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NEWS

Wheeler student wins prize for app that pairs refugees with volunteer translators

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PROVIDENCE — Jane Josefowicz was volunteering as an English teacher at the Refugee Dream Center last fall when one of her students came in with a bag full of documents.

“She grabbed all these letters out of her purse and she was like, ‘Help me with these,’ ” Josefowicz said.

The woman, who spoke Arabic and only limited English, had been letting the papers pile up. They included time-sensitive communications about health coverage and notices of her child’s eligibility for the free lunch program at school.

“She just didn’t know what they were,” Josefowicz said. “She didn’t know that they were important.”

Josefowicz, a 16-year-old junior at the Wheeler School, realized that, for many refugees who come to the United States and don’t speak English, dealing with government bureaucracy can be a massive challenge.

So, she set out to help.

Josefowicz came up with the idea of using the messaging app, WhatsApp, to pair volunteer translators with clients who access services at the Refugee Dream Center. Immigrants and refugees who need help with translation can send photos of letters and documents to their translators, who in turn can reply with message or voice memos explaining the document in the client’s native language.

This month, Josefowicz was one of 10 young people across the country to win \$5,000 grants from the Kellogg Co.’s Pop-Tarts brand, which partnered with United Way Worldwide to award grants to people ages 13 to 22 with ideas for innovative community service projects.

The next step in getting her translation service off the ground is to recruit volunteer translators, specifically those who speak Arabic, Haitian Creole, Tigrinya, Kibembe, Somali, Swahili and Kirundi.

She then plans to host a class in government programs literacy for the translators to prepare them for the types of documents they might see before pairing them with their clients.

Helping recent immigrants is personal for Josefowicz, who has many relatives who recently relocated to the United States from Syria. Josefowicz has been learning Arabic and also working at Aleppo Sweets, a Syrian bakery on the East Side opened by Syrian refugees. She hopes to spend the summer in Jordan with a State Department program for youths.

“I really just want to alleviate some of the stress and the pressure of being a recent immigrant to the United States because the bureaucracy here works in mysterious ways,” she said of her translation service program. “It’s hard for me as a citizen. It must be even harder as a recent immigrant.”

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Wheeler student Jane Josefowicz is looking to recruit volunteer translators. She will then provide training in understanding government programs. [The Providence Journal / Madeleine List]

To volunteer as a translator, contact Josefowicz at
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How you can help: