

Riverview International Center director and founder Kirsta Benedetti (in the background) with a visitor.

by Tonya Slaubaugh

The Riverview International Center:

# A Gift of Welcome

*Editor's note: The Riverview International Center and the Rosedale International Center share the same acronym. Whenever RIC is used in the following two articles, it's referring to the Riverview International Center.*

The Riverview International Center (RIC) in Columbus, Ohio, serves immigrants from many different countries, including Iraq, Bangladesh, Syria, Algeria and Jordan. The center offers English classes twice a week, and volunteers help immigrants and their families fill out paperwork for taxes and government programs. Kids come after school for help with their homework, moms show up with school forms to fill out or for help with other legal necessities, and some people stop in just to chat and ask questions about American life. Every month, a midwife meets with mothers and mothers-to-be, and a pediatrician has tea with the women and answers health questions.

Kirsta Benedetti, founder of the RIC, began the center with a vision to “be a bridge where Americans can connect with internationals and internationals can connect with Americans, creating a safe space where peace is built through relationships and sharing life.” This vision was born out of her own experience as a newcomer to another country. In 2009 Kirsta and her husband moved to Egypt to establish

a non-governmental arts organization with the purpose of teaching art and self-expression as a means of peacemaking. “With little knowledge of the country and no knowledge of the language, we landed and worked at getting started.”

Kirsta and her husband were humbled by how little they knew and how limiting that was. “We didn’t know so many of the basic things for living life in our new country, such as paying utility bills, where to buy notebooks for school, what was expected of us as neighbors in a huge apartment building, etc.” When buying fruits and vegetables from the small stalls, they simply held out a handful of money for the sellers to take what they owed because they didn’t know the numbers. “We went from being two people with college degrees who were very competent in our home country to being able to function slightly higher than a 2-year-old in our new country.”

Once they started language school, their teacher became one of their closest friends and a tremendous help. She answered all their questions, whether it was about where to renew visas or what the man outside was selling. “Our teacher became our guide and advocate while living in Egypt, and to us this was one of the greatest gifts we could receive, but to her it was no big deal simply because she was just sharing what she knows.”

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Their teacher went beyond being their guide, letting them experience Egyptian culture by opening up her life. She invited them to events with her friends and family, making Kirsta feel welcome.

When they moved back to the States in 2012, Kirsta met an Egyptian woman who had lived on Riverview with her family for many years. Kirsta says, “She had always had a huge heart for her community and would tell me about the challenges many of the residents face. She told me that most of the men work long hours and the women were isolated and limited by lack of transportation and English ability.”

A few years later Kirsta was introduced to Bruce Bernard, who had recently purchased many housing units on Riverview Drive. He had a heart to serve the neighborhood as well and was connected to people who shared that vision. A group formed, and after meeting a few times and discussing ways to help, they decided to create a resource center in the heart of the neighborhood. Kirsta knew that “in order to see real change and to build trust we needed a consistent presence on the street.”

The group registered as a non-profit organization with 501c3 status. Bruce agreed to rent the non-profit an apartment and gave them free use of two rooms in the basement of the same building for classrooms. The Riverview International Center opened its doors in the fall of 2015.

The RIC works with both new and established immigrants in the Riverview Drive neighborhood. According to the center’s Web site ([riverviewinternationalcenter.org](http://riverviewinternationalcenter.org)): “Our office is a place where people can walk in and get help with any question they may have about navigating life in America.” If the RIC cannot provide the help, they work hard to find someone that can. “The role of the Center is to be a flexible and open resource that reflects what people in the community need.”

While the RIC is still fairly new to the community, it hasn’t taken long for the women to connect with each other. Kirsta says, “The volunteers and I have been to people’s baby showers, birthday parties, held hands with women on their couch while they cried about a miscarriage, and even parented our kids together.” Brittany Kuepfer, a volunteer at

the RIC, says, “My favorite part about living in this community is living life with the women. Sometimes a pediatrician will come to the center and we will all sit around and talk about child-rearing. I love it because

it reminds me that no matter what culture we are from, as women, we all experience similar things. It’s a very bonding moment.”

Salam Rahmeh, a recent visitor from Jordan, speaks about her experience at the RIC as being “with family.” She received help registering for WIC, finding a doctor for her young daughter, learning English with Brittany, and going to the food pantry. Salam considers Brittany her best friend in America, and they have many conversations “about refugees and how [Americans] can help them.”

Muna lives next to the RIC with her husband and three children. Through a translator, she told me that her husband will be killed if they go back to Iraq. She hasn’t been back to Iraq since coming to America, almost ten years ago. She appreciates the RIC because her kids can come and get help with their homework, and everybody is friendly.

Rajaa came to America from Morocco on a lottery visa. Like Muna, she has been here for ten years. When she first came to the center, she didn’t know how to pay her hospital bill, but Kirsta helped her with the paperwork. She says she is lucky to be able to come to America, but that life here is hard. At the moment, her biggest obstacle lies in the cross-cultural health setting. Not knowing what is wrong with you can be scary in your own culture, doubly so in an unfamiliar culture. She is grateful to the center and its supporters for helping her. “When I come here, I feel okay.” It is fitting then that “Rajaa” means “hope.” She is full of hope because of the RIC, a place where she knows she will be okay.

As the Riverview International Center continues to grow, both in volunteers and visitors, Kirsta is grateful as well, not only to be doing something that brings real change to marginalized people, but also “to have the opportunity to give the gift of help and welcome that I received in Egypt.”

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