



all photos: Ashland Christian Church (Ashland VA)

MISSION MOMENT: GIFTS TO LIVE ON Strawberries & Bicycles: How One Community Welcomes Refugees

A car full of strawberries and a classroom full of clothes. Applause for asking questions and quick-thumbed typing into Google Translate. Well-coordinated schedules and unexpected on-call moments. Local congregations involved in refugee response know all these challenges, rejoice in every success, and have countless stories to tell.

Lily Cameron was born in Iran in 1979, where her father worked for the Shah (king). When the revolution started that same year, anyone connected to the Shah was targeted by the rebels and likely to be killed. Knowing the risks in any direction, her parents took Lily and her older sister and fled. With \$8 to their names when they arrived in the States, Lily's father worked three jobs, while her mother took care of the two little girls at home; when her dad came home after his workday, her mother left for an overnight shift.

One thing Lily's family could not find when they arrived was support. Fearful of public spaces because of the lingering suspicions following the Iran hostage crisis, Lily's mom still found ways for them to venture into the community. She loved Christmas and its music, so at nearby churches, she would sneak into the back row with the girls

to listen to services. Even then, Lily says, "No one greeted us, supported us, welcomed us. My mom felt very alone."

In the fall of 2021, as Afghans were evacuated en masse and many were resettled to the United States, a friend from First Baptist Church of Ashland called Lily, by now a member at Ashland Christian Church, with a question: How do we respond? The two churches worked alongside Reestablish Richmond, a local assistance agency, as volunteers went through needed training. With some help getting the word out to refugee communities, soon First Baptist was hosting English as a second language (ESL) classes and art programs to help children express their thoughts and feelings. English classes were led at First Baptist, and volunteers from Ashland Christian served as drivers for any who needed help, provided childcare during classes and other programs, and served as conversation partners in class.

Volunteers are quick to point out that language skills aren't a requirement. "With good humor, lots of gestures, and a phone open to Google Translate, they've found that lacking a common language doesn't have to be an actual barrier."

As ESL students moved through their coursework, volunteers took them on field trips to local libraries, businesses, and events to practice ordinary conversation. Summoning the courage to ask a question of a store clerk, whether at the local Target or the farmer's market for strawberry picking, would earn a chorus of cheers from the proud and supportive friends looking on. This openness to revealing needs and desires led to other ways neighbors could help ...

For the last year, one Saturday a month, more than 150 people visit the Disciples Depot. In this continued partnership - hosted at Ashland Christian Church, with volunteers joining from First Baptist and the community - families select from clothes, toys, kitchen items, even furniture and bicycles. A back to school event at the Disciples Depot helps students at all ages get ready for their new year.

With an ongoing influx of refugees from recent crises, as well as families who have been in the resettlement process for years, congregations have stepped up in many ways. Week of Compassion's [Immigrant and Refugee Response](#) helps experienced Disciples continue their ministry, and those new to the response find ways to get started. Week of Compassion's support includes a broad network of resources, grant funding, and supportive connections with others doing this vital, life-giving work.

As we learn from the gospel story of the generous widow (Luke 21:1-4), there is something in everyone that can be used for the glory of God. In Ashland, Virginia, established residents are providing welcome, AND new residents inspire community and resilience. All are **GIFTS TO LIVE ON**, shared with compassion and in genuine hospitality.

