Robotics program guided students through designing, building, and programming robots. FORA's sixth- through twelfth-grade students worked with staff and volunteers to tackle this year's VEX challenge: designing robots capable of picking up and moving objects into three goals while defending their own goal area. Students developed skills in object retrieval, manipulation, storage, and defense.

FORA's younger students, kindergarten through fifth grade, participated in weekly LEGO Robotics activities in the fall and summer. During the fall, students explored the five senses and applied what they learned to build carnival and amusement park games. In the summer, they designed metropolitan transportation solutions to address challenges. Throughout the program, students strengthened their teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills.

MATH CIRCLES OF CHICAGO

Twice a month on Sundays during the school year and for three weeks over the summer, Math Circles of Chicago uses FORA's space as one of its community hubs for advanced math programming. There, university professors guide students through challenging, creative math in hands-on, small-group settings. Math Circles is one of the largest math enrichment programs of its kind, operating across multiple sites in Chicago. At FORA's site specifically, the program serves FORA students, students on FORA's waitlist, and West Ridge students in grades three through twelve. We are so grateful to Math Circles of Chicago for its dedication to our students.



Brothers Bilal, 19, and Hilal, 11, came to the U.S. with their family in 2021 from Afghanistan as their country was being taken over by the Taliban. They fled because their father had served as a soldier alongside the American military.

They arrived in Chicago in 2022. Bilal was fourteen years old and spoke no English.

"Not at all," he said. "I couldn't talk for almost three months. I started talking in English when I met a volunteer at another organization, but it was just, 'Hi, how are you?' "

That volunteer told Bilal about FORA. Within three months of arriving in Chicago, he signed up. He was the first in his family to enroll in FORA, with his eight siblings and several cousins quickly following along.

"When I came here, I didn't know anyone—and I didn't want to talk," he said. "Then after a few days, I started talking with the other students and the volunteers. After that, my English became better and better."

"FORA was really great. The tutoring was amazing. I didn't know how to do division, so my tutor taught me division, multiplication, and a little bit of algebra."

Bilal excelled in school and became a fixture of FORA's robotics program. "We didn't know anything about how to build a robot, so we were building them and taking them apart, using different ideas," he said. "This year, I'm a paid staff member, teaching other students how to build robots. It's a lot of fun."

With FORA's support, he has graduated from high school and has started Arrupe College, the two-year degree program of Loyola University Chicago, where he plans to major in business.

"I'm really excited," he said. And so are we.

Together we are... forging opportunities for refugees in America.

FORA is the only after-school learning center in the country fully dedicated to unlocking the potential of SLIFE refugee children through personalized, intensive foundational education. Each year, we provide more than 50,000 hours of High Impact Tutoring (HIT) to 120 refugee students, designed to bridge educational gaps and set students on a path toward success. We are here to empower refugee children, ensuring they have the opportunity not only to catch up academically but also to excel in every aspect of their lives.

These students have faced immense adversity throughout their lives. They have been displaced from their homes, separated from family members, and forced to live in refugee camps or slums for months to years at a time. Despite these challenges, they arrive in a new country full of hope. At FORA, we help give them the tools and encouragement they need to turn that hope into reality. With our guidance, these children are not just overcoming the trauma of their past but are rediscovering their potential. Watching them succeed academically and grow in confidence is the ultimate reward, proving that every child, given the right opportunities, can flourish.




Patriots

FORA's Strategy

FORA is not the only organization in the United States providing tutoring to refugee children, but we are the only refugee service organization that has built its core academic program around High Impact Tutoring, a research-backed intervention designed to accelerate learning for students with foundational gaps in reading and math.

In 2020, the Annenberg Institute at Brown University launched the National Student Support Accelerator after identifying High Impact Tutoring as one of the strongest available responses to pandemic learning loss. The model calls for frequent instruction in groups of no more than four students per tutor, consistent tutor-student relationships, structured curricula, and the use of data to target individual needs. FORA applies that model at considerably greater intensity. Our students attend for two hours every weekday, year-round, and receive instruction at a ratio of 2:1 or better. We are implementing an intervention designed precisely for the problem our students face, with twice the intensity and a weekly dosage that far exceeds the national standard.

By the time today's kindergarten students graduate from high school, each will have received more than 6,000 hours of individualized instruction at FORA. But time is only as good as how you spend it, so our program is designed to ensure that students get the maximum benefit of personalized instruction.

Throughout the year, each student completes standardized assessments that identify their precise level of competency in reading and math. Our Chief Education Officer personally reviews every student's results and develops an individualized learning plan that maps the skills they have mastered, the gaps that remain, and the stages of learning through which they must progress next. Those plans guide each tutoring session and are revised as students advance.

Nasimah, a Rohingya mother of three, and her daughter Tasneem, 8, heard about FORA while they were still in Malaysia, waiting for permission to immigrate to the United States.

Her own mother, who had come to Chicago in 2015, had a friend whose daughter is a FORA student. The friend urged Nasimah to enroll her children if she was able to come to Chicago. "She told me that FORA is a very nice place, very supportive," Nasimah said.

After a nearly 14-year wait, Nasimah and her family were approved to come to the U.S. When they arrived in Chicago, Nasimah's friends took her to enroll Tasneem at FORA.

Tasneem was struggling. She could speak Malay and Chinese and had been attending a Chinese school, but she didn't know any English.

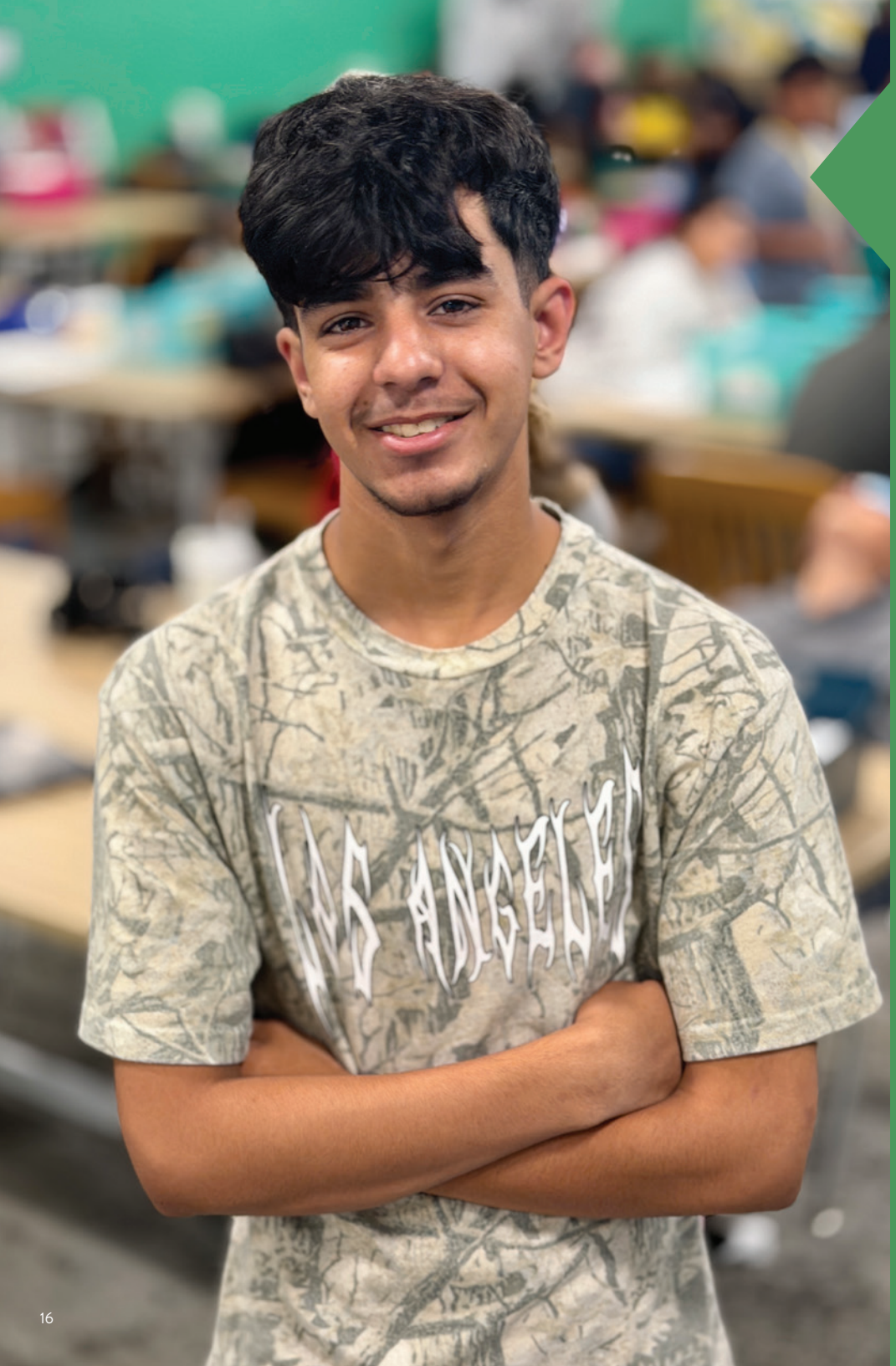
"She cried every day," her mother said. "She said, 'Mommy, I don't know how to speak.' She was getting Fs and Cs. She had to attend her school's after-school classes, but she didn't understand them."

Tutoring at FORA changed everything. Tasneem began to understand and speak English, and in response, her skills in reading, writing, and math soared. Her teacher told Nasimah that Tasneem had improved remarkably.

Nasimah had already seen it herself. "Last year and this year—they are not the same," she said. "Tasneem is happy at FORA and at school."

Nasimah's second child is already on FORA's waitlist, and she plans for him to start as soon as he is old enough. "I'm so excited," she said. "I want this for my kids—for my kids' futures."





Moving to the United States from Afghanistan was a big change for Faheem, 15. "It was my home country, so I love it. I had family, friends."

Most of his family had to leave when the Taliban took over in 2021 because his uncle, Bilal's father, had worked for years with the American military and faced potential retribution from the Taliban.

Faheem was ten. "When I came here I didn't have any friends. And school was very different. We used to sit on the floor, on a carpet, and the teacher would sit and teach us."

Even the way people drive and cross streets was different in the U.S., he said. In Afghanistan, "there is too much traffic–and people don't look. There were traffic lights, but no one stops at the lights. Cars and people just go." Most of all, he said, "I didn't know anyone."

At school, he was isolated by his lack of English. "I didn't know anything," he said. "I was just sitting in class, not talking." His cousins, including Bilal, told him about FORA. "They told me this was a place that could help with English," Faheem said. He started getting tutoring, and his new life in America started to take shape.

"FORA is a nice place, a good place for me. They helped me a lot with reading and math skills. Now I'm getting As and Bs. My favorite subject is math. I love math."

He joined Bilal in FORA's robotics program and became known as an expert in manipulating the robots' controllers. "I love it; I'm good at it," he said. "Last season, we went to the semifinals. There were like 34 teams. We beat some teams."

Last year his family moved to Madison, WI, home to a large Afghan community. Faheem spent the summer in Chicago, staying with Bilal's family, so he could get tutoring at FORA in person. During the school year, he switches to FORA online. He is a fan of the method: "Online is better. You can focus more."

His focus is firmly on FORA and his future. "I want to keep up with my education. I want to become an electrical engineer."

"And to keep up with soccer!"

Meet FORA's Board



MELIKE ONCU *(President)* is the chief strategy officer of the International Code Council, where she has served since joining in 2007 as assistant general counsel. She holds a Juris Doctor from George Washington University and a bachelor's degree from Lafayette College and began her legal career as a corporate attorney with White & Case LLP before serving as Of Counsel at Bingham McCutchen LLP. She currently lives in Chevy Chase, MD, with her husband and their dog.



LENA JESSEN *(Vice President)* is an active community volunteer, serving on the board of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools as chair of the Alumni and Family Relations and Development Committee. She also sits on the board of High Jump. She previously served on the board of the Hyde Park Youth Symphony and has professional experience in marketing, sales, and consulting within the biotech, skincare, and medical device industries. Lena holds a B.S. from Southern Methodist University and an MBA from the University of Chicago.



CHRISTINE SPEARS *(Treasurer)* recently returned to the Minneapolis area after two decades in Washington, DC. She began her career with KPMG before transitioning to nonprofit accounting and finance, spending 12 years with International Justice Mission, where she helped grow the organization's budget from $9 million to $50 million. Christine has since held finance leadership roles with Power to Decide and Special Olympics International, and now provides interim and project-based support to organizations experiencing change and growth. Outside of work, she enjoys running, weightlifting, trivia, watching sports, and taking walks and day trips with her two high-school-aged children.



NAUSHEEN ZAIDI, MD (Secretary) is a board-certified maternal-fetal medicine specialist and OB/GYN practicing in Chicago. She completed her residency at UIC and fellowship at the University of Chicago Hospital and has lived in Chicago for the past 20 years with her three children. Since 2022, Nausheen has volunteered with FORA, supporting its mission to promote education for refugee children and to help ensure their long-term success. In her free time, she enjoys travel and movies.



ZAINAB BAIG, MD is a board-certified internist who has practiced as a hospitalist and practice builder in Chicagoland hospitals for more than 20 years. She most recently served as an associate medical director at Elevance Health (formerly Anthem) and also serves on the board of AMPI USA, a nonprofit providing affordable healthcare to poor and refugee communities worldwide. A graduate of Osmania Medical College in Hyderabad, India, with residency training at Cornell University's hospital in New York City, Zainab has been a dedicated volunteer and fundraiser for FORA and is passionate about expanding access to healthcare and education for underprivileged communities.



LEE BARKER is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. From 2003 to 2019 he served as president of Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago where, among other achievements, he instituted the school's "Global, Multi-faith Classroom." On the occasion of his retirement, and in honor of his transformational presidency, he was named president emeritus by the school's Board of Trustees. At that time, the school also endowed the Lee Barker Professorship of Leadership Studies. Lee holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota, a Master of Arts in Religious Studies from the University of Chicago Divinity School, and a Doctor of Ministry from Meadville Lombard Theological School. He makes his home in Chicago and has one adult daughter.



FARAH NOOR CHEEMA was born and raised in Pakistan, where she earned her medical degree with honors from King Edward Medical University before immigrating to England and later to the United States. Inspired by the transformative power of community service, she has spent the past decade promoting self-sufficiency and empowerment through education while holding volunteer leadership roles with institutions such as the Avery Coonley School, the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, and the Muslim Leadership Academy at the Islamic Foundation of Villa Park. Farah has also served on the board of the U.S. branch of the Hunar Foundation and has worked with the Islamic Circle of North America, Viator House of Hospitality, the Human Development Foundation, and multiple interfaith initiatives.



BOGDANA CHKOUMBOVA is the founder and principal consultant of BC Edu Consult, LLC, bringing more than 25 years of experience in public education. She served as a teacher, principal, network chief, chief schools officer, and chief education officer with Chicago Public Schools. As chief education officer for CPS, she helped shape academic strategy and school improvement across more than 500 schools serving approximately 320,000 students, with a focus on instructional leadership, organizational effectiveness, leadership development, and educational equity. She now provides consulting services to school districts and educational organizations, supporting leadership development, strategic planning, organizational effectiveness, and school improvement. An immigrant from Bulgaria, Ms. Chkoumbova has called Chicago home for the past 30 years and lives with her husband, Vassil.



BILL FORSYTH is co-founder and partner of Frontier One, an investment consulting firm established in 2024, and a founder and director of the New Frontiers Foundation, which supports educational opportunities for underserved youth in Chicago. He has held leadership roles with the University of Illinois Alumni Association, Loyola Academy, Horizons for Youth, and Tutoring Chicago, and he currently sits on the governing boards of the University of Illinois Foundation and Catholic Extension Society. Bill holds a B.S. from the University of Illinois and an MBA from the University of Chicago.



JULIE SCHULZ HALBOWER, a Chicago native, earned a B.A. in Economics from Duke University and a J.D. from Northwestern Pritzker School of Law. She began her legal career in New York City with the law firm Coudert Bros. She moved back to Chicago, where she practiced commercial litigation at a mid-sized firm for several years, and then served as associate general counsel at Grant Thornton LLP. After practicing law for 15 years, she retired to focus on her family. Julie has served on boards of other children- and healthcare-focused charities. She has two daughters in college who both volunteered for FORA. She lives with her husband and three dogs.



SHAIK KALEEM was born and raised in India, where he earned a bachelor's degree in electronics and communications engineering from the University of Madras before moving to the U.S. to pursue a master's degree in computer engineering at Wayne State University. He has since built a long career in the communications and technology industry, spending 26 years at Cisco Systems, Inc., where he was the senior director of global business development for Cisco's IoT Business, leading market expansion across industries such as manufacturing, energy, transportation, and the public sector. Based in the Chicago area with his wife, Kaleem has also been deeply engaged in community service through the Islamic Foundation for 25 years, serving as a board trustee and chair of the Technology & Communications Committee while organizing numerous fundraising drives in support of giving, community service, and refugee resettlement.



LARRY MCMANUS is currently the managing director at Modern Wealth Management. He has extensive international management experience across Asia, including Japan, and Europe, including mergers and acquisitions, acquisition integrations, business development, and sales at companies such as Cisco Systems, Ericsson, BET, Ltd., and ISS, Inc. He holds a B.S. in finance with a minor in real estate from Clemson University, an MBA from the University of South Carolina, and completed the Advanced Program of International Management at the Copenhagen School of Business. Larry and his wife, Pamela, have four children and two grandchildren. They enjoy traveling, hiking, golf, and college basketball, and Larry serves on multiple boards and supports charitable causes including FORA, Habitat for Humanity, the Women's Shelter in Columbia, SC, and the Food Bank of North Carolina.



WENDY KAPLAN MILLER attended Amherst College, where she co-led the Cambodian Refugee Tutoring Project, and taught fourth grade at the Bullis School in Potomac, MD. After graduating from Harvard Law School, she served as an AmeriCorps and Greater Boston Legal Services attorney, focusing on domestic violence and housing issues. She currently lives in Laguna Beach with her husband and dog, with two sons living nearby in Los Angeles. Both of her sons have tutored extensively at FORA.



KATHLEEN O'CONNOR has dedicated her career to teaching in diverse educational settings. She graduated *magna cum laude* from Amherst College in History, earned a master's in Education from Harvard University, and a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Vanderbilt University, where her research centered on family-school partnerships and developing math curricula for underprivileged students and undergraduates. Kathleen has taught in the U.S. and abroad, worked as an educational consultant, and served as an assistant professor at Dominican University, earning multiple awards for teaching, community activism, and educational impact, including recognition as NBC Chicago Today Show's "Hero of the Month" in 2024.



MICHAEL O'CONNOR attended Amherst College and Harvard Law School, where he served as president of the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau and gained experience with organizations including the U.F.W., the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the Southern Center for Human Rights, the D.C. Public Defender Service, and the U.S. Department of Justice. In the 1990s, he worked as a senior trial attorney for the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. DOJ and as associate counsel to the president at the White House, followed by international field work with Catholic Relief Services in Madagascar and Kosovo. He also served as regional director for South Asia at International Justice Mission, testifying before Congress on human trafficking. Since 2007, he has been a portfolio manager in the financial industry.



CASEY LEWIS VARELA is president of the Lewis-Sebring Family Foundation and previously served as manager of strategic partnerships at Youth & Opportunity United and associate director at Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights. She earned her B.A. from Kenyon College and a Master of Arts from the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice at the University of Chicago. Casey has held leadership roles on numerous boards, including the ETHS Educational Foundation, McGaw YMCA, Kingsley Elementary School PTA, and Evanston Community Foundation, and lives in Evanston with her husband, George Varela, and their two college-aged daughters.

The work must continue.

On average, FORA students require three years of dedicated support to fill their foundational learning gaps, but each student requires ongoing support to ensure that they do not fall behind again. When we enroll a new student, we commit to supporting their learning until they complete high school. The work is ongoing, and support must be as well.

Give today and help us keep our promise to stand beside every FORA student until the day they graduate.







We know what works.

FIRST, OUR STUDENTS REQUIRE A SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT OF TIME. Each child attends FORA five days a week, two hours a day, for at least 48 weeks a year—totaling approximately 480 hours of tutoring per student annually. With 120 students enrolled, this amounts to more than 50,000 hours of instruction each year. Because our students' families have been denied access to education for generations under totalitarian governments and rogue regimes, rebuilding their educational foundation and restoring their right to learn requires time and consistency.

SECOND, EACH STUDENT BENEFITS FROM AN INDIVIDUALIZED CURRICULUM. Tailoring instruction to the specific needs of refugee learners, many of whom have missed years of schooling, is essential to ensure they are neither disengaged nor overwhelmed. Students must be challenged, but not discouraged. Because every child learns at their own pace, our team carefully evaluates each student's progress every week and adjusts lessons accordingly.

THIRD, MAINTAINING A TWO-TO-ONE STUDENT-TUTOR RATIO OR LOWER IS CRUCIAL. This close ratio fosters both academic growth and social-emotional development. Students' confidence, focus, and joy in learning all increase when they are supported by dedicated tutors who guide and encourage them.

FINALLY, PARENTS REMAIN AT THE HEART OF EACH CHILD'S EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY, both at FORA and within their schools, where our collective efforts have an even greater impact. Through FORA's Family-School Partnership program, parents regularly connect with teachers and staff to collaborate on the best strategies to support their children. Families set the tone for educational priorities, and our parents are deeply engaged and committed to FORA's mission and approach.

Together, we create opportunity.

This has been a transformative year for FORA. Your generosity allows us to continue this work, build our capacity, and create new opportunities for the students we serve. ***Will you please give to FORA now?***

You can donate in one of the following ways:

You can send a check or a recurring credit card donation via the attached envelope.

If your company offers a donation matching program, please consider using it to double your impact.

We happily accept stock donations. To make a stock donation, please contact Rebecca Clendenen at rebeccac@refugeefora.org for more information.

Go online to our website at www.refugeefora.org/donate or use the following QR code to be led to our donation page.

FORA accepts Zakat-eligible donations, which are designated to support eligible expenses within our educational programs.

In addition to donations, FORA needs the following:

VISITS

Come meet the 120 refugee students we serve and see FORA's programming in action. To schedule a visit, please reach out to Rebecca Clendenen at rebeccac@refugeefora.org.

CORPORATE SPONSORSHIPS

Companies that are interested in becoming involved with FORA are encouraged to reach out to Rebecca Clendenen at rebeccac@refugeefora.org.

VOLUNTEERS

Our organization thrives because of the dedication of our volunteers. We are currently seeking in-person volunteers who can commit to four hours per week, as well as online tutors who are 17 years old or older who can tutor for one hour a day, every day, Monday through Friday, during our programming hours. Throughout the school year, FORA programming takes place every weekday from 4:30–6:30 p.m. and 7–9 p.m., with programming shifting to weekday mornings and early afternoons during the summer.

To learn more about volunteering at FORA, please reach out to Catharina Baeten at catharinab@refugeefora.org.

Together, we are... Forging Opportunities for Refugees in America.

FORA
FORGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFUGEES IN AMERICA

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