

Jiran: A Community Action Summer

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This summer, I had the opportunity to participate in Middlebury College's Jiran program. Jiran is a cultural and language exchange program where five college-age Arabic language students spend five weeks in a community of newly arrived Arabic speaking refugees and immigrants in the suburbs of Hartford, Connecticut. Each student participant was paired with a family of Arabic speaking refugees or immigrants both as an opportunity for exchange and as a way to connect the families to pre-existing free community programs. Additionally, we the Jiran participants put on weekly programming of ESL classes, women's fitness classes, citizenship prep classes, digital literacy classes and community networking and outreach events. Although these opportunities were only available for five weeks, they were free and easily accessed because the word was being spread about them through the participating families and those whom they chose to tell. I worked on the ESL classes and observed the significant impact that weekly English classes could have on adults who are dedicated to learning the language that they need to do government paperwork, get jobs, and obtain citizenship. The biggest way that the Jiran programming helped was by connecting participating refugees and immigrants to permanent community resources that they did not know about until Jiran.

Another core aspect of the Jiran program is the idea of cultural and language exchange. This exchange benefitted both the student participants and the participating families. The student participants were able to practice and learn a significant amount of colloquial Arabic, which is a dialect that is not emphasized in college Arabic classes but is by far the globally dominant spoken form of Arabic. Another benefit that this exchange had for student participants was that it keyed us into an Arab-American refugee and immigrant perspective that is simply unattainable in a classroom. Connecting with the cultural-linguistic reality of Arabic-speaking refugee and immigrant communities allowed us to work in culturally sensitive ways that I believe we could not have developed without our connections with the families. This cultural-linguistic exchange was helpful for the families too. I spoke to one person who shared that their view of American culture was deepened because of the program, and they felt more welcome to engage with a community that they were only just getting to know. Additionally, my associated family expressed that the ability to practice English at home removed classroom pressures and generally made it feel easier to connect with the language, and to speak Arabic with an American in their home helped to bridge a divide constructed by cultural difference.

Jiran was a great opportunity to deepen my understanding of immigration and cultural resettlement. I learned many ways to connect with people of different backgrounds to my own, and about what can be done – minor and major – to make a person feel welcome in a new environment. I am endlessly grateful to the Bakarar Memorial Fund for granting me the opportunity to do Jiran. Thanks to this opportunity, I have found a passion for this kind of work, and I plan to continue it.

Faculty mentor: Professor Batool Khattab

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