Helping Refugees from a War-Torn Country Get a College Education

By Michael Rainey
Imagine that your home country has become a war zone, and its educational system—just one of many features of its proud past—is now in ruins.

Such is the case in Iraq, which boasted the best education system in the Middle East until 84% of the country’s schools and universities were bombed during the Iraq War, a conflict that lasted from March 2003 to December 2011. Many professors and students were killed or kidnapped and hundreds more fled for safer territory while many universities were turned to rubble. These developments have forced Iraqi citizens interested in pursuing or finishing their postsecondary education to flee their country in search of opportunities elsewhere.

Enter the Iraqi Student Project (ISP), a St. Louis-based grassroots organization that has offered young Iraqi refugees undergraduate programs in the United States since 2007. Gabe Huck and his wife Theresa Kubasak started the program; Gabe is the former director of Liturgy Training Publications in Chicago, and Theresa is a teacher. The couple had been traveling to Iraq since the 1990s, reporting on the gruesome consequences of the sanctions imposed on the country by the United Nations Security Council 22 years ago.

Most Americans have no real idea what living in a war zone is like since our armed conflicts are generally played out on foreign soil, but living in a country where buildings are destroyed and life and death issues are common makes it virtually impossible to lead a normal life. A person’s only hope of making a successful future is to relocate someplace safer, and a quarter of the four million Iraqis who left their homeland during and after the Iraq War migrated to Damascus, Syria.

Wanting to do something to help Iraqi students whose lives had been torn apart by the war, Gabe and Theresa moved from New York to Damascus in 2005 and set up the ISP training center in the city to which so many Iraqi refugees had fled. The ISP training center helped young Iraqi refugees interested in participating in the program to advance their English skills and become generally prepared for higher education in America. They did so by putting them through a nine-month program run by volunteer teachers. They also helped the students obtain the F-1 visa and other documents required for international students to study on American campuses.

The biggest challenge the ISP faced was getting U.S. colleges and universities on board. “How did we do it? We begged,” Robert Rosser, executive director of ISP, says laughing, when asked what the organization had to do to get schools to offer tuition waivers and full scholarships to Iraqi students. “All colleges like to have an international student body, and having someone from Iraq is particularly valuable to teach people what really went on there as opposed to what we were being told went on there. Campuses welcomed them for that reason.”

Since its inception, the ISP has brought a total of 62 students to the U.S. to get their undergraduate education. Ten students made up the first ISP graduating class last May and June. There are currently 48 ISP students enrolled at 36 universities and colleges across the country. Some schools offer free housing for the ISP students in addition to free tuition, while others require the ISP to make their own housing arrangements, which they usually accomplish by finding a host family near the school’s campus.

The program has been life changing. Mohammed Al-Ani is a shining example of the positive effect that ISP can have. Sectarian violence forced Al-Ani’s family to flee Iraq for Syria in 2006, but because

Mohammed Al-Ani
the Syrian educational system doesn’t support Iraqi refugees enrolling into their universities, Al-Ani had to look for alternatives for his undergraduate education. ISP proved to be his only viable option.

“In the beginning, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to come to the U.S. or not, but after meeting Gabe and Theresa, it kind of cleared the fog and my initial fears,” says Al-Ani, who is currently enrolled at Tufts University in Boston. Al-Ani is majoring in economics with the hope of becoming a professional economist after he earns his masters degree. “I want to help with the development of Iraq’s economic policies and create a healthy economy,” he says. “Right now they don’t have any economic policies or any economic vision.”

Al-Ani is quick to add that things have gone smoothly for him in America, despite some initial misgivings about how he would be treated in the country that was at war with his homeland.

Ahmed Al-Dulaimi is one of eight new ISP students who arrived in America in August 2012, and he has enrolled at Fontbonne University in St. Louis. Al-Dulaimi, whose parents and two younger brothers are in Jordan, is thrilled to be at Fontbonne. “The welcome I received here has been beyond anything I could have imagined,” Ahmed says. He has chosen to begin his studies with a concentration in biology.

The Future

Unfortunately, the situation in Damascus has changed dramatically since ISP began in 2007, as Syria is now embroiled in a civil war which, Rosser says, “has made life unbearable and dangerous.” As a result, Gabe and Theresa have had to flee Damascus and close the ISP training center there. Other factors, including programs devised by the Iraqi government to send students to study in the United States and the United Kingdom as well as the increasing difficulty in finding tuition waivers at U.S. colleges, have left the program’s future in doubt.

In a statement released on the ISP website (www.iraqistudentproject.org) in the summer of 2012, Gabe and Theresa said:

“We want to share with you what we have decided here and have already written to the ISP Board and ISP students. We have decided that we cannot work in this dear city of Damascus with a new group of ISP candidates in 2012-13. But ISP will have undergraduate students in U.S. colleges at least until the spring of 2016. We intend to be supportive of those students and supportive of all who continue to support them. We do not know at this time where we will be. We want to choose well where to be and what to do.”

Although the training center in Damascus is closed, the program has by no means shut down. The 48 ISP students who are currently enrolled in colleges and universities across the U.S. still have to complete their education, and the 10 students who graduated this past spring are looking for graduate programs to support them. The groups of volunteers in the U.S. who support those students are still growing. “The Iraqi Student Project is still very much alive,” Rosser says. “Closing the training center in Syria was a necessity, but the program is still very vibrant.”

Gabe and Theresa might not be able to continue this wonderful program because of circumstances beyond their control, but the impact they made on the Iraqi students who were able to come to America in search of a college education will last a lifetime.

Michael Rainey is the Editor of INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine.