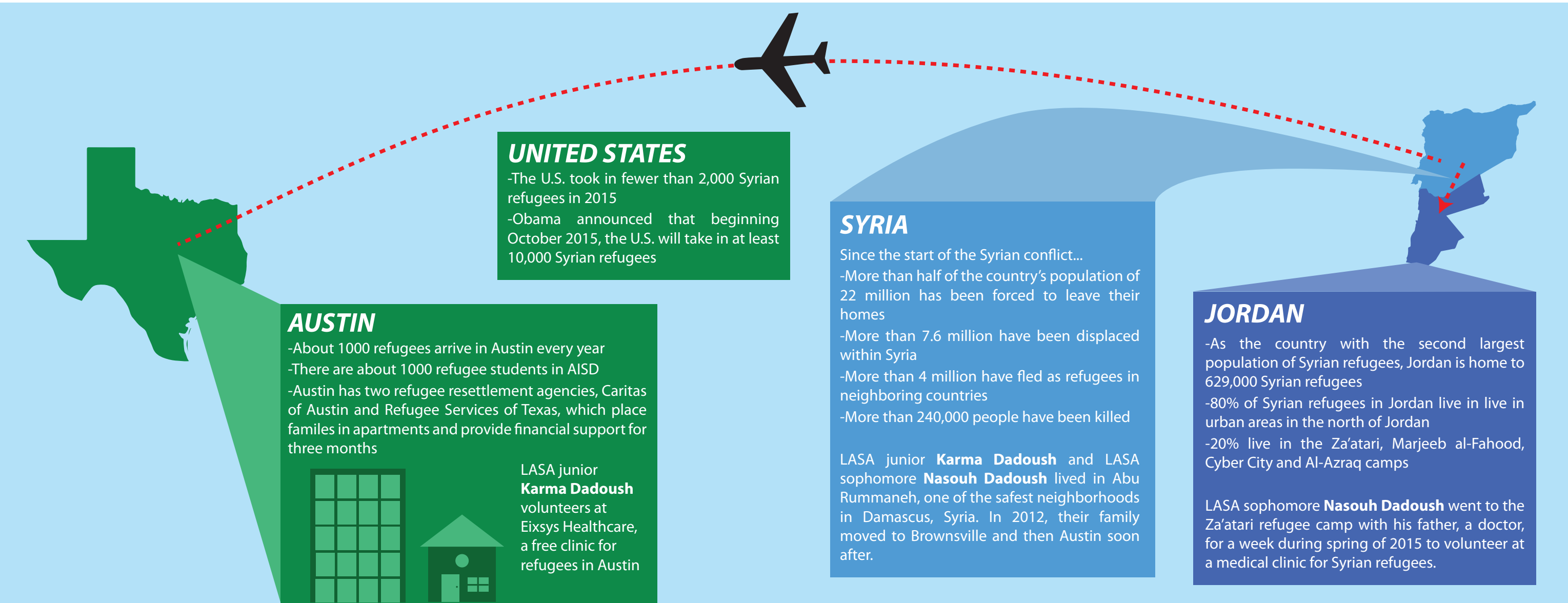


# SEEKING REFUGEE IN AUSTIN



## After moving from Syria to Austin, LASA siblings assist Syrian refugees in Austin and abroad

VICTORIA MYCUE  
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When she was 13, LASA junior Karma Dadoush's father took Karma, her 12-year-old brother Nasouh and her stepmom on a "trip" to the U.S.

"We're going to visit for the summer, just for the summer, and we're going to come back after," her father told her.

Shortly thereafter, the excited and anticipative Karma went to her mother's house, just a short walk from her father and stepmother's house. It was then she was met with her mother's hard words: "You guys are going to stay there."

"She just had a feeling," Karma said. "I don't think he told Mom. Everyone leaves and doesn't come back."

Millions of Syrians have fled the country since the start of the civil war in 2011. Among them were many friends of the Dadoushes, so Karma was not unfamiliar with the concept of taking refuge from her home country. Accordingly, she said she trusted her father's decision.

"Dad would have thought it's just going to get worse—it's not going to get better—over the summer," Karma said. "And Dad knew that. And Mom knew that Dad knew that. We thought... 'Why didn't Dad tell us?' So we talked to Dad, and he was like 'Yeah, your Mom's right.'"

Though Karma had an intuitive heads-up from her mom, Nasouh didn't know until the day of travel that the trip was not a temporary family vacation but rather a permanent move. He didn't get to say an absolute goodbye to his friends, but he said that in retrospect they probably all knew he wasn't going to come back. Nasouh also had no context clues—they barely packed any of their personal belongings, much less any furniture or home decor.

"I only took a carry-on and my sister took a bag," Nasouh said. "Because the style here is different in clothing, they only brought the essentials, and once we got here, we bought clothes."

Upon arriving to the U.S., the Dadoush family settled in Rancho Viejo, Texas, a town next to Brownsville, where Karma and Nasouh's father worked as a doctor prior to the family's move. He had to begin traveling to other countries to work after business at his clinic in Syria severely declined.

"His work was [slower] than usual because of the bad things in Syria," Karma said. "People just didn't leave their houses at that time. They were scared to leave. So no one went to his clinic, and while the clinic is still going on, it's not getting a lot of money. But he doesn't want to close it down because there are [people who need it]."

One of the few times Syrian children leave their houses is to go to school, Karma said. Because Karma and Nasouh's father was a doctor, their family could afford their attendance at a private school between 40 minutes and an hour from their house. There was a closer public school, but Karma said her family preferred the superior education of a private school. Though prestigious, the school was situated in a dangerous neighborhood far from their house.

"There, 40 minutes was a very long time—it was like five cities over," Karma said. "Because it was far away, Dad was scared every time we had to leave to [go to] school. We didn't know what was going to happen there, because the school is in a very not-safe area."

Even closer to the more dangerous parts of Syria was the school Karma and Nasouh's cousins attended. And although both schools frequently had to cancel school days and parts of days due to

high-risk conflict in the area, their cousins' school was more often canceled.

"Sometimes [they] didn't go to school," Karma said. "Their school canceled it. Sometimes we had to leave early from school because our school decided to cancel because things were getting bad."

For most of her life, Karma knew very little about the Syrian conflict. She knew there were dangerous areas and she knew there were soldiers on guard everywhere.

"Even though we were living in the safest area in Syria, our stepmom had to sit outside [whenever we went] out to the park," Karma said. "Even though it was right outside our house, our stepmom had to watch us because there were always soldiers in the park. We had to make sure. Kids got kidnapped from the park all the time."

The soldiers were pro-regime, working under Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Karma said the soldiers, who patrolled everywhere she went, terrorized children.

"All my life, I could go wherever I wanted—like I could bike... to the supermarket after sunset," Karma said. "I couldn't do that anymore. Not [once] I was 11."

Karma's parents required she always carry her phone with her. She said people always ask why she had a phone when she was a young child, and she said it was expressly for safety precaution.

"[The soldiers] looked really scary," Karma said. "Whenever I would pass them, I would pretend to not look scared, but I [was]."

Karma's best friend, her cousin who was two years older than her, lived within walking distance from Karma. The two would meet halfway between their houses and then go eat at a nearby restaurant.

"We didn't do that the last two years, and if we did my brother had to be with us even though my brother is a kid," Karma said. "They wouldn't mess with girls if [they were with boys]."

Karma and Nasouh experienced the Syrian war not just through cautionary tales of their parents, cancelled school days and the omnipresence of pro-regime soldiers. There were many times when they were nearly violent conflict, even while living in one of the safest neighborhoods of Syria.

"Once, we were hearing gunshots and then we went outside to the porch," Nasouh said. "There were gunshots and people were running away. Someone got shot."

Still, both Karma and Nasouh said they feel fortunate to have lived comparatively affluent in Syria, and they also feel fortunate to have experienced such a smooth transition into life in the U.S.

"There are very few people who are lucky like me," Karma said. "Most of [the Syrian refugees] don't have the job that Dad got or all the education that Dad has because his parents were educated. It's just like a line of things that led to Dad being able to bring us here and get [us] accustomed."

After moving from Brownsville to Austin, the Dadoushes have helped a number of new Syrian families assimilate into a new life in America. Karma and Nasouh's stepmom, Mai, works closely with these families. Previously, when the Dadoushes lived in Syria, Mai

worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

"In UNHCR she worked with refugees in Somalia and Yemen," Karma said. "And then she got married to Dad a few years before [we left Syria]. We moved here two years after they got married. So she quit her job, and we moved here."

Using her experience with refugees, Mai has involved herself in a network of people in Austin who notify her whenever a new Syrian family arrives. She, or another in her network, begins by picking them up from the airport; then they help them with other aspects of resettling, like finding a house.

"Our family is there for them to help them with finding a job, translating [and] finding what they need for their kids," Karma said. "Their kids are going into school right now. They need extra help [because] they don't know any English, [and] they barely know any Arabic."

In addition to helping Syrian refugees new to Austin, Karma and Nasouh have also recently began translating during parent-teacher conferences at elementary schools in Austin.

"If you know how to speak the language of the parent of the family, then you help with parent-teacher conferences that are kind of weekly," Karma said. "So last week...I went and helped Iraqi refugees."

Karma and Nasouh went to different classes, so the meetings were between one or both parents, the teacher, and either Nasouh or Karma. The teacher would speak

about the child's performance in English, and if they parents didn't understand, the translator would speak to the parents in Arabic.

Karma also helps her stepmother, Mai, who works with women in Syria who have a textile business. Mai travels back to the country and hauls their handcrafted bags, table runners and cloths back to the U.S. where she sells it for profit to return to the Syrian women.

"Mai sells them, and I help her a lot with organizing them and pricing them, because you have to have prices on them," Karma said. "Sometimes there are just random neighborhood fundraisers in our neighborhood. They do events, and we ask if we can do a fundraiser for Syria, so we sell these things."

Karma and Mai give the entirety of their profit to the Syrian women, and all the time they spend preparing the products and selling them is volunteer work. Karma also recently began volunteering at Eixsys Healthcare, a free health clinic for refugees in Austin.

"This [guy] who has a tech company decided that people needed free health care because some of them were refugees and didn't have the green cards," Karma said. "[They're] not just Syrian or Iraqi refugees, but a lot of them are because they're moving here right now."

The money used to fund the clinic comes from donations made by people who attend service at the mosque and the Hindu temple where the clinic is set up. Some volunteers handle funds; organizing donations, calling in prescriptions, and speaking to pharmacists about discounts for refugees. Karma said she prefers to make use of her Arabic by helping the patients who only speak Arabic to

understand the doctor's orders.

"Most people that volunteer do the stuff that doctors don't have time to do, like being a receptionist, putting in the patients [and] helping the patients with their forms because some of them may not speak English," Karma said. "I have helped people who [only] speak Arabic."

The clinic is not in a permanent location. Rather, it's set up at the beginning of clinic days and taken down and packed up at the end.

"We either set it up in the mosque, or we set it up in the Hindu temple, and people just come," Karma said. "We have a Facebook page and a website... [This way], you can know when the clinic is going to be open, because it's not open all the time."

Nasouh has also volunteered with refugee health clinics, though the clinics were at refugee camps in Jordan. In spring 2015, he spent a week volunteering at these camps with his father.

"I went to Jordan and stayed in a hotel and every morning we'd wake up, eat breakfast and then board a bus," Nasouh said. "We would go to a refugee camp or an area that needs help that has refugees. That day, we went to this abandoned city, with a lot of Syrian families there."

The clinic was in Za'atari, a refugee camp in Jordan that was set up in 2011 and is now home to almost 90,000 people who have fled the war in Syria. The doctor who heads the clinic is a friend of Nasouh's father, so the head requests he travel to the clinic and help as an additional doctor. When Nasouh traveled with him, he volunteered with the pharmacists.

"I know Arabic but the pharmacist didn't," Nasouh said. "People would come to the door to get a number, and when their number is called, the doctor checks them out. He writes a prescription on paper, and the patient comes to a clinic and hands the paper in where I was, and I would translate it and fill up the medicine in a Ziploc bag by looking at the instructions. I would just give it to them, but it was very chaotic. Sometimes we wouldn't have the medicine, so they would have to return to the doctor and get another prescription."

Karma and Nasouh both said many Syrians in refugee camps are sick for a number of reasons: they couldn't get the medical care they needed while living in Syria or their living conditions in the camps are conducive to illness.

"It was very sad," Nasouh said. "A lot of people had the same disease and everyone was sick. You could see them coughing all the time. They all live in compact areas, so they don't have that much room."

Nasouh said he feels fortunate enough to have lived healthily in Syria and to have been able to move to the U.S. without living in a refugee camp first.

"I felt really good helping and being able to give back to my country after all these years," Nasouh said. "It felt right."

Four years after moving to the U.S. from Syria, Karma and Nasouh said they have still maintained close connection with Syria and the Arabic language, doing whatever they can to help Syrians who have suffered under oppressive rule.

"They don't have all the things I have, so I think it's important to help them because...I need to give back," Karma said. "I have the resources and the energy and the education to help them so why wouldn't I?"

## Refugee students settle in AISD, district struggles to provide support

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At 10 years old, a Liberian boy leaves school and joins the army. He has been a child soldier for seven years when his father kidnaps him. With the aid of Methodist Ministries of West Africa, they escape the country, and three weeks later the boy is sitting in ESL teacher Betsy Markman's classroom at Lanier High School.

"He hasn't seen a classroom in five or six years, he hasn't seen his father, like his life just turned upside down," Markman, who now teaches at Murchison Middle School, said. "He doesn't know what to make of anything, and by the way he's a trained killer. And he's 17."

Such additions to ESL classrooms in Austin are increasingly common. There are currently approximately a thousand refugee students from around the world in the Austin Independent School District (AISD), and more will continue to arrive throughout the year. ESL teachers like Markman are faced with the challenge of how to educate a growing population of students who are alienated not only by language and cultural barriers, but also by their lack of consistent and adequate schooling prior to their resettlement in the United States. Many refugee students are classified as Students with Interrupted Formal Education, or SIFE, and may have missed years at the elementary or middle school level or only attended class for a few months each year.

"I have 31 refugees," Markman said. "I have 23 kids whose math skills, specifically math, are more than three years behind. So they are in sixth grade [or older] and in second grade [math] or below."

When Austin's refugee population started to grow, the district trained about 16 teachers including Markman in how to educate and understand SIFE students. One of the most immediate issues was coping with their, in some cases, severely interrupted educations, which leaves some students entering Markman's classroom with less than two years of schooling.

"The goal was 'How do you make up three years of math with a kid?'" Markman said. "You can't possibly make up a year per year and ever graduate. So how do you make up two or three years in a year: what do you do, what do you skip, what are the highlights, what's the rationale, how can you integrate English and math and get more bang for your buck as a teacher?"

Markman, who has a background in teaching at an elementary school level, helps her students with the fundamentals of math, reading, writing, technology and even handwriting so they can catch up with their peers. However, the complexities of assimilating refugee students into mainstream American education extend beyond the deficits in their schooling. The students are in a totally unfamiliar culture, and may be confused or frightened by everyday procedures like fire and lockdown drills, which could be perceived as threats they have faced in the past.

"I recently assigned two eighth graders to lunch detention when I saw them at 10 a.m.," Markman said. "I didn't think about the fact that they're both reasonably new to AISD and hadn't ever had detention before. Both spent the next three hours terrified that they would be beaten for using the school computers for social media instead of the spelling program. I felt awful!"

While students attempt to settle in a new school environment, their families are transitioning into life in an entirely new country. When refugees enter the city, the begin their resettlement process through either Caritas of Austin or Refugee Services of Texas, Austin's two local refugee resettlement agencies. These agencies help the refugees find housing, typically in low-rent apartment complexes, as well connecting them with any other basic needs and placing children in schools. From there, they are the responsibility of Maria Arabbo, Austin's Refugee Family Support Services Coordinator, who helps refugee students and families through the registration process and afterward, providing interpreters and counseling as necessary among other services. Arabbo's office is funded by a federal grant from the Refugee School Impact Program and consists only of herself and one other staff member.

"It's a really tiny grant—that's actually part of the problem, is that in many ways, resettling refugees is expensive because they need more support than they can get," Arabbo said. "For example, if I had more money to hire more people... it would make a huge difference, but it's just not possible. So that's why we're kind of just working with what we have."

Helping refugees resettle is a process that extends far beyond housing them and enrolling the children in school. Refugees still carry with them the experiences and traumas of their pasts, which have conditioned some students to never admit their religion or country of origin, or to panic when someone unfamiliar enters the classroom. Seated behind the desks in Markman's classroom are child soldiers, torture victims and survivors on opposing sides of a civil war.

"These kids have PTSD, these families have PTSD; they have suffered loss," Markman said. "We have one family where the dad... was tied up and interrogated in the house while the children were at school. My kiddo was 10 years old when she walked through the door at the end of the day and saw him. He's alright, I mean he has PTSD too no doubt, but she was 10 years old when she found him."

Teaching these students requires an understanding of the nuances of their situations and lives, and what those things mean for their wellbeing, education and relationships with other students. Initially, 16 teachers including Markman were trained in SIFE. Since then, however, federal budget cuts have significantly impacted the district.

"One of the pieces that fell off of educational funding was SIFE," Markman said. "So there's now three of us left in the district of that original 16 who have any idea what SIFE is or how to do it."

Most SIFE students are also categorized as ESL. Unlike Murchison, LBJ does not have a large enough ESL population to have classes dedicated exclusively to English learners; as a result, any LBJ class may have one or two students who are not fluent in English. According to LBJ English teacher Daniel Vogt, who is certified in ESL, it can be challenging to identify and provide the assistance an ESL student needs while in a busy classroom with many other issues that demand attention.

"That's what's heartbreaking, is I've got a student who's ready to run, she's chomping at the bit, and the best I can do with the time I have is give her a little bit, a little piece," Vogt said. "And that's what's kinda tough, is only being able to do so much when so much more needs to be done."

Markman said that that not only does the district lack the necessary staff to support refugee students, it also fails to provide her with the textbooks and workbooks she needs and asks for. She said she has emailed the district repeatedly requesting materials that she knows are in storage, only to receive more copies of a text she already has. As a result, she's forced to find and print out resources from the Internet.

"As far as I'm concerned, they're doing nothing for the refugees," Markman said. "We're not getting materials. Honestly, I could spend half my day just putting together materials. I work regularly an 11-hour day; at least two of those hours are doing things that I would not have to do if I had materials."

The lack of support for refugees isn't limited to the district. According to Markman, the resettlement agencies used to pay for their rent and other basic needs for a year and a half; that support now only lasts for three months. In addition, Markman said that the housing refugees are placed in is often run-down and unsafe for small children.

"I was as likely as anybody to repost the Facebook post of, 'If Germany can take this many refugees, the US should be taking 100,000 or 10,000,'" Markman said. "And then I go, well okay, if we took 100,000, does that mean each family only gets support for two months instead of four months? And who's hiring the new ESL teachers? And who's getting twice as many donations to Operation School Bell [a local charity that provides children's clothing] and its equivalent around the country? And who's teaching the parents English?... Taking them is one thing—then what?"

Texas, which is the largest refugee resettlement state in the country, accepted 7,214 refugees in 2014. Arabbo said that one of her goals is to help the district and the city take a more active role in supporting refugees, and that she is beginning that process through conversations with AISD.

"Am I angry at the way the system works?" Arabbo said. "No. But I think we can all do a lot better than we are doing, and I think that's part of what we're trying to do in this office. Really it's an overwhelming issue and I'm sure every city is handling this and feeling overwhelmed, because there are a lot of refugees that are coming and everyone wants them to come but we haven't really figured out the pieces exactly."

Among other things, Arabbo hopes to hire newcomer teachers that can address the needs of ESL students more effectively than a general ESL teacher. She also leads trainings for the staff and district to help them better understand what to expect from refugee students and how to help them.

"I ask everybody to try and be as patient and open and willing to be creative around this new matter, especially as new refugees come in and we're expecting more Syrian refugees," Arabbo said. "So more than anything I just always want to advocate for people to have a lot of patience and try to culturally understand where these kids and their families are coming from, because I think there's a lot of misunderstanding.... I think just having an open heart to families as they come is really important."



Nasouh volunteered at a clinic in Za'atari, one of the largest refugee camps in Jordan. "[There were] kids playing—that was the most crowded camp," Nasouh said. "There were hundreds of people around the clinic."



Nasouh acted as the link between the pharmacists, who spoke no Arabic, and the refugees, who only spoke Arabic. "I would translate it and fill up the medicine in a ziploc bag by looking at the instructions," Nasouh said. "I would just give it to them, but it was very chaotic. Sometimes we wouldn't have the medicine, so they would have to return to the doctor and get another prescription."



On the third day of volunteering, there was a crowd of hundreds outside the clinic where Nasouh was taking and filling prescriptions from refugees. "Each doctor had his own room, and there were hundreds of people outside of the clinic giving us papers," Nasouh said.



Just outside of their hotel, Nasouh and his father helped distribute food and supplies to two different groups of refugees. "There were Palestinian refugees waiting outside," Nasouh said. "There were two companies, or groups, and the Palestinians came and then the Syrians came later."

photos courtesy of Hachem Dadouch