



Paula Frantz
June 14, 2020
Refugee Awareness Sunday

Good morning. My name is Paula Frantz and I am the Director of The Global Institute of Lansing. I'm so happy to be here with you this morning. GIL is a local nonprofit that helps adult refugees earn an accredited high school diploma. Our mission is to provide educational services to adult refugees that enable them to earn a high school diploma in an atmosphere of peace, respect, encouragement, and inspiration. At GIL, we believe that refugees are invaluable members of our community, and as such, deserve an accessible, quality education. We aim to build a stronger, more inclusive community through engaging those in need and providing them a solid educational foundation, so they can go on to post-secondary education or obtain gainful employment that allows them the opportunity to grow. Our students dream of purchasing homes in our community, starting businesses, and making Lansing their forever home.

GIL takes refugee students who have "aged-out" of high school or are too old to attend public schools and enrolls them in an accredited on-line high school completion program. Through this online program, they are required to complete 24 credits to earn an accredited high school diploma. If a student previously attended high school in the United States, we will get their transcripts, so they can get transfer credit for classes they've already taken. Our classroom is in the First Presbyterian Church in downtown Lansing. Until March of this year, our classroom was open 5 days a week and 2 evenings a week which allowed students flexibility in coming to class while also working full-time and caring for their families or extended family members. Our classroom is staffed with volunteer teachers and currently we have 18 volunteer teachers working with us. Our teachers work one-on-one with students, helping guide them through the class material, learn vocabulary words and critical concepts, write essays, and the list goes on and on. Students work at their own pace, so we may have 15 students in the classroom working on 10 different classes. This year, we received a new grant that allowed us to offer child care two days a week for our students with children 5 years and younger. Since opening our classroom doors in the fall of 2010, we have enrolled 202 students, 38 of whom are currently enrolled. And to date we have 78 graduates of our program, with another group quickly approaching the finish line. Almost all our graduates have gone on to Community College, are working full-time or are doing both. Our students come from a variety of backgrounds, ranging in ages from 18 to 61 years old and represent 23 different countries.

I want to take a moment to recognize our amazing volunteer teaching staff. It is such an honor to work with them every day. Their commitment to our students comes straight from their hearts. They are kind, compassionate, patient, encouraging, and inspiring. They work with our students day in and day out because they believe in the importance of education. Not only do they teach, but they mentor and guide our students in so many other ways. Our amazing teachers have created an incredibly supportive and

welcoming classroom environment which has allowed our students this opportunity to work toward their dreams and earn their high school diploma. On average, our volunteer teachers donate over 2,500 hours of their time each year.

While this is how GIL has operated since opening our classroom doors in December 2010, everything changed on March 12th of this year when the Governor signed the Executive Order closing schools due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Out of concern for the safety of our students and teachers, we also closed our classroom for in-person learning. At first, we had hoped to only be closed for a few weeks, but then it became obvious that our classroom would be closed for longer. Under normal circumstances, our students are not allowed to take tests from home for a variety of reasons. However, with the closure being for more than a few weeks, we came up with a plan to allow our students to work from home and take tests, so they can keep moving forward in their education. The first step was making sure our students had a computer at home as well as reliable internet. We lent out laptops from our classroom for those students who did not have one at home. We helped students get connected to low-cost internet options, so they didn't have to rely on their cell phone hot spot to study and complete their work. A plan was implemented requiring students to complete additional assignments prior to taking any test from home. All students signed a formal student agreement which laid out all the new rules and procedures. Videos were made to help teach them about the new programs we would be using in addition to their online classes. While nothing beats in-person learning, we have done our best to create an environment that supports our students remotely. Our volunteer teachers have really stepped up and are working one-on-one with students over the phone, through Zoom, and by email. We hold weekly student Zoom meetings where we gather to ask questions and talk about life and what is happening in our community. We miss seeing everyone in the classroom, but we are making the best of the situation and are working hard to provide a quality education to our students.

Even though it felt like life was put on hold back in March for many of us, most of our students had to continue working as they are essential workers. Some students were laid off and found navigating the unemployment system to be very frustrating, so they found new jobs very quickly. Additionally, back in April, a group of our students all tested positive for COVID-19. Thankfully they all have recovered and are now back to work. The one beacon of light through all of this was seeing how our students and teachers came together to support one another. Early on, our teachers, all on their own, pooled money together to help our students who had been laid off or had tested positive for COVID-19. Through their generosity, they were able to pay rent and utilities, as well as money for food for all our students affected either by unemployment or those who became ill. I know our students were so incredibly grateful for this help during such uncertain times.

I am often asked "how can we help?" Right now, we ask you to continue to hold our students and teachers in your prayers. There is still a lot of uncertainty going forward and we ask you to pray for our program. We ask you to share our story with the greater community so more people can learn about the important work we are doing. Please follow us on social media because we will share there when we have specific needs. Also,

this fall is our 10-year anniversary and while we had planned on doing a large fundraising event, we are now looking to do more of a celebration, but plans are still on hold until we know we can do it safely.

Tomorrow, Monday, June 15th was supposed to be our graduation. Sadly, we had to postpone it until further notice. Our graduation ceremony is always a part of World Refugee Awareness Week and even though we won't be having our graduation tomorrow, we wanted to do something to celebrate this special week. We have created a video called "Where Are They Now?" and we will be premiering it on our website and Facebook page tomorrow at 6pm. Some of our previous graduates made short videos talking about why they came to GIL and what they're doing now. They also offer words of encouragement and inspiration to our future graduates. I'd like to end by sharing a sneak peak of one of our graduates from last year. Arbab shares his story of why getting his high school diploma was so important to him and what his future plans are. I hope you'll check out the full video tomorrow night. Thank you for your continued support.