

SAMS changes the lives of Syrian refugees

Only 60 percent of children who have left Syria are enrolled in school to get an education, according to Melisa Fleming, author and chief spokesperson for UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees.

Touched by her words and motivated to change that percentage, Farrah Alarmanazi, co-president of University of Toledo's Chapter of Syrian American Medical Society, said she is working to raise that number to 100 percent.

Second-year biology majors and sisters Farrah and Marah Alarmanazi founded the UT chapter of SAMS – a non-profit, medical and humanitarian relief organization aimed towards helping Syrian refugees – at the beginning of the fall semester.

“When I was a sophomore, that’s when the refugee crisis hit its peak,” Farrah said. “There were Syrian refugees headed here, and I started looking for an organization on campus that would focus on that issue, but I didn’t find any.”

Determined to create change, the Alarmanazi sisters got to work and contacted the Ohio chapter of SAMS to start a university chapter for students.

With the help of UT faculty, such as lecturer and director of Honors Learning, Page Armstrong; Associate Director of Undergraduate Research, Dr. Larry Connin; Associate Professor, Dr. Melissa Gregory and Dean of the Jesup Scott Honors College, Heidi M. Appel; Farrah was able to spread the message and find members to build the organization.

In August 2016, a friend of their mother’s, Rania Taher, asked Farrah and Marah to help four Syrian kids learn English. In

the process of helping the children learn their alphabets, Farrah said she came to realize that these children deserved, and were in dire need of, education.

“They didn’t have any background in English and were struggling when they came here because they moved from Syria to Jordan just before starting school and then again to Toledo,” Farrah said. “One of the children even had a speech impairment.”

With the drive to help, Farrah and Marah contacted people within SAMS to establish a program to tutor Syrian refugee children between the age of five and 18. With Taher’s help, they contacted the principal of the Central Academy of Ohio and figured out a plan to hold the tutoring sessions at the school.

“In the beginning, it was tough since we didn’t have a lot of supplies, and were working with just pen and paper,” Farrah said. “We had about 20 children and only 12 to 13 volunteers.”

The program has since grown to 30 Syrian children, but the problem of too few volunteers still remains. Since the sessions are only held from 5:00 – 6:30 p.m. on Tuesdays, most volunteers are unable to make it.

However, the Alarmanazi sisters are planning to change the weekly session to two meetings for more volunteers to be able to tutor the children.

“You would think just because they’re refugees, they wouldn’t worry too much about education, but really they did,” Farrah said.

She said that while the refugees struggled with issues like health insurance, finding a job and a place to live in, no one was focusing on helping the children with their education.

“The thing that made me want to help was when I realized how

much the children were in need of education and how their parents were ready to do anything for their kids to be educated," Marah said.

She said that when she sees the progress and how pleased the parents are with how well their kids are doing, she feels more motivated to continue helping those children. The kids don't get tired from all the learning and never want to take any breaks.

Farrah added that, until last semester, most of the kids didn't even know their alphabets and now they are starting to spell, read and make conversation.

"One kid came up to me and asked, 'How do I say what my favorite kind of food is?' He told me he was trying to make conversation with his tutor and didn't know how to say it," Farrah said. "I asked him if he wanted me to translate it for him and he said, 'No, I want to know how to say it!' It made me so happy to see him trying."

Marah said that the children have formed such a strong bond with their tutors; they are sad when they are not there to work with them.

"This has also changed the volunteers' perception of refugees since they are actually interacting with them," Farrah said.

Hemaa SreeKumar, a second-year pharmacy major, said that she enjoys spending her time tutoring the children.

"I never had an impression of Syrian refugees, but I've always wanted to help and do something to help the community," SreeKumar said. "I meet all these different kids and it's kind of a good stress reliever."

SreeKumar said that people have a misconception that they cannot help since they don't speak Arabic, but she says anyone can help. The goal is to teach them English, and you don't

have to be Syrian or Arabic to volunteer.

Another volunteer, Annalisa Han, a fourth-year pre-pharmacy major, said as an international student, she really loves to learn about different cultures from different parts of the world.

“I have interacted with Europeans, Asians and Americans, but I’ve never met someone from the Middle East,” Han said. “SAMS has opened my eyes to a different perspective, to people’s different lives and I think it has made me care more about people.”

First-year nursing student Carly Gerogolian says she feels the same way. As a result of volunteering, she has become more open-minded and open-hearted as a person.

“My role in this organization is to help the kids and spread the message of all that I’ve learned through these tutoring sessions,” she said.

Due to the growth of the organization, Social Services for Arab Community has reached out to the SAMS Toledo chapter and asked to collaborate with them to have a separate section for the parents to be tutored.

The sisters have now started a program called the Family Education Program, where parents are also being tutored to learn English.

During the session, parents take lessons to learn English. For the half hour of the session, a volunteer speaks to the parents about living in the United States and how to adapt.

Farrah and Marah Alarmanazi say they are very happy with the success of the organization and the progress the Syrian refugee children have made in their education.

For more information about SAMS’ Toledo chapter, visit SAMS University of Toledo campus Chapter page on Facebook, SAMS-UT

Student Chapter on Instagram or email the presidents of SAMS at Sams.utoledo@gmail.com.