

Forming New Connections in Grand Forks

Margarita Consing, UND SMHS, MSIII

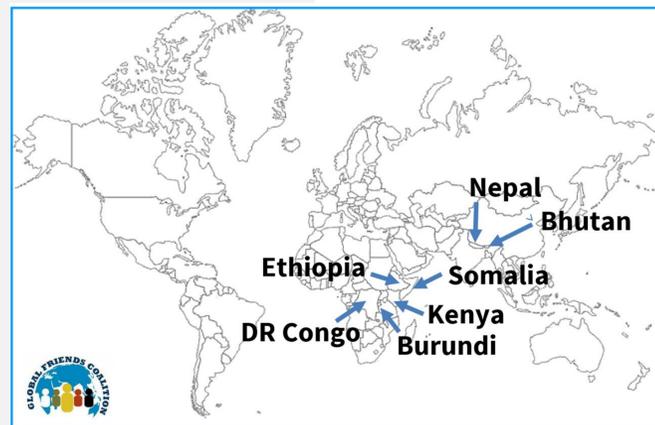
Community Organization

- **Organization:** Global Friends Coalition
- **Mission:** "Global Friends Coalition fosters refugee integration through work with New Americans and the Greater Grand Forks Community."
- **Population Served:** refugee community of Grand Forks primarily those from Bhutan, Somalia, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo
- **About:** The number of refugees resettled through Lutheran Social Services in Grand Forks started increasing in 2008 and was at its highest in 2013. About 300-400 secondary migrants moved to Grand Forks from other U.S. cities, which sparked the need for Global Friends' mission of refugee integration. Although the number of refugees resettled has significantly dropped in the last couple years, Global Friends continues its message of integrating refugees through assisting with English language learning, community assimilation, and teaching local American-born community members about refugees and their strengths.
- **Goals:**
 - *Educate:* Offer English and citizenship classes through the classroom and in-home English instruction via Global Friends Coalition mentors
 - *Empower:* Organize community cultural events put on by New American Youth, offer field trips and Summer Performing Arts (SPA) opportunities and city activities for New American Youth
 - *Embrace:* Foster a more welcoming community through outreach and advocacy events such as a community picnic and World Refugee Day and partnering with local organizations to support New Americans
- **Programs:**
 - *Family and Adult Education Program:* Mentors guide refugees through social interaction, cultural sharing, and English conversation. They assist New Americans with understanding new customs, laws, and expectations to ease their assimilation.
 - *Resilient Youth Program:* Volunteers partner with English language learners to assist with homework, to practice English skills and build confidence, and to be positive role models.
 - *Outreach and Advocacy Program:* Volunteers and New Americans arrange a community picnic and World Refugee Day in Grand Forks.



Personal Growth

- **Lessons Learned:**
 - To not take for granted being born in America and the opportunities that we can have specifically due to the families that we are born into
 - To not take English fluency for granted because it is a hard language especially for those who are learning in later stages of their life
 - Simply knowing how to speak English in America can open so many doors that can make or break one's life and can affect one's ability to "make it" in this country.
 - One does not have to travel far or even halfway across the world to have a cultural experience that can make a difference for others who are different from you, as I was able to meet and help these individuals in my hometown of Grand Forks.

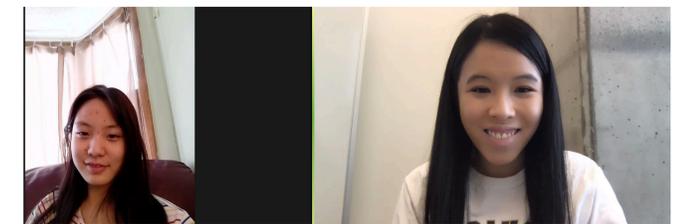


Community Impact

- **What I did:**
 - During my gap year between undergraduate and medical school, I volunteered with Global Friends under their Family and Adult Education Program.
 - I mentored a Somalian family consisting of a mother and her four children.
 - The mother did not know much English, however her children were of middle school and high school age and learned English when they were in a refugee camp in Kenya.
 - I started teaching the mother basic English words and phrases.
 - Eventually I also assisted with driving their family around town getting groceries, paying bills, buying a car, and helping the mother and her eldest son find a job.
 - I learned about the challenges of relying on support from Lutheran Social Services and government assistance programs for newly resettled New Americans.
 - Although we were of different cultures, we managed to form a friendship that transcended any language barrier.



- During my third year of medical school, I started volunteering again with Global Friends under their Youth Program.
 - I am tutoring a Chinese high school freshman who moved to Grand Forks from China less than a year ago.
 - During this COVID-19 pandemic, I have been able to meet with her weekly through Zoom and have provided her a friend and mentor by practicing English and assisting her with homework.
 - I try to explain to her American traditions and introduce her to activities to do in Grand Forks such as sledding or skating.
 - We share similarities and differences between her Chinese culture and my Filipino heritage.



Challenges and Rewards

- With the Somalian family, there were many tough financial situations that made their initial settlement difficult.
 - Their government assistance only supported them for the first five months of their arrival to the U.S., which did not give much time for acquiring necessities such as a job or car on top of a language barrier and culture shock.
 - It was tough finding a job for both the son and mother that matched their skillset and her limited English abilities yet was also near enough for them to walk to especially in North Dakota's extreme weather.
 - Finding work was necessary for them to acquire and save enough money to buy a car to be able to run simple errands such as paying bills on time.
 - Despite some stressful moments trying to help them navigate the complexities of government assistance, they welcomed me into their home, taught me some of their language and traditions, and always provided me their cuisine with the little food they had.
 - They always had a smile on their face and were so grateful for being able to live in Grand Forks, calling it "clean" and "beautiful" because of how orderly it is compared to the hardships and chaos they faced in their home country.

Academic Learning

- From these experiences, I have realized I enjoy meeting people from other cultures and backgrounds as it enriches my learning and communication skills, which are very necessary for being a good physician.
- These days, it can be easy to judge others who are different; however, being able to put oneself in another's shoes and taking the time to understand another's differences is what will help improve our global issues in this increasingly interconnected world.

Thank You & References

- Cynthia Shabb, Ph.D., Executive Director of Global Friends
- Somalian family and Chinese student
- <http://www.gfcoalition.org/what-we-do.html>