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Immigrant-Led Soccer Program Helps Refugees Find Their Footing in America

By Rebecca Koenig



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LESSONS ON THE FIELD: Luma Mufleh (second from left) started Fugees Academy, a private school for refugee children in Clarkston, Ga., where teamwork is a required part of the curriculum.

The refugees call her Coach.

She found them in 2004, barefoot Sudanese, Liberian, and Afghani boys kicking a raggedy ball around an apartment complex in the small Georgia town of Clarkston, Luma Mufleh, who had played soccer for Smith College, felt an immediate impulse to coach them.

That ragtag team became the catalyst for something much bigger and more enduring.

Since 2007, Ms. Mufleh, a native of Jordan, has led Fugees Academy, a private, nonprofit institution that enrolls nearly 90 students. Their families came to Clarkston from 12 countries, sent by resettlement agencies because of the town's ample housing, public transportation, and proximity to jobs. They've escaped violence and deprivation in their home countries, and thanks to grants and donations, they attend the academy for free. Another Fugees is slated to open in Columbus, Ohio, next year.

Every student at the academy plays on a soccer team to foster discipline and camaraderie, since many feel isolated after arriving in a foreign country.

Soccer, Ms. Mufleh says, "is the soul of our school."

And she's the soul behind the soccer. "I could not have been more lucky to have a coach like her," says recent graduate Mohammed Alsaadi.

'High Standards'

From 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Fugees students attend class on the top two floors of a church. At 4 p.m., they run a mile and a half to a public soccer field, where they practice, boys and girls together, until 5:30. Then they run back to the church for tutoring, which lasts until 7.

"When I first came, I thought she was mean and harsh, very tough," says Mr. Alsaadi, an Iraq native who enrolled in the school at age 12. "As I grew up, I saw it was for our benefit, of course. She pushed us and held us to high standards."

After organizing the refugee boys into a team in 2004, Ms. Mufleh says she realized that local public schools were not equipped to hold them to the same standards in the classroom that she set on the field. Some refugees arrived in the United States with minimal schooling. Others who knew no English received only one hour of specialized language training a week and so filled out their worksheets with "gibberish," she says. And many suffered from the trauma of war.

The contrast between their schooling and the education she received in British and American schools in Jordan "really shook me," she says.

"I was just horrified," she says. "I felt they were set up for failure from day one."

If they were her own kids, Ms. Mufleh thought, she'd find an alternative. "I couldn't afford a private school for all of them," she says, "so I started a school."

With one teacher and rented church space, Fugees Academy opened for middle schoolers in 2007. The initial funding came from the cleaning business Ms. Mufleh ran at the time. Classified at first as a home school, the academy was accredited in 2013. That, Ms. Mufleh hopes, will keep people from thinking of Fugees as just "a school for poor refugee students."

The sports teams draw some students. Others come primarily for the academics. Middle-school students catch up on basic skills, while high schoolers follow a more traditional curriculum. Ms. Mufleh coaches the two varsity soccer teams and trains varsity players to coach younger students.

Success Stories

Maison has experienced a lot of disruption in her 15 years. She moved from war-torn Sudan to Jordan as a child, then to Georgia. She was illiterate when she entered public school and began fighting frequently and using bad language, says her mother, Hawa Mohammed.

Concerned, Ms. Mohammed asked a friend what to do. The friend pointed her to Fugees Academy.

Maison, whose last name is being withheld at the academy's request, didn't take to it immediately. After enrolling, she would cry in frustration about how hard it was to learn to read and write. But soon she was doing well academically, her mother says. And playing soccer has improved her physical health.

The school has also been good for Hawa Mohammed. Ms. Mufleh hired her as a caseworker to counsel families in their native Arabic about how their kids are doing in school. She also helps them find access to medical care, food, and housing.

"I'm learning a lot about school and how I can teach my kids after I see in school how they do it," Ms. Mohammed says.

The academic results are impressive. Many Fugees students arrive lacking basic literacy and math skills, but by eighth grade 87 percent are testing at grade level in those subjects. Mr. Alsaadi started speaking English after just three months at the academy; he's headed to Oglethorpe University in Atlanta in the fall, where he will play soccer and study for a career in physical therapy.

Fugees Academy proves every day that refugee children can learn and succeed, says Brian Bollinger, executive director of Friends of Refugees, a Clarkston nonprofit. "It's not the kids that are broken. They are just as intelligent, able, and ambitious as every other child. They need an educational environment where they're going to be equipped to bring that in full force to our community."

The soccer teams are formidable, too. The Fugees Academy boys' varsity team made it to the state final in 2016.

"We are capable of so much more than what others think we're capable of," Ms. Mufleh says.



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WORLD CLASS: In the past 10 years, Fugees Academy has enrolled students from 90 countries. Many arrive with minimal schooling, but by eighth grade the vast majority are testing at grade level.

Trauma of Loss

Coach has a secret remedy for homesickness. When the mother of a Syrian student felt sad recently, Ms. Mufleh made her a dessert using sweet Middle Eastern mint. The woman started to cry.

She asked how Ms. Mufleh knew the flavor would soothe her.

"I know because that's what helps me," Ms. Mufleh said.

She empathizes with students and their families. She's lived in the United States since college — in part because her family in Jordan cut her off after she told them she was a lesbian — and she applied for political asylum because there are few protections for gay people in her homeland.

"There's a trauma that comes with not being able to be in your country," she says. "I feel that pain."

Being an Arab and a Muslim gives her credibility with some parents who are skeptical that their daughters should play soccer after school instead of going home to clean. Ms. Mufleh navigates such cultural minefields with a combination of sensitivity and playfulness. When

one mother tried to opt her daughter out of practice, Ms. Mufleh told the woman that wasn't allowed — and said if her daughter left, her son would have to go, too.

"I said, if you were hedging your bets, I would invest in your daughter, because she's significantly smarter than your son," Ms. Mufleh says.

She also does what she can to prepare refugees for the nastiness they might encounter, especially on the field. With a woman coach and a roster full of minority players, "we push a lot of buttons," Ms. Mufleh says.

Opposing players often taunted Mr. Alsaadi and his teammates, he says, telling them they didn't belong in the United States. "Coach always taught us, 'When you hear things like that, take a moment, meditate, block these people out of your head,'" he says.

Recent political rhetoric about refugees drove away some donors the organization depended on to pay its \$12,500 to \$14,000 cost per student. One individual cut ties upon realizing that the school served Muslims in general and Syrians in particular. A foundation decided that Fugees was "too political as an issue" and stopped its support, Ms. Mufleh says. But other donors, including first-generation immigrants, have increased their giving, especially after Ms. Mufleh was named a 2016 CNN Hero.

The day after the presidential election, Coach calmed students' fears that they would be deported or that harassment at their soccer games would grow unbearable. The teachers, tutors, coaches, and volunteers who help Fugees students have shown Mr. Alsaadi that "there are many people who love refugees and believe we deserve an opportunity."

Losses and Abundance

Yet there have been heartbreaks. Of Mr. Alsaadi's original class of eight, four students left Fugees, some because their families moved out of town. Three of those four ended up in jail.

In 2015, the school didn't hit its fundraising goal, and that summer, two of Ms. Mufleh's former players died in the same week: one by suicide, the other in a drug-related incident. Ms. Mufleh was so distraught, she composed a resignation letter.

"The one thing that stopped me? I'd have to go explain to all my students why I was leaving," she says. "They still had to go to school, still had to get up in the morning."

That reality both humbles and motivates Ms. Mufleh.

"You're working with a kid who might have seen his mother raped," she says. "They still love life. They still are resilient and passionate and excited. It's catching. You want to be around that."

That attitude is on display after big tournaments, when Coach takes players to the Golden Corral. By team tradition, no one tells newbies that the restaurant serves an all-you-can-eat buffet. Overwhelmed, they try to balance spaghetti, fried chicken, ice cream, and jelly beans on one dish.

Ms. Mufleh loves to explain the abundance, breaking the news that they don't need to struggle to stack mountains of food. They can fill their plates as often as they wish.

"They can't believe they can go a million times," she says. "It just makes you appreciate everything a lot more, things that simple."

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