Refugees find a safe place to learn at Jacksonville’s ILC

By Jim Burton

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. – While sitting with her daughter at a mall food court, Kim Carr noticed internationals in exotic clothing surrounded them. Carr asked her daughter, “When did they all get here? Where are they from? Who is reaching them?”

Armed with the new sensitivity, and prompted by the Holy Spirit, Carr felt led to learn more. She visited a local fitness center where staff immediately took her to an office. There, she met a former International Mission Board Journeyman who had been praying less than 12 hours before for someone to help with international refugees.

Two days after completing her English as a Second Language (ESL) certification on a Saturday, Carr wanted students. As one of America’s 30 refugee intake centers, surely Jacksonville would have people needing to learn English. And she felt God leading her to help unreached, unengaged people groups (UUPG).

Nearly 20 years later, the International Learning Center (ILC) of Jacksonville, Fla., Inc., has taught English and citizenship to more than 6,000 people from 108 countries. More than 1,500 students have made professions of faith while establishing more than 94 house groups.

And God has done this through a woman who hated English as a subject in school. With a bachelor of science in nursing, Carr’s professional expertise was starting and running medical businesses.

“I kept trying to talk God into a clinic and he kept saying English,” Carr said. “That was a huge surprise for me.”

After receiving her ESL certification, Carr started teaching classes at Chinese restaurants until the YMCA had a plan for what would become a growing project. Now, the ILC has its own 10,000 square-foot building and a thorough curriculum that the North American Mission Board (NAMB) hopes to see implemented in cities throughout North America.

**The world comes to Jacksonville**

Jacksonville is one of America’s smallest intake centers, but the flow of refugees into the city is diverse. Carr believes most cities have the same mix of immigrants and could use an ILC.

New refugees face many obstacles once they arrive. Most don’t know English or America’s culture, and many left their homeland penniless. Though they may be lacking physical baggage, emotional and political baggage often weighs them down. Many flee to America because of threats on their lives, mostly coming from UUPG countries where they are leery of western religion and slow to trust.

“They will trust an American over almost anyone,” Carr said. “They just don’ trust people from their own community because too many have been killed trusting.”

Through the ILC, Carr and her volunteers focus on teaching English and citizenship skills, which the immigrants typically are eager to learn. As relationships develop, she is able to refer students to planters from their language and culture. Those planters become advocates for the immigrants to help them navigate a new and confusing culture.

Many eventually join a house group after having a dream or a vision of the Lord.

“They bring trusted family and friends into their group,” Carr said. “They don’t casually bring somebody who just decided to become a believer. They are careful to vet those they bring in.”

The ILC model of partnering a compassion-based program with indigenous planters is the most natural outcome one could hope for, Carr said.

“When you meet peoples needs with excellence, establishing an authentic relationship with them, you are so different than anything they have seen, Carr said. “And they will listen to why you are different.”

Jacksonville’s indigenous planters help immigrants understand that following the Lord isn’t just a western religion.

“We don’t want to introduce individuals to a western religion,” Carr said. “We want them to enter into authentic relationship and worship in a way that is expressed by believers from their nation.”

Usha Reifsnider has Hindu background and serves on the ILC executive team. She’s doing masters work at Cambridge in England on the modern Diaspora, the dispersion of people groups from their native lands to live as minorities in new homelands. Reifsnider leads cultural sensitivity training for volunteers.

“I have learned that simply the way we position our bodies and speak to people can cause such lasting damage that you can never share the good news,” Carr said.

One of the ILC’s volunteers who has learned to navigate the cultural sensitivities is H.B., who serves as the center’s academic director. A former public school teacher, her vision of cross-cultural work expanded on a trip to Alaska with her home church, First Baptist of Orange Park. She believes that God has gifted her to connect to the nations.

“I have a big heart, but I can’t go to far away places,” H.B. said. So she serves more than 100 people groups in Jacksonville who come to the ILC.

She is responsible for evaluating incoming students and determining their class placement. The ILC segregates classes by gender but not by nations.

As the students learn among people from other nations and receive the love of volunteers, attitudes begin to change.

“We wish the world could experience the peace and love that we have found here,” the refugees often tell H.B.

**Multiplication through NAMB**

When NAMB leaders discovered Carr and the ILC, they realized that the 32 Send North America cities need the Jacksonville model. So NAMB’s Send Relief focus has developed an ILC initiative and made Carr the national director and mobilizer. Now, she’s working to establish new ILCs across the United States and Canada.

“I am feeling the weight of it,” Carr said.

She continues to work out of Jacksonville but travels frequently to other cities to implement the ILC template with its proven teaching curriculum.

Carr is a member of Mandarin Baptist Church and receives Annie Armstrong Easter Offering® (AAEO) funds from NAMB for her work. Likewise, AAEO contributions are funding the template replication. A key component will be a partnership with local indigenous planters who start house groups in each Send City.

“At ILC 25-50 may make a profession,” Carr said. “However, the UUPG planters are reaching an additional 200 per year. They take the living water to them and enter into the people’s ‘mess.’”

And when they do, Carr calls that, “A beautiful thing.”

*Kim and Ron Carr are AAEO MSCs for NAMB. Half of the funding NAMB receives to support, train and resource North American workers comes through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. Learn more about the Carrs at AnnieArmstrong.com.*

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