NEW OPPORTUNITY – ONE STITCH AT A TIME
RefugeeOne’s Sewing Studio Helps Refugees Thrive

Steve remembers his summers in Syria fondly, passing the days by his mother’s side as he learned to sew. From the age of 8, she encouraged him to dedicate himself to learning a skill.

“We don’t know what will happen in the future, she would tell me,” recalls Steve. “So I did my studies, but I continued to practice sewing all the while—eventually finding work as a tailor.”

That was long before conflict broke out across the country—a conflict that would quickly turn into a civil war and eventually force Steve to flee everything he knew.

After his village was destroyed, Steve went to Damascus, where he met his wife Yara. But even in the country’s capital, they weren’t safe.

“I was imprisoned and tortured,” said Steve. “Because of that, I knew I had to flee.”

After a dangerous 10-day journey attempting to cross the border, Steve arrived in Turkey as a refugee and began looking for work again. Yara soon joined. They waited 5 years before finally being offered resettlement in the United States in March 2019.

Upon arrival in Chicago, Steve was thrilled to learn about the RefugeeOne Sewing Studio, a vocational sewing program for refugees. Within a week, Steve was enrolled in classes, determined to continue honing his skills so he could find work in his field.

RefugeeOne’s Sewing Studio offers two levels of classes to equip beginners and more advanced sewers with marketable job skills and the vocabulary needed to practice their trade. More than 85 refugees have graduated from the program.

The English language component of classes were particularly helpful for Steve, who graduated from the Sewing Studio and promptly began looking for full-time work with the help of RefugeeOne’s job developers.

“The most important thing for me is to provide a good quality of life for my family,” he continued. “We lost 8 years of our life because of the war in Syria, but now, it’s finally time for us to live a normal life.”

In addition to helping students find full-time work, the Sewing Studio equips refugees to work from home, a perfect fit for some of the students with young children.

The program also has product partnerships with businesses and entrepreneurs throughout the city, which allow students the opportunity to practice a wide range of skills and earn an income while still enrolled in classes.

Student projects have included everything from handmade pillows, quilts, and home décor, to custom-clothing production and dresses for children in orphanages overseas.

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“We’re honored to have such amazing, strong people included in the foundation of our company,” says Betsy Drach, owner of Dot Cup, one of the Sewing Studio's project partners. “It’s truly one of the elements of our brand and story that most resonates with and inspires our customers.”

While some students benefit from classes by finding new economic opportunity, others benefit from the classes in more unexpected ways.

For example, students who may not have otherwise felt comfortable leaving home alone have built confidence mastering Chicago’s complicated public transportation system, helping them become more independent.

“And it’s empowered them in other ways, too,” said Helen Sweitzer, RefugeeOne’s Director of Resettlement. “Our classes have helped refugees—especially refugee women—create new friendships, learn how to navigate the city better, and thereby mitigate the social isolation that often sets in after arrival in the U.S.”

Afrah, a graduate of the program who found work as a seamstress at the Chicago company TeePee Joy, agrees.

“After graduation, I really missed being in the studio with the rest of my class,” she said. “Throughout the 12-week course, I worked alongside 9 other women from 5 different countries. I loved everything about it.”

Steve quickly found work in the industry as well. Within 3 months of arriving in Chicago, Steve was hired as a tailor making $21 an hour with benefits at Nordstrom. Recently, he learned how to custom fit the sleeves of men’s dress shirts.

“Sewing is like any other trade—there are always new things to learn,” explained Steve. “When you want to do something, the first step is always difficult. But if you are brave and work hard, you can become something very great in the future.”

Steve and his wife Yara say they’re grateful to the people of Chicago who have welcomed them.

“Near our house, there is a sign in many languages that says, ‘It doesn’t matter where you’re from, only that you’re our neighbor and we now share a life together.’ Now, it’s our turn to help others improve their lives and build a better future for us all.”

HELP REFUGEES GAIN NEW SKILLS AND FIND EMPLOYMENT

HERE’S HOW YOU CAN HELP:

1. Commission our students to make your next sewing project come to life! We’re ready to take on new sewing and cutting projects. Have an idea? We can help!

2. Help our students find employment. Know of an alterations shop or clothing factory that’s hiring? Introduce us!

3. Volunteer in our commercial sewing classes. We’re looking for individuals with sewing experience to help in our weekly beginner and advanced sewing classes.

For more information, contact Annie Kaufman akaufman@refugeeone.org.

LOOKING TO GIVE BACK?

RefugeeOne is recruiting volunteers to serve as mentors, employment coaches, and youth tutors.

For more information, visit refugeeone.org/volunteer.
Years ago, Kathy Allan was at a train station in New York City when she stumbled across a refugee camp simulation created by the UN’s Refugee Agency (UNHCR). As a teacher, she felt compelled by the exhibit to share what she learned with her middle school students.

With the help of UNHCR’s educational materials, she started teaching a unit on refugees that captivated her students—and her.

“I knew then that I wanted to work with refugees when I retired,” she declared.

And that’s exactly what she’s been doing since 2012, when she first learned about RefugeeOne. Most recently, Kathy has been a key volunteer with RefugeeOne’s Sewing Studio—but over the years, she’s supported refugees in many different capacities.

“I’ve worked just about every volunteer position there is at RefugeeOne,” she laughed, “and I don’t think there’s a single one I haven’t enjoyed.”

After attending a volunteer orientation, Kathy began organizing a cultural program for refugee seniors each month—which she continued for nearly 5 years.

Meanwhile, she began mentoring an Afghan family resettled by RefugeeOne, helping them practice English and adjust to life in the United States. Like the other refugees she’d met, Kathy was impressed by the family’s resilience and ability to overcome obstacles.

“They each found jobs and went on to buy a condo,” she said. “Now, even though they’ve moved to D.C., we’re still very close. They’re practically my family. They’re just lovely people.”

Each year, RefugeeOne partners with more than 1,000 volunteers like Kathy, who offer their time as mentors, tutors, and advocates to help refugees acclimate and become self-reliant.

For Kathy, mentoring was such a positive experience that she was eager to get involved in other ways. Whenever there was a need at RefugeeOne, Kathy was ready to fill it, from tutoring the students in our English classes to bringing the arts into our after-school program for refugee youth.

Now, at the Sewing Studio, Kathy enjoys getting to know the students, who come from all over the world.

“The studio is a safe space for women—and men—to be creative, meet other people, and become more comfortable speaking in English. I think that’s really important,” she said. “And as they’ve done so, some students have confided in me, sharing their stories, both of hardship and resilience.”

Although Kathy has gone above and beyond to stand with refugees, she’s also an example of how even small acts of service can go a long way in helping refugees feel safe, welcome, and independent.

Before enrolling in classes, one student—a mother of four young children—didn’t even know how to leave her own house. With the help of one of her children, she found the studio on the first day of class. As she went to leave at the end of the session, however, Kathy saw her go the wrong way and realized she didn’t know how to get home.

“I took her to the train station and told the attendant that I needed to show her how to board, transfer trains, and get home safely,” explained Kathy. “I was especially worried about the transfer.”

But thanks to Kathy’s help, she made it home safely and returned to class every day on her own.

“That was one of my favorite moments,” she said. “I really enjoyed showing her how to get out of her own house, because she couldn’t do it otherwise. It’s huge! Now she can go places, do things, and meet other people. It’s a really good thing.”

One of Kathy’s favorite parts about volunteering at the Sewing Studio is attending graduation.

“We have a big celebration where I give a little speech about each graduate, give them their certificate, and most importantly, give them each a sewing machine of their very own.”

Over the years, Kathy has learned a number of valuable lessons from the refugees she’s worked with, including the importance of dropping your own expectations.

“You’re doomed for failure if you have expectations about how it’s going to be!” she exclaimed. “Instead, just go into it ready to help however you can within the needs and abilities of the person you’re serving. If you do that, you’ll always have a good experience.”

Volunteers like Kathy play a critical role in helping refugees acclimate and become self-reliant. “I really appreciate the experience,” she says. “I’m just happy that I get to do it!”

Despite the steep decline in arrivals over the last three years, recent reports indicate that the Trump administration is considering zeroing out the resettlement program completely in 2020.

Dial 202-224-3121 to tell your Representative and Senators that you want to see the U.S. welcome more refugees. Specifically, as them to support the GRACE Act, which would raise the ceiling for refugee admissions to 95,000.
Dear friends, as you know, these are uncertain times for our nation. Even as we face the worst refugee crisis in recent history, the Administration has continued to reduce refugee admissions even further.

Despite that uncertainty, and thanks to your support, we’ve launched new initiatives to support refugees already living in Chicago, like RefugeeOne’s Sewing Studio, which you will read about in this newsletter.

Our vocational sewing program is a shining example of what successful resettlement looks like: recently-arrived refugees gaining skills as they navigate life in a new city and build meaningful connections with those in their communities.

You’ll read about two graduates of the program, Steve and Afrah, who have used their new skills to find full-time work with benefits—one of the Sewing Studio’s primary goals. You’ll also read about Kathy Allan, a dedicated volunteer who, like you, is committed to helping refugees succeed.

Refugees’ success would not be possible without the support of people like you and Kathy. Thank you for giving of your time, talents, and resources to welcome refugees and help them along as they build the foundation for a flourishing life here in the United States.

If these stories inspire you, I invite you to attend our event on October 26 to learn how you and your network can welcome refugees as co-sponsors. New refugees continue to arrive each month – you can help them reach their full potential as New Americans!

Sincerely,

– Melineh Kano

RefugeeOne
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Suite 401
Chicago, Illinois 60640

REFUGEEONE CO-SPONSOR EXCHANGE

GET EQUIPPED to welcome a refugee family
CONNECT with groups who have done this before
HEAR refugees’ stories firsthand

Save the date for a morning of stories and workshops that will inspire and equip you to become a co-sponsor. You’ll find out how you can help welcome refugees, get them set up in their new home, and help them adjust to life in Chicago.

Join us to learn how you can change refugees’ lives – and your own.

Save the date
Saturdays, October 26, 2019
9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Wright College
4300 N Narragansett Ave
Chicago