

Learning English, Hoping to Help

Saeed Murad is grateful to be able to bear an American flag. The 22-year-old Yezidi refugee ardently wishes his people's flag could also fly in peace, but he accepts that for now Lincoln is his home. Six months into his stay, Saeed is studying hard in Lincoln Literacy refugee English classes in hopes that he can one day help his beleaguered people.

"He knows he has it good here, and sometimes that makes him feel sad," says Carrie Knapp, a staff coordinator who oversees one of the classes Murad attends. "He's still in contact with a lot of Yezidi people back home."

When an American-led coalition invaded Iraq in 2003, two of Murad's brothers volunteered to help the U.S. Army. Saeed himself was just nine years old, but even he knew that life under Saddam Hussein was brutal, and that the Americans represented a



Saeed Murad gratefully drapes himself in the American flag, but cannot forget his fellow Yezidis left behind in Iraq.

chance for Yezidi families like his to gain freedom in a new Iraq. They never imagined – indeed, no one imagined – that a dozen years later ISIS, the self-styled Islamic State, would rear up and devastate the Yezidi community.

(See *Yezidi*, p. 3)

A Rising Generation of Young Readers

No kids are more at risk of failing to graduate than those who arrive in the U.S. as refugees or immigrants. It's easy to see why: they typically enter school here without having been read to in English or learning to read for themselves. They lack familiarity with our school norms, and their parents can do little to help them.

Lincoln Literacy's FLAIR program (Family Reading Activities for Immigrants and Refugees) changes that. At after-school, evening, and weekend learning sites all over the city, parents and children are learning together and gaining life skills. Here is one child's transformative experience. (See *Youngsters*, p. 2)



Refugee and immigrant children learn reading, crafts, and school-readiness skills from FLAIR teacher Rik Minnick while their parents learn English.

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If You Can Read This, You Can Surely Help!

Lincoln Literacy depends on volunteer tutors to get the job done. We offer highly effective training and support to the volunteers who teach our students. Tutors have a wide range of choices, from serving in classrooms or as one-to-one tutors. For more info, click "Get Involved" at our website, lincolnliteracy.org.

◆ Youngsters Learn English, Reading, and Friendship's Fun

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At the start of our fall semester a four-year old little boy named Raul (pseudonym) came with his mom to our new Park Middle School FLAIR program on Tuesday afternoons. He didn't know a word of English. Raul played alone with toys we offered but refused to join in the FLAIR class. He showed his disapproval with a flood of tears.



Lizeth and Leslie, two generations of Espinozas, learn together in FLAIR.

Finally, volunteer intern Terra Garay broke the ice by speaking to him in his native Spanish. She then coaxed Raul into making friends with another Spanish-speaking boy, Arturo (pseudonym). Even though he's a bit younger than Raul, Arturo is bold, brassy, and always willing to come to FLAIR class. Soon, Raul and Arturo became inseparable. This meant that Raul became a regular participant in the FLAIR class. On the other hand, having a buddy can have its drawbacks. Arturo didn't like to share the attention of his new friend with Rik, our FLAIR lead teacher, so he would constantly try to distract Raul.

Raul, on the other hand, was a perfectly attentive, well-behaved student on his own. It's a classic teacher's dilemma, Rik says. "If we tried to send Arturo away for misbehaving, Raul thought that he needed to leave too."

As in politics, teaching is often the art of compromise. Rik, a certified elementary-school teacher who finds himself working with children from all over the world who are often well under the entry age for kindergarten, eventually found a way forward. "To keep Raul around," he said, "We were more permissive of Arturo's mischievous mannerisms." It worked. Both are gaining more than either would without each other. Raul understands some English and can repeat words. "Where we used to have to say 'dice,' the Spanish word for 'say' to get him to repeat something, now I can just ask in English," Rik says. Just before Thanksgiving, Raul passed a milestone: He said his first complete sentence in English.

Arturo is coming right alongside his buddy. Arturo's older sisters, who often join in, are astonished to find their little brother is using English. "They used to tell me, 'He only speaks Spanish,'" Rik recalls. FLAIR proved them wrong.



Amid fun and mischief, the boys make progress.

2015: A Year of Amazing Achievements

This year has been outstanding in so many ways. A few highlights:

- ◆ Give to Lincoln Day Rocked!
The community pitched in and presented Lincoln Literacy with nearly \$60,000 in a single day, putting us 6th among all the nonprofits competing for contributions that day.
- ◆ Refugees Learned English & Landed Jobs!
For instance, Miriam, who had been working part-time in our childcare, got a job with Younkers. Ahmed got hired at Wal-Mart. We ~~hate~~ love losing students this way.
- ◆ We made the Peter Kiewit Foundation Challenge!
The Omaha-based foundation offered us \$15,000 if we could raise \$105,000 by Sept. 15. We did it by Aug. 15!
- ◆ L Magazine did a splash on our Reading Rainbow Dinner.
- ◆ Farid passed the driver's license exam in English and is now able to drive his parents to their jobs.
- ◆ Scrabble Scramble Hit New Heights!
The food was fantastic, the competition furious, and the fundraising spectacular. We raised over \$17,000.

◆ Driven from Home by ISIS, Yezidi Man Pursues Learning to Help Others

Continued from p. 1

As tens of thousands of Yezidis, an ancient minority with a religion all their own, fled the ISIS onslaught, Saeed's family sought refuge. His older brothers' service to the U.S. military opened the way for them to be resettled here in Lincoln, one six years ago and the other three. Eventually, Saeed and the rest of his family were able to obtain refugee status and join their brothers here.

His mother and father work at the Good Neighbor Community Center. Four younger siblings attend North Star High, and another is at Belmont Elementary. Saeed arrived in June, and on his older brothers' advice started studying English at Lincoln Literacy. They're sure he's college material. Before the ISIS troubles began, he was doing well in biology, chemistry, math and physics. Saeed dreams of going to university and being an intercollegiate soccer player. Eventually, he'd like to become a pharmacist and use those skills to relieve pain and heal sickness.

But first he must conquer English. Saeed attends Lincoln Literacy's Refugee Entry Class for recent arrivals, funded by a Refugee Social Services grant from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. He's been doubling down by taking an additional Lincoln Literacy class with award-winning volunteer tutor Robin Westhoff.

The effort has paid off. In half the usual time, Saeed has jumped more than a level in his English ability. And the sadness over his people's suffering occasionally lifts. "It's fun to see him with other students," Knapp remarks. "They're supportive of each other, and they like to joke around."



In Lincoln, Saeed Murad holds the Yezidi flag he cannot fly in Iraq.

Saeed and his fellow refugee students recently had a good laugh over something most Americans would not regard as funny at all: food. As part of the acculturation that comes along with Lincoln Literacy English classes, volunteer tutors brought in a Thanksgiving feast to share with students. Much of it was new to them, but for some reason the green bean casserole evoked much mirth. All part of the intercultural learning experience, Laura Campbell, the volunteer tutor who brought it, said.

When the laughter fades, Saeed's sense of purpose remains. "I am thankful for America. I don't want to get rich here," he says, "I just want to find a way to help my people."

Guatemalan Teacher Hopes to Earn Another Credential

If not for an ice storm, Libby Garcia might already have her GED. The immigrant mother already earned a teaching degree in her native Guatemala. Since moving to Nebraska with her husband and daughter in January of this year, she has realized that she must start all over.

"I would love to be a teacher here as well," she told Lincoln Literacy ELL Coordinator Sandra Rojo. "But first I have to learn enough English, then get a GED and go to a U.S. college."

Her American education odyssey began with Lincoln Literacy's English classes at El Centro de las Americas. Soon, she joined our afterschool classes at Culler Middle School as well. In the summer, Garcia brought her daughter Nathaly to our family literacy classes run in concert with the Lincoln City Libraries.

Rojo, an immigrant from Mexico who started out as an English language learner at Lincoln Literacy herself, says that Garcia is a hard-working student.

"Libby is very motivated," Rojo observed. "She provides a great example to other students in the class."

This fall, she resumed English studies in several Lincoln Literacy classes, but also began taking the GED preparation classes offered by El Centro. By late fall, she felt ready to take the high school equivalency exam. There was just one catch. Garcia doesn't yet feel comfortable working on a computer.

"If I took it on a computer, I don't think I could answer fast enough to pass the exam," she told Rojo.

Garcia located a testing center in Mississippi that still offers the exam on paper. She and a friend planned to drive all the way there just before Thanksgiving. That's when Winter Storm Cara hit. The trip had to be scrubbed, but Garcia remains determined.

"I want to be a good example to my girl," she said. "And I would love to teach again."



Libby Garcia and Nathaly.



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Helen Roeske's Good Works as a Volunteer Live on in Her Bequest



Helen Hillier Roeske

Helen Roeske was a spry 64 when she first volunteered with Lincoln Literacy. That was in 1984.

Over the years, Roeske kept herself busy with many kinds of volunteer work, especially at her beloved Eastridge Presbyterian Church, but she never forgot Lincoln Literacy.

Twenty-five years later, in 2009, Executive Director Clayton Naff called her to thank her for a year-end gift she had made.

"Oh, you're welcome,"

she said. "By the way, I've remembered Lincoln Literacy in my will. It's not very much, I'm afraid, but I want you to have it."

At the time, Roeske was in somewhat frail condition and living in Eastmont Towers, so she apologized for not being able to do more to help as a volunteer.

Naff assured her that she had been a big help already, and that any such gift was very welcome, whatever its size. He mentioned her plans in newsletters, hoping to encourage others to do the same.

On March 26, at the age of 94, Hellen Hillier Roeske passed away. Having no living heirs, she willed her \$3.7 million fortune to nonprofit organizations. To date Lincoln Literacy has received just over \$78,000 from her estate. It's the largest single gift Lincoln Literacy has ever received.

"I was astonished," Naff said. "So much for 'not very much.' I only wish I could tell her how grateful we are." The Board of Directors is studying how best to use the bequest.

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