

FORA

FORGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFUGEES IN AMERICA

2023 Impact Report

FORA's **VISION** is a world where refugees in need are welcomed and empowered.

FORA's **MISSION** is to ensure that refugee families are provided access to an education sufficient to prepare them to become economically self-sufficient and robustly engaged in American civic life.

FORA's **OBJECTIVE** is to ensure that refugee SLIFE (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education) students and refugee first generation readers catch up to and then maintain grade level so that school becomes joyfully meaningful.

FORA's **STRATEGY** is to provide two-hours daily of customized foundational High Impact Tutoring (HIT) in math and English to each refugee student we serve, with a 2-to-1 or less tutor-student ratio throughout the calendar year, ensuring that foundational educational gaps are filled so that educational scaffolding can occur.

FORA's **MAIN TACTICS** are to be embedded in the communities we serve, within walking distance of our students, and to establish deep relationships with our students' parents and teachers so that we work together as partners to support the academic progress of the students we serve.

We at FORA **VALUE** patience, kindness, wellness, intercultural connection, a passion for learning and a determined resilience... and modeling these values for others.



Nicole's story

Nicole is a 2nd grader from Ethiopia. She came to FORA in 2021 with C-level grades. She had so much energy and enthusiasm for everything but struggled to focus it on any specific activity. Now, after two years at FORA, she loves learning. And as she continues to learn, she continues to gain confidence and radiate joy. Look again at that front-page photo; that is a confident young girl. And her grades reflect her confidence; they are now As for reading and for math!

Greetings, friends, from all of us at FORA.

This is a stark time for humanity, when some of the most important political, economic and social crossroads of human history are being torn apart by war, oppression, natural disasters and refugee crises.

In Ukraine – the crossroads for Europe and Northern Asia – the war will soon be in its third year, having already created more than 11 million refugees and internally displaced persons.

In the Central African Republic – literally the center of Africa – an inter-religious civil war has been going on for ten years, with approximately 20 percent of its 5,000,000-person population displaced.

In Myanmar/Burma – the crossroads connecting the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and China – the military junta continues to attack ethnic minorities and political reformists, leaving little hope of return for the approximately 700,000 Rohingya refugees who have been living with minimal safety and food, amidst squalor, in Bangladeshi refugee camps after escaping genocide in Burma.

In Turkey – the crossroads of all crossroads – the country attempts to rebound from a devastating earthquake while almost 4,000,000 refugees displaced from other countries wait for the chance to settle in a new homeland.

And in the Middle East – a crossroads since the dawn of civilization and the locus of the Abrahamic religions – the horrors of terrorism and war are returning in ways that I am simply unequipped to properly process.

As a species, we are upending ourselves in some of the culturally richest intersections of our shared heritage. In precisely the places where we should be most celebrating humanity's cultural richness while recognizing our common humanity, we are tearing each other apart.

But there is hope. Believe me. So much hope. And the path is right in front of us. The phrase "[t]hink globally; act locally," coined by Scottish biologist and early 20th century cutting-edge urban planner, Patrick Geddes, has real wisdom. We can see what is happening from afar, but we are mere physical creatures with a limited reach. We can only touch that which is right in front of us. Change must begin in our own homes, our own neighborhoods and in our own country. And often the best point of entry is with children, whose laughter and dreams defy any tendency to classify them based on race, ethnicity, or religion.

We at FORA find ourselves at a uniquely American crossroads, a microcosm of many of the world's most-famous crossroads. We work in a community that is approximately 30% Jewish (descendants of refugees who survived the Holocaust) and approximately 20% Muslim (from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and other places formerly or currently torn by war). Meanwhile, Illinois has the largest number of Palestinian Americans, by percent of the population, of any state. And more than 40% of our West Ridge neighbors are foreign born.

At FORA, more than 90% of our refugee students are Muslim, and we have scores of Jewish and Muslim volunteers who commit thousands of hours each year to helping our newest refugee neighbors. We are committed to working together on a common goal – restoring human rights of our newest neighbors (such as Afghan girls, Rohingya survivors of genocide, and Africans fleeing from decades-long wars) who lost their homes and their homelands to terror, war, and oppression. We all work together as neighbors, with the shared hope, deep in our bones, that "the ripple effect" is at work so that our deep commitment to each other and to holding this corner of the world together – as a community, at peace, and with love – will be felt in the yet to be determined future in all those international crossroads that we now see but cannot yet touch.

May our world be a more peaceful place next year and may our children grow up to be healthy, happy, and wise.

Never forget that it is only *together* that we are forging opportunities for refugees in America.

With great appreciation,



Kathleen O'Connor

Kathleen O'Connor, Ph.D.
Director of Education
FORA

Meet FORA's Board



Melike Oncu *(President)* is the General Counsel of Jobot, which combines top performing recruiters and AI technology to provide the best possible service to clients and candidates. Prior to her position at Jobot, she was the General Counsel of the International Code Council, which she joined in October 2008 as Assistant General Counsel. As General Counsel, Ms. Oncu oversees all legal affairs for Jobot. 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.



Natasha Yaqub *(Secretary)* 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.



Lena Jessen *(Treasurer)* is an active and engaged community volunteer and currently serves on the board of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools as chair of the Alumni and Family Relations and Development Committee. She also currently sits on the board of High Jump, chairing the Program Committee, and she previously served on the board of the Hyde Park Youth Symphony. Lena has worked in marketing, sales and consulting roles in firms working in the biotech, skincare and medical device spaces. Lena has a B.S. from Southern Methodist University and a MBA from the University of Chicago.



Michael O'Connor *(Co-Founder and 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. He has been a Senior Trial Attorney for the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice, an Associate Counsel to the President of the United States at the White House, an international field worker for Catholic Relief Services in war-torn Madagascar and Kosovo, and the Regional Director for South Asia for International Justice Mission.



Kathleen O'Connor *(Co-Founder and Educational Programs Director (Volunteer))* is a child developmental psychologist with a B.A. from Amherst College, an M.A. from Harvard Education School and a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University who specializes in working with war-torn youth. She has worked in Madagascar as a volunteer English teacher and as a 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. She was recently nominated by the American Red Cross for the 2022 Hero Award and in 2021 she was awarded the Valuing Difference Award for community activism and achievement by the Wingspan Project and Live Oak Chicago.



Zainab Baig, MD *(Board Member)* is a Board Certified Internist who has practiced as a Hospitalist and Practice Builder at several hospitals across Chicagoland for over 20 years. In addition, she most recently served as an Associate Medical Director at Elevance Health (formerly Anthem) where she helped physicians across the country assess and manage complex patient cases. Zainab is also on the Board of AMPI USA – a non profit providing affordable healthcare to the poor and refugee communities across the world. She did her residency at a Cornell University hospital in New York City and studied medicine at Osmania Medical College in Hyderabad, India. Zainab is passionate about expanding access to healthcare and eduction for underprivileged communities, and has been an active volunteer and fund raiser for FORA since 2019.



Wendy Kaplan Miller *(Board Member)* 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.



Farah Noor Cheema *(Board Member; President Emeritus)* 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 also served on the board of the U.S. branch of the Hunar Foundation, and collaborated with both Viator House of Hospitality and the Human Development Foundation.



Shaik Kaleem *(Board Member)* got his Bachelor's Degree in Electronics and Communications Engineering from University of Madras then his Master's degree in Computer Engineering from Wayne State University, Detroit after migrating to the U.S. in 1985. He has worked for Interface Electronics, Hughes Aircraft Company and for the last 26 years at Cisco Systems, Inc, where he was the Senior Director, Global Business Development for Cisco's IoT Business. 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 area and has been passionate about giving, community service, and refugee settlement and has successfully organized various community fundraising drives.



Julie Schulz Halbower *(Board Member)* was born and raised in the Chicago area. She received a bachelors of arts degree in Economics from Duke University and a juris doctorate from Northwestern Pritzker School of Law. She began her legal career in New York City practicing corporate law with the law firm, Coudert Bros., and then moved back to Chicago to practice commercial litigation with Holleb & Coff. From there, she was appointed Associate General Counsel at the accounting firm, Grant Thornton LLP, where she worked for several years before retiring to focus on her family. She has also been on the boards of other charities in the Chicago area that benefit children and healthcare. She currently splits her time between Kenilwoth, IL, Naples, FL, and Exeter, NH, where she lives with her husband Matthew, two daughters and three dogs. Her daughters have joyfully volunteered at FORA and found the experience to be very meaningful.

Because of you...

In the past year, more than 100 recently arrived refugee children have received approximately 48,000 hours of individualized tutoring, empowering them to succeed in school and beyond. In fact, 103 refugee children and their 180 pre-literate parents and their under-school-age younger siblings are all receiving services at FORA that will prepare them to become joyfully engaged members of our society.

This empowerment is not the norm. On average, it takes refugees ten years after fleeing their homelands to be permanently resettled. During their years in exile, many are forced to live in camps and slums, and their children are denied access to any education. So many refugee children around the world have forcibly missed years of education that a new pedagogical acronym has been coined – "SLIFE," or Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education. Almost all refugee students became SLIFE students, years behind in school or totally illiterate.

When these children arrive in the United States, so hopeful about their future lives, they are still not seen for who they are and what they need. They are placed in grade levels based on their age rather than their academic level, leaving them demoralized and unable to engage. They sink in school emotionally and academically. All that they and their families risked so much for is still out of reach. In fact, fewer than 10% of SLIFE students in the U.S. graduate from high school.

We at FORA are laser-focused on flipping this percentage on its head. These children can thrive; they just need a little specialized help – someone to believe in them and give them a space to learn with educational resources tailored to their level. That is what we do at FORA. We respond to the issue with precision and joy, restoring hope to these children and their families. FORA students are breaking through the glass ceiling. They are classified as SLIFE, but they are on track to not only graduate high school, but to go on to college.

Our tutoring program is made possible by grants from the Jewish United Fund, the Council of Islamic Organization of Greater Chicago's Zakat Chicago, the WC and EJ Thornton Foundation, the W.P. and H.B. White Foundation, the Patrick and Anna M. Cudahy Fund, general development support from the Chicago Community Trust and the New Frontiers Foundation, and your donations.

Your support is enabling refugee children to achieve at breathtaking levels, and we need your ongoing partnership to continue making these remarkable outcomes possible.



100 Refugee Children = 48,000 Hours of Individualized Tutoring



January 3rd, 2024 will be the fifth anniversary of FORA's opening.

We started with twelve children and now are at more than 100 children a day with more than another 100 on the waiting list. And in mere months, we will move into our newly-purchased 11,800 square foot building, the former Northtown Branch of the Chicago Public Library.

We at FORA do not do what we do for fanfare. We do what we do because the refugee children we serve have been denied access to their right to literacy by rogue regimes and brutal dictators, have survived war, ethnic cleansing and genocide, and are now our newest neighbors. However, we do want Americans to know that these children exist, they deserve our help, and that we all can help empower them, drastically changing the trajectory of their lives for the better.

So it was with great joy that we were told in October 2023 that FORA has been named as one of 35 finalists for the Public Interest Registry's 2023 .ORG Impact Awards. With more than ten million organizations registered as in the registry, FORA's odds of being selected as a finalist were small indeed. FORA is one of only 35 finalists from 22 countries out of approximately 1,000 nominees from 70 countries. With five finalists in each of seven categories, FORA is a finalist in the "Quality Education for All" category.

Out of millions of nonprofits and thousands of cities in the world, 2 of the 35 worldwide finalists this year are from Chicago. The other Chicago finalist is Children's Place International, which provides healthcare and well-being for some of the world's most vulnerable populations. Chicago's "can do" spirit shines through in FORA's families, volunteers, and supporters. It takes all of us to tackle the world's biggest challenges, and together, we are all up for the challenge.

Again and again, we want to emphasize that it is only together that we are forging opportunities for refugees in America.

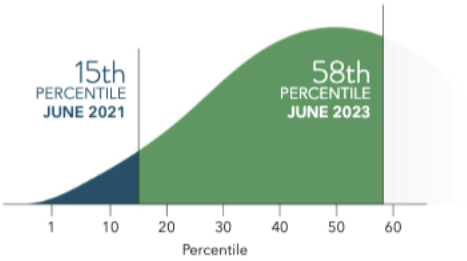
Because of you...

In the past two years, FORA's 3rd through 12th graders have developed reading and math skills at an incredible rate. Their median percentile ranks in nationally normed standardized tests have gone from the 15th to the 58th percentile in math and from the 5th to the 23rd percentile in reading. That is growth of 43 percentiles in math and 18 percentiles in reading in just two years!

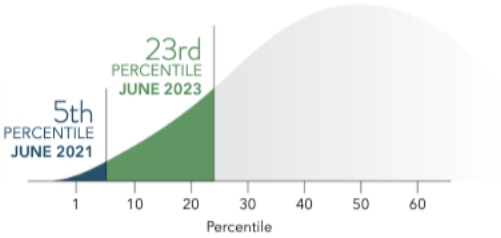
This growth is particularly impressive in light of recent research showing that while students are expected to increase their scores over time, they typically don't change their percentile ranks. Doing so would require that they learn at a higher rate than their peers who began ahead of them – that is what our students are doing! FORA's efforts are working – our students are catching up to their peers so they can learn in school.

These students' progress in math is amazing, but please know that such reading progress is otherwise unheard of. Most of our students come to the U.S. with no knowledge of English and unable to read or write in any language. To see them devouring their favorite books, from Rick Riordan books to science-fiction, feels nothing short of miraculous. Such gains happen only because of your financial support.

Math skills, as measured on Star Renaissance standardized tests



Reading skills, as measured on Star Renaissance standardized tests





Khushida, Tharduke, and Harsan's story

Kushida was two years old when she came to the U.S. from Myanmar, where her parents, Mohamad and Gunshar, had lived as refugees after fleeing Myanmar. She absorbed English swiftly. At 9, she is so fluent that she recounted the plot of her favorite book in detail and at breakneck speed, delivering the conclusion with a breezy "long story short…"

The family credits FORA, where Kushida, her older brother, and her younger brother have all gotten tutoring, with their school success. The two older children earn high GPAs; five-year-old Harsan, too young for numeric grades, gets "E"s for Excellent.

But the family moved to Milwaukee in 2021. They left Chicago — but they had no intention of leaving FORA. They arranged for the children to continue their tutoring remotely.

"It's important," said 10-year-old Tharduke. "When we went to FORA, we learned English better. They gave us vocabulary. It's a total success." Tharduke participated in Model U.N. Kushida got an "outstanding" grade in debate. Much as she loves reading, her favorite subject is math.

"I get almost all As," Kushida said proudly. "I have a 3.6 GPA." "No," corrected her mother, Gunshar, smiling: "3.98."

Because of you...

In June 2023 when final report cards were released, FORA students were filled with pride and joy. In the past two years, our 1st through 12th graders raised their final report card grades, on average, from 2.5 to 3.2 G.P.A. in math; from 2.3 to 3.0 in reading; and from 2.3 to 3.0 in writing – all statistically significant gains.

Our students' scores speak volumes. At the start of the 2021-22 school year, many FORA students had grades just above a 2.0., or a C. Local public-school policy is to give refugees a C simply for showing up. These "refugee C's" often mask a knowledge level that is at a D or even an F level, making a grade increase from those Cs to a C+ reflective of an incredible amount of growth. Behind these numbers are scores of stories of students finally being able to engage in school. As our students start being able to, they start being able to benefit from school. They learn and grow alongside their peers, putting them on a path to success beyond school.

Just this past year, we graduated our first twelfth-grade student. With three younger siblings, she had dropped out of school during the pandemic, which hit her sophomore year of high school, to take care of her siblings and help them attend school virtually. After joining FORA the summer after her sophomore year, she not only got all As her junior year and all As except for a B+ in AP Psychology in her senior year, she also at the same time made up all her sophomore year classes, getting all As in all of them. And this past spring she was accepted into the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, one of the top 15 public universities in the United States, with Women and Gender Studies as her selected major.

You make these academic achievements possible. Your continued support will enable more students to take this crucial path to success in America.



Asal Amiri on her first day of college at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.



Babesh's Story

Babesh first came to Chicago in 2015. "I didn't know that much English," he said. "The only thing I knew was, "Hello, I'm Babesh, nice to meet you." "

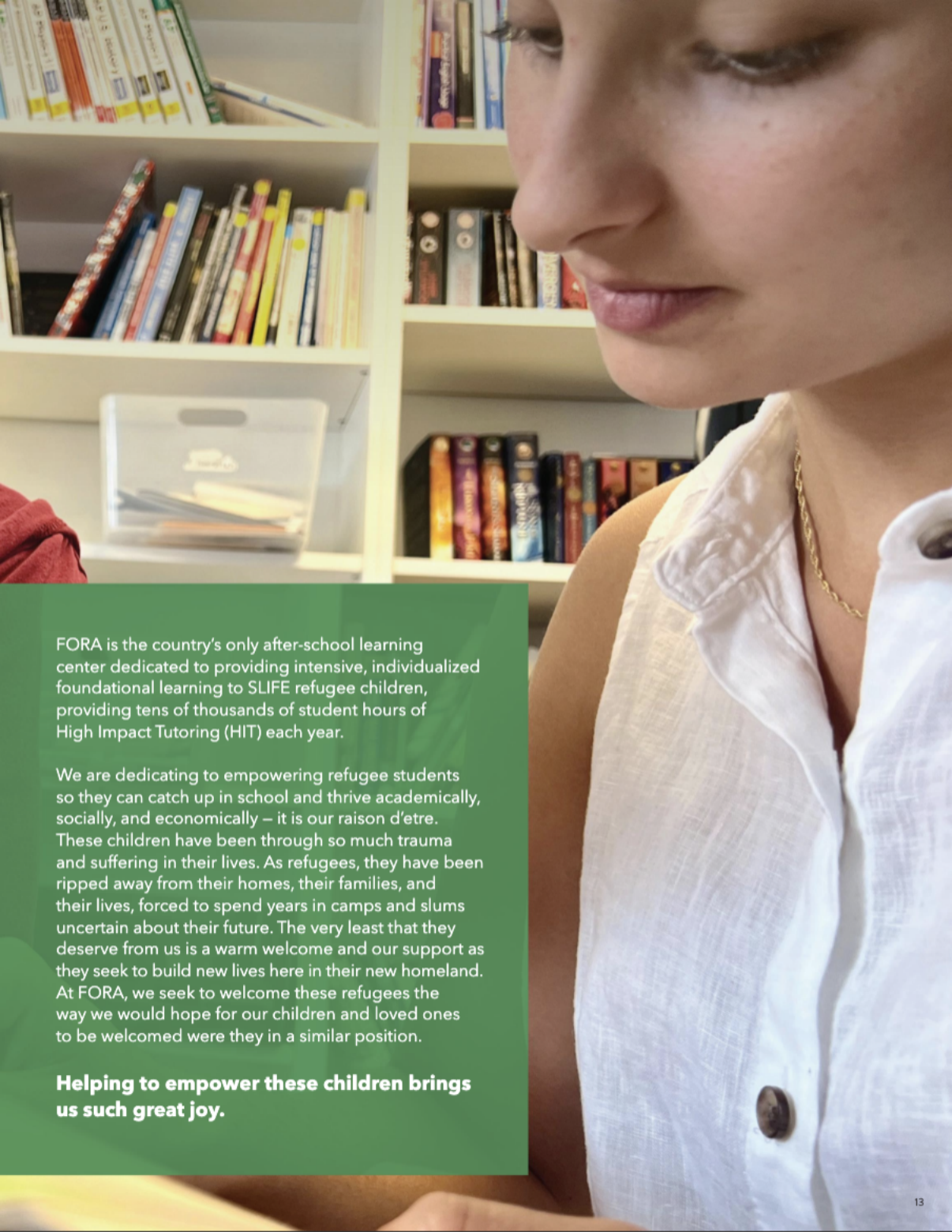
Politeness wasn't enough to get him through class. "I didn't want to read because I know I was bad at reading. When they would call on me, I would start panicking." His mother, Jyoti, was new to English herself – she and her Nepali-speaking Bhutanese husband had spent 22 years as refugees in Nepal and India – and couldn't read Babesh's books or navigate the American school system. "Everything was completely different here," she said. "He needed education, but I couldn't help him."

FORA could. Jyoti spotted neighborhood children going to FORA, and got Babesh on the waiting list. When he was in eighth grade, a spot opened up. Once he was in FORA, Babesh soared upward. He learned English. He mastered pronunciation. He excelled in school. His younger brother, Drish, 6, followed him into FORA.

Babesh participated in FORA's robotics and Model U.N. programs. He completed a year-long Youth Leadership Council program at the Adler Planetarium. At the program's end, he gave a speech about his life as a refugee.

Now 17 and a high school senior, he is working with the Chicago Scholars Foundation on applying to college. He hopes to study engineering and architecture. The family has faced heartbreak; Jyoti's husband died in 2019. But with FORA's support, Jyoti says, the future is bright. "Our life is getting better and better because of education," she said. "Education is the most important thing. My plan is for my kids to be educated people - and good people, good human beings," she said. "If I can see that, that is my achievement; that is my dream."


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



FORA is the country's only after-school learning center dedicated to providing intensive, individualized foundational learning to SLIFE refugee children, providing tens of thousands of student hours of High Impact Tutoring (HIT) each year.

We are dedicating to empowering refugee students so they can catch up in school and thrive academically, socially, and economically – it is our raison d'etre. These children have been through so much trauma and suffering in their lives. As refugees, they have been ripped away from their homes, their families, and their lives, forced to spend years in camps and slums uncertain about their future. The very least that they deserve from us is a warm welcome and our support as they seek to build new lives here in their new homeland. At FORA, we seek to welcome these refugees the way we would hope for our children and loved ones to be welcomed were they in a similar position.

Helping to empower these children brings us such great joy.

Because of you...

Our students are able to find not just academic success but joy at school! We launched our Family-School Partnership (FSP) program two years ago, and in these past two years, refugee parents have gone from reporting that only 50 percent of their children were happy in school in 2021 to reporting that 93 percent of their children were happy in school in 2022 to reporting that 96 percent of their children are happy in school in 2023.

Many refugee parents feel confused about and isolated from the American educational system. They are reluctant to talk to teachers because of language barriers or uncertainty over what to ask. Having been barred from attending school themselves in their homelands, they feel as though school is a black box that their children disappear into – they have no idea what is happening inside and feel powerless to participate or influence it in any way.

The FSP program, made possible by grants from the Helen Brach Foundation and the Howard and Abby Milstein Foundation and your generous support, empowers parents to participate in their children's education. FORA team members work hard to familiarize parents with their children's school and the school system, foster communication between schools and parents, and equip parents with the knowledge and tools they need to positively impact their children's education.

In 2023, the FORA team has engaged in over 800 interventions supporting students, parents, teachers, and relevant school personnel ranging from meeting with students and their parents to ensure awareness of grades and attendance to facilitating meetings between parents and school officials to discuss any educational issues as they arise and brainstorm solutions. With parents, teachers, and FORA's High Impact Tutoring staffers working together, student success skyrocketed. Moreover, empowered parents raise empowered children who will grow up to contribute meaningfully to American civic life.

This momentum is possible in part because you spend the money to treat these students as your own. Please help us keep it going.





Ubaidah's story

When Ubaidah started 1st grade, it wasn't just her first time in an American classroom; it was her first time in any classroom. She and her family had been living in Malaysia after fleeing Myanmar, and Rohingya children living there weren't allowed to go to school. She had been spending her time at home, playing with her cousins.

Then the family came as refugees to Chicago. Ubaidah was starting school in a new city in a new country. "I didn't know anything or any English," she said. "I couldn't speak to anybody or understand anything." At the end of eighth grade, she began getting tutoring at FORA.

"I was skeptical," she said. "I thought, 'What if I don't know the people? I just stay here for two hours?' I was a little scared. But my mother told me not to be scared. So I loosened up a bit. And it's fine now."

It is very fine. Ubaidah is now 17 and in 11th grade and is embarking on the demanding International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme at Senn High School. Having started her education not knowing English, she will cap off her IB by writing a 4,000-word essay.

"School is fun," she said. She loves reading. "It's one of my all-time favorite hobbies! I used to stay in the classroom just to finish a book. My and my friend would race to see who would finish a series first. Books are my escape from reality."

She still comes to FORA for tutoring, especially in math, and has become a tutor herself. In spring she helped run FORA's Butterfly Project, helping children learn the life cycle of butterflies.

She would like to go into nursing or maybe bioinformatics. She is already considering her college choices. FORA remains at the center of her life and her future.

Because of you...

Our students were able to build STEM knowledge and skills as well as their confidence by participating in a regional robotics competition – and winning!

This year, building on our TinkRworks Robotics program of years past, we ran our first ever VEX Robotics program for two teams of our middle and high school students. They spent the fall honing their conceptual and practical robotics skills and experimenting with robot designs to pick out the one most effective for completing this year's VEX task – picking up disks from the ground and shooting them into a bucket. Through the winter, they designed and built their robots for speed and accuracy, and in February, they competed in a regional VEX tournament… and made the semi-finals!

Also this past February, a group of our middle school students competed in an aeronautical engineering competition hosted by the Adler Planetarium. They designed and built airships to complete specific tasks then pitched their design to investors. As part of the design process, they were given a budget with which to "purchase" the supplies they needed, demonstrating financial competency. They created and tested design hypotheses to build an effective airship and constructed and delivered a persuasive pitch to investors, and they won third place!

Working both individually and in teams, overcoming engineering failures time and time again, students are developing social-emotional skills such as growth mindset, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and social awareness, alongside practical STEM skills and belief in their abilities to be scientists and engineers.

To expand these benefits even more students, we plan to greatly expand robotics this year. Our older students are currently engaging in VEX Robotics team competitions on the weekends thanks in part to a grant from the Society for Science. We will additionally be offering Lego Robotics for all of FORA's younger children every Friday night after we move into our new building, thanks to a generous grant from the Albert Pick Jr. Fund.

We need your help to continue and grow our students' access to opportunities such as these. Will you help us provide high-level resources that put refugee children on the same level as students at the city's top schools?





Soe and Moe's story

Back in Myanmar, Soe, 17, and Moe, 15, had pushed to get a good education in a system where Rohingya refugees were not welcome. "It was hard," said Soe. "Most of the population there is Buddhist. They don't want people like us going to school with them."

Their lives changed when they and their parents came to the U.S. in 2019. They knew they had to learn English fast; they had to translate for the family. And to go to school during Covid, they had to master new technologies – apps like Google Classroom that Chicago schools were using but that he had never seen.

Enter FORA. At FORA, Soe developed fluency in English and learned how to use online education apps – discovering in the process that he loved tech. "That's how I became the STEM guy," he said happily.

Both Moe and Soe joined FORA's robotics team. Soe won a summer internship at the Adler Planetarium, where he studied the use of electrical circuitry to reduce light pollution. For his final project, he programmed and built a model of a low-frequency red light that could be used in the waiting area outside the planetarium's dome theater.

Soe attended the Illinois State Conference of Future Business Leaders of America, where he won 4th place in a data analysis competition, earning him an invitation to the 2023 National Leadership Conference of Future Business Leaders of America in Atlanta, which he attended this past June. He is currently working with the Chicago Scholars Foundation on college applications.

Moe is exploring the college application process through the Morton Schapiro Northwestern University Academy, a competitive free college access program for motivated and accomplished Chicago Public School students. In school, her schedule is crammed with AP classes. It is a world away from Myanmar.

"We were desperate for opportunities – but we knew we would never get them," Soe said. They're getting them now – and running with them.

Fayez Family's Story

Fazlulhaq Fayez tried to shield his children from knowing the danger he faced when the U.S. left Afghanistan. He was a project development specialist with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) based at the U.S. embassy in Kabul. When the Taliban took over, he knew, he would be a target.

"Even if they don't kill you, they'll say, 'Why do you shave your beard? why do you wear western clothes?' " he said. "I didn't want my kids to see."

He wanted to leave with his wife and three children, but it had become nearly impossible to get to the Kabul airport to catch one of the last military flights out. However, USAID organized buses to transport their staff to the airport, and after sitting on a military plane for 18 hours, the family was on its way. They traveled from Kabul to Kuwait to Germany and finally, in 2021, with a coveted Special Immigrant Visa, to the U.S.

It was not an easy transition. They struggled with being separated from their homeland and family and with a new language. "When we came here, we can't speak English," said Fayez' wife, Morsal. They settled in Chicago, and their oldest son, Fardin, 10, began school here. "It was difficult for my son; he didn't know the language," Fayez said.

FORA became the family's lifeline. Here, Fayez found a new career; he is now FORA's online education officer. And here Fardin, along with his five-year-old brother Faisal, got tutoring that had him communicating well in English within two months.

"I like coming here," Fardin said. "I learn so much. I learn English; I learn how to read; I learn vocabulary words." "He speaks English so well," his mother said proudly.

Every day Fayez talks with his mother in Afghanistan about the difficult future in Afghanistan. Here in Chicago, the family is making its own future with the support of FORA. "Whenever we have a problem with school, when we need information, they help us," Morsal said. "This is a good place."





FORA's Strategy: High Impact Tutoring

FORA is focused on filling gaps in math and reading so that school becomes enjoyable and meaningful. The pedagogical strategy used is called High Impact Tutoring (HIT) – an educational intervention typically defined as five or more tutoring hours per week at a ratio lower than five students per tutor.

HIT is strongly associated with large learning gains. Recent research from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University recommends it as the intervention most likely to have the greatest impact on pandemic learning loss, but FORA is the only organization that takes this approach with refugee students.

And because our students are some of the most disenfranchised in the world, FORA goes well beyond standard HIT practices.

Students come to FORA's center for two hours every weekday after school – 10 hours a week, year-round – and receive mostly 1:1 instruction on the fundamentals of reading and math. By the time current kindergarten students graduate high school, they will each have had more than 6,000 hours of individualized FORA tutoring with curricula that are tailored to their individual needs.

Learn more about our mission and strategy. Scan the QR code to watch the video.

Because of you, FORA is growing! Soon, we will be able to provide our services to many more refugees.



The purchase and renovation of the library building would not be possible without the *pro bono* professional expertise of:

REBECCA MATI
Construction and Redevelopment Coordinator

Perkins&Will

THOMAS R. RAINES
ATTORNEY AT LAW, LLC

Salas O'Brien

BULLEY & ANDREWS



Learn more about the library. Scan the QR code to watch the video.

To that end, we have bought a huge former library in the heart of Chicago's refugee community!

FORA is located in West Ridge, a neighborhood that has welcomed refugees from around the world for the past 100 years. We are within walking distance of more than 400 SLIFE refugee families from all over the world.

Our children, parents, staff, and tutors are currently crammed into less than 3,500 square feet of space. Because of this limitation, we had not advertised a wait list since January 2019.

But in March 2022, the City of Chicago announced that it would open a bidding process to sell the decommissioned Northtown Library, a building that literally abuts one of FORA's West Ridge storefronts. This 11,800-square-foot former library – almost four times our current space – is a mid-century modern gem and a West Ridge landmark where generations of immigrant and refugee students first fell in love with reading.

Excited by the possibilities, we put a poster in our window announcing the opening of our waitlist. In less than three weeks more than 50 children signed up, and the waitlist grew from there. Our assumptions were confirmed: there are scores more children who would use our services if only we had the space to offer them.

We are currently renovating the space and plan to move in on and open the doors of our new empowerment center in March of 2024 to those scores more children.

The Chicago City Council approved the sale to us at approximately $963,000, and we have already raised the money for the entire purchase price because of generous donors. But the purchase price is only part of the cost. The building needs renovations to meet city code. Thanks to you, our incredible family of donors and supporters, we have already raised approximately half of that cost, but we have the other half still to raise or else we simply will not be able to refurbish the building. We additionally have another $700,000 to raise in general operating expenses over the next 11 months to keep our programs and services going.

Several generous donors have pledged a dollar-for-dollar match of up to $172,000. We put out a call, and you answered by helping us to raise $31,420 towards this match! To get the full extent of the match, we still need to raise $140,580 in donations. **Please give generously by year-end to double your impact and help us make the most of this wonderful match opportunity – if we raise $172,000, we will have $344,000!**

Help us make this dream come true, not only for us, but for the hundreds of refugee families in our neighborhood in desperate need of our services.

This is a big year for us, a year that will solidify FORA for generations to come.

Between the upcoming purchase of the former Northtown Library and FORA's focus on greatly shrinking our waitlist of more than 100 children, FORA is doubling fundraising efforts this year, with the goal of raising more than a million dollars. We need your support now more than ever. Will you please give generously and joyfully?

You can donate in one of the following ways:

Go our website www.refugeefora.org or scan the QR code below. Click on "Donate."

Send a check or a recurring credit card donation via the attached envelope.

We also happily accept stock donations. If you would like to make a stock donation, please write to Michael O'Connor at michael@refugeefora.org.

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

Please be as generous as brings you joy.

In addition to donations, FORA needs the following:

VISITS
The refugee children we serve yearn and deserve to know that they are welcomed here. Please come and tell them in person that you welcome them to America. If you would like to visit, please reach out at michael@refugeefora.org.

CORPORATE SPONSORSHIPS
Corporations who are willing to provide internships, host corporate volunteer days at FORA, and/or donate to our capital campaign or fundraising galas, are encouraged to reach out at michael@refugeefora.org.

VOLUNTEERS
Our organization thrives because of our volunteers. Please join our dedicated team of amazing volunteers. We need in-person volunteers of any age who are willing to come four hours per week for at least 100 hours total. We also need adult online tutors who can tutor one hour every weekday during tutoring hours (4:30 pm to 6:30 pm and 7 pm to 9 pm, on weekdays throughout the school year; or every morning or early afternoon on weekdays during the summer).

Learn more about tutoring at FORA. Scan the QR code to watch the video.

FORA's Facts and Figures

The Grave Situation

As of June 2023, there were 35.3 million refugees in the world.[i] Once refugees escape their native lands, they spend, on average, more than ten years in exile.[ii]

Only 61% of refugee children attend primary school and only 23% of refugee adolescents attend secondary school.[iii] Only one percent of all refugees have access to higher education.[iv] Meanwhile, 23% of refugee females and 17% of refugee males are illiterate even in their native language.[v]

When refugee children arrive in the U.S. either years behind in school or illiterate, they are placed into classes according to their age, not their current academic level, and they despair. Regarding both reading and math, recent research has confirmed that academic percentile rank in earlier grades tends to predict percentile rank in later grades.[iv] There is little hope for refugee children who start so far behind their peers to "catch up."

Intervention

FORA steps into the gap, providing approx. 100 students from pre-literate refugee homes with two hours a day of year-round individualized High Impact Tutoring (HIT) to fill foundational academic gaps so that children can catch up in school and school becomes meaningful.

With each refugee student obtaining approximately 500 hours a year of HDT, FORA provides approximately 48,000 hours a year of free tutoring.

Our volunteers are the reason we can provide so much one-on-one tutoring. Since 2019, we have had over 750 volunteer tutors who have undergone full FBI background checks.

Scholastic Results

In math, from June 2021 to June 2023, our students went from a median percentile rank of the 15th to the 58th percentile.

In reading, from June 2021 to June 2023, our students went from a median percentile rank of the 5th percentile to the 23rd percentile.

From June 2021 to June 2023, our FORA students increased their average final grades in reading from 2.3 to 3.0, in writing from 2.3 to 3.0, and in math from 2.5 to 3.2.

Emotional Impact

From June 2021 to June 2023, the percentage of FORA parents who reported that their children were happy at school went from 50% to 96%.

i UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency." UNHCR, 16 June 2020, www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html.
ii Devictor, Xavior, and Quy Toan Do. "How Many Years Do Refugees Stay in Exile?" World Bank Blogs, 15 Sept. 2016, blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/how-many-years-do-refugees-stay-exile.
iii Grandi, Filippo. "Education Is Key to Our Refugee Crisis Response. Here's Why." World Economic Forum, 7 Feb. 2020, www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/09/refugee-education-unhcr-filippo-grandi.
iv Schorchit, Nicolle. "Despite Inclusive Policies, Refugee Children Face Major Obstacles to Education: The Barriers Refugee Children Face Overseas Create Even More Problems if They Are Eventually Resettled in the United States." National Education Association, www.nea.org /advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/despite-inclusive-policies-refugee-children-face-major-obstacles. Accessed 30 Oct. 2022.
v Ramsay, Georgina, and Lucy Fiske. "Election FactCheck: Are Many Refugees Illiterate and Innumerate?" The Conversation, 18 May 2016, theconversation.com/election-factcheck-are-many-refugees-illiterate-and-innumerate-59584.
vi Fielding, Lynn. D., Jay Maidment, and Christian N.K. Anderson. "Readiness for Entering Kindergarten: The Impact on Future Academic Achievement." The Reading Foundation. 2019, https://www.readingfoundation.org/download/J6F1O3.

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

FORA
FORGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFUGEES IN AMERICA

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