



**2022**  
Annual Report

# ABOUT OUR WORK

## OUR MISSION

Our mission is to restore dignity and enrich the lives of Syrian refugees and other vulnerable families by providing innovative education opportunities and critical humanitarian aid via our flagship program, The Azraq Education Center, in the town of South Azraq, Jordan.

## WHAT WE DO

The Azraq Education and Community Fund (AECF) provides opportunities for refugee and vulnerable families to create a sense of normalcy and better their lives after experiencing tremendous hardships over these last years of conflict. In the face of an enormous humanitarian crisis, we focus our efforts in the small, rural town of South Azraq, Jordan where nearly half of the town population today are refugees. This community is underserved by large, mainstream aid organizations and AECF provides meaningful contributions to directly better their lives.



**Ghuzlan, Malak and Hadeel | Grade 6**

## OUR MOST IMPACTFUL YEAR YET A Letter from the Executive Director

In our seventh year as a non-profit organization, AECF achieved major milestones and had our most impactful year yet. Our commitment to refugee and vulnerable families in Jordan is stronger than ever, and we've refined and strengthened our approach to meet student and family needs, becoming a true pillar for the South Azraq community.

Last Fall, we achieved a years-long dream of moving into a permanent space to host our education program. The new building delivers! The larger classrooms, outdoor space, full kitchen and more has allowed us to stretch our wings and explore new avenues of creativity and knowledge to enrich students' lives.

Nothing warms my heart more than seeing our whole school community gathered each morning to share announcements, performances, and a little exercise surrounded by our beautiful building, student-run garden, and team of loving staff.

We are watching our students grow up and this year we expanded our programs to support 11th and 12th graders as they work to graduate high school and pass the challenging Tawjihi (high school equivalency) exam. We look forward to continuing to support these teens as they seek post-secondary programs and follow their dreams.

We made it a priority this year to expand partnerships with local and international organizations, and use our new space as a base for host other partner programs. We created murals with a team from Seattle, hosted open medical days for all with a team of Jordanian and International doctors and nurses, invested in our teachers through training programs in Amman, and helped secure scholarships for youth to attend the largest technical college in Jordan.

We have a lot of work ahead. As our students grow up, we face high drop-out rates and few opportunities to advance our kids through university programs. The economic realities of 2022 are impossible to ignore as the cost of living rises exponentially while international aid for the most vulnerable families dwindles. But our community is strong and we are proud to be supported by YOU, our most generous supporters, many of whom have been with us since our humble beginnings in 2015.

Onwards and upwards for a peaceful and healthy 2023!

Lexi Shereshevsky, Executive Director

# ADDRESSING THE NEED

Access to quality education for Syrian refugees is a high priority across Jordan and particularly in rural communities like Azraq. Jordan's two-shift school system has weakened the overall education sector with condensed school days and many new or inexperienced teachers in the classroom. This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. UNICEF reported that 26% of Syrian students didn't access Government distance learning programs throughout nearly two full years of school closures due to lack of internet, guidance, or awareness.

The need to enhance public school education exists across all ages and grades, but is especially critical between seventh and eighth grade levels, when school enrollment drops drastically among Syrian refugee students. UNICEF found that only 15% of 16-year-olds and 21% of 17-year-olds were enrolled in secondary school, as compared to more than 80% of Jordanian children of both ages.

Severe poverty is the largest factor impacting high dropout rates among Syrian refugees. Only 2% of Syrian refugee households can meet their essential food needs without negative coping strategies. Students often leave the classroom early to earn wages to provide essentials for their families, and early marriage is encouraged among teenage girls to decrease the number of dependents at home.

The academic interventions provided by The Azraq Education Center, along with wraparound support services for students and parents designed to increase the value of educational attainment and address potential barriers, are necessary to prevent this population of Syrian refugee youth from becoming a lost generation.

---

Source:  
*Socio-Economic Assessment of Children and Youth in the time of COVID19—Jordan. UNICEF, 2020.*  
*Barriers to Secondary Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Jordan, Human Rights Watch, 2020*  
*Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (3RP) Regional Strategic Overview 2022-2021*



# 2022 KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

400

Students Reached Age 3-18

80%

Attended The Center For +3 Consecutive Years

**+ 400** Backpacks With Essential School Supplies Distributed

50%

Grade Improvement Year Over Year

**+ 18** Tawjihi Students Enrolled

**+ 50** New Teenage Boys Enrolled

**+ 20** Local Jobs Created



**+ 570** Essential food boxes delivered to vulnerable families



**+ Second** school bus added to reach more students



**+ Hearing aids, physical therapy, and specialized learning** for students in need



**+ Capital improvements including shade and cooling system**

# PROGRAM PILLARS

Founded in 2014, the Azraq Education Center hosts more than 400 students starting at age 3, providing daily enriching and impactful education programming.

## 01 MONTESSORI-INSPIRED EARLY EDUCATION

Montessori-trained teachers lead our youngest students, ages 3-5, in innovative, peer-to-peer learning in a Montessori-inspired environment.



## 02 REMEDIAL ADVANCEMENT CLASSES

Remedial Arabic, English, Science, and Math courses help students from Grades 1 to 10 catch up with their peers in Government School.



## 03 POST-SECONDARY PREP

Test preparation for the Tawjihi Exam, as well as mentorship support, assist our 11th and 12th graders in remaining in school, graduating, and pursuing vocational or post-secondary programs.



## 04 ENRICHMENT PROGRAMMING

Art, sports, theater, field trips, gardening, and other programs encourage students to pursue their interests, remain curious, and develop leadership skills.



## 05 WRAPAROUND SUPPORT SERVICES

Regular food aid, emergency medical support, and referral pathways ensure that all families' basic needs are met.



## 06 LOCAL JOB CREATION

98% of our team is from South Azraq, and the majority are women, in a community where unemployment is high and women make up less than 10% of the workforce.



# A FOCUS ON TEENS

## A NEW AFTERNOON SHIFT

A key 2022 priority was increasing our student body of teenagers (particularly boys) and supporting them in their efforts to stay in school and sit for the Jordanian Tawjihi exam. By rolling out a new afternoon shift, we met our goal and added 50 teenage boys, and an additional 18 Tawjihi-level boys and girls to the program.

We launched with three days per week of Math, English, Arabic and Sports for grade 5 to grade 11, but due to the program success, we've now expanded to five days per week for 2023!

***"I have a better understanding of division, square roots, and equations. In Arabic, I am learning the parts of speech and I am reading and answering questions about poetry. In English...well..I'm getting better every day!"*** - Abd al-Kareem, Grade 8

## PREPPING FOR TAWJIHI

Tawjihi requires specialized teachers familiar with the level and test-style of the subject on the exam. However, in rural areas like South Azraq, it is difficult to find teachers with the appropriate skill-set and experience.

To meet this need, the Center subscribes and provides access to the Watad online learning platform. Watad offers semester-long Tawjihi prep courses with specialized professors in specific test subjects, available by laptop or smartphone.

Our Tawjihi-level students, Jordanian and Syrian, come to the Center three days per week to access the Watad programs free of charge, use the internet and devices, and work in groups to listen to the lectures, complete worksheets, and prepare for the exam.

## ABOUT TAWJIHI

*Tawjihi is the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination in Jordan. It is the last stage of school education, and a student's results determine where and what they can study at University level. There are many streams for Tawjihi but the most common are Science and Literature. Students prepare for Tawjihi throughout grades 11 and 12.*



**“** I take English and Chemistry Watad courses (at The Azraq Center) as they are the subjects I struggle most with. Watad is a great option for Tawjihi prep in my opinion. My goal is to get the highest grade on the exam and make myself proud by getting accepted into medical school, the path I've always dreamed of. **”**

**Ibtisam | Grade 12 Tawjihi student**  
(Student of the Azraq Center since 2016)

# BRIDGES TO POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS

University programs are both academically and financially difficult to access for the majority of our students. With this in mind, we worked to create relationships and referral pathways to vocational programs that teach specific skills and help create future job opportunities for Azraq youth.

This year, we enrolled our first cohort of students at Luminus Technical College, on full scholarships provided by Luminus! These seven-month programs include three months of in-class work followed by four months of paid internships to participating students.

AECF provides transportation from Azraq to Amman (approximately 90 minutes each way) to make sure that distance is not a barrier to education. Our first cohort are in HVAC repair, Esthetics, and Cosmetology courses. We look forward to seeing them complete their studies and enter the workforce!

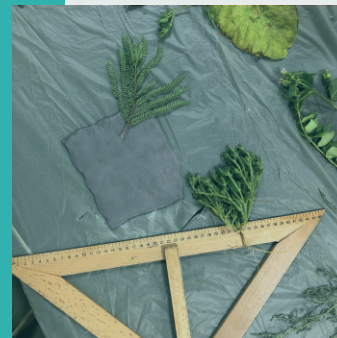
***“I really enjoyed studying Esthetics and Cosmetology at Luminus. I learned many things I didn't know before. I highly endorse the program because you receive a certificate and are employable immediately after the course ends.”*** - Muneera, Age 20



***“My time at Luminus was wonderful, and even though three months were short to learn everything, they gave us the fundamentals so we could advance and learn more in the real world. I'm glad I went because I now have a plan for working and taking care of my family.”***

- Mohammad, Age 19

# ENRICHMENT AT THE AZRAQ CENTER



# SPORTS

## BASKETBALL

This summer, 15-year-old Cyrus from Connecticut raised funds to help build us a multi-purpose sport court at The Azraq Center. Further, he helped coordinate a one-week basketball clinic with Full Court Peace, introducing students to the sport for the very first time! Everyone loved learning to dribble and shoot hoops together and it continues to be a sport students love to play.

## SOCCER

Of course, for most of our kids, soccer is their true love language! Coach Suleiman led our teenage boys to victory this Fall in the first ever Azraq soccer tournament! Six teams went head to head (including boys from the local military school and another school nearby) but only one could come home the winner.... The Azraq Center Stars!



It was a huge moment for celebration as the boys brought home their winning Tournament Cup, celebrating with ululations and a giant meal!



“ My time at the Azraq Center as a Full Court Peace ambassador was truly eye opening. My biggest takeaway was that whether you are playing basketball in New Canaan, Connecticut or Azraq, Jordan, everyone, regardless of gender, age, and background loves a good game. It was heartwarming to work with the local community members to help build the new sport court and be able to play lots of games with the students of the center with whom I had language barriers with, but zero barriers to our new formed friendships. ”

**Cyrus | Age 15**  
Basketball Clinic Volunteer



# COMMUNITY GARDEN & LUNCH PROGRAM

Last Spring, we laid the beds for our school vegetable garden. Throughout the year, everyone works together to plant and harvest a variety of veggies including radishes, eggplants, cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, and an assortment of herbs. We even have an olive tree that we hope will grow enough fruit to make our own olive oil in years to come!

Everything we harvest goes directly to the kitchen where school cooks Um Ahmed and A'isha incorporate them into healthy lunches. The team develops a three-month lunch plan, considering the nutritional facts and what vegetables are in season.



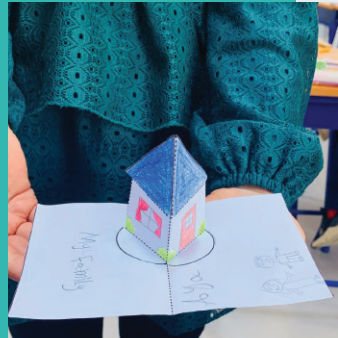
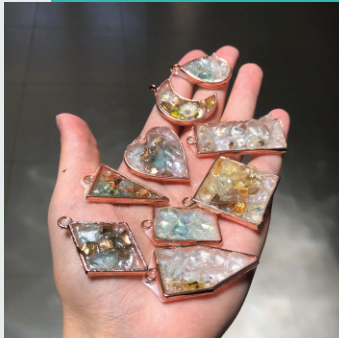
# FIELD TRIPS

Field trips are a great way to reward student academic achievements, while exposing kids to new places and ideas. This year, we hosted multiple field trips outside of Azraq, including visits to *Galaxy Park*, *Jerash*, *Ajloun*, *Wadi Rajeb*, *Green Land*, *the Yadoodeh Zoo*, and *Hussein Park*.



# SUMMER CAMP

The Azraq Center operates year-round with a special, modified summer program. This year we facilitated a variety of student-run clubs throughout July and August filled with activities and exploration!



“ I feel focused here. We couldn't all fit in the little space at the old center. I appreciate that we now have large classrooms for each grade, lots of library books, a computer lab to research on the internet, and a large kitchen where my mother (the school cook) can freely prepare meals for everyone.”

**Salwa | Grade 10**  
(Student of the Azraq Center since 2016)

# EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

## The Butterfly Project

The Azraq Center partners with Seattle-based NGO Voices of the Children, implementing arts-based exchange between Azraq students and students in Washington State.

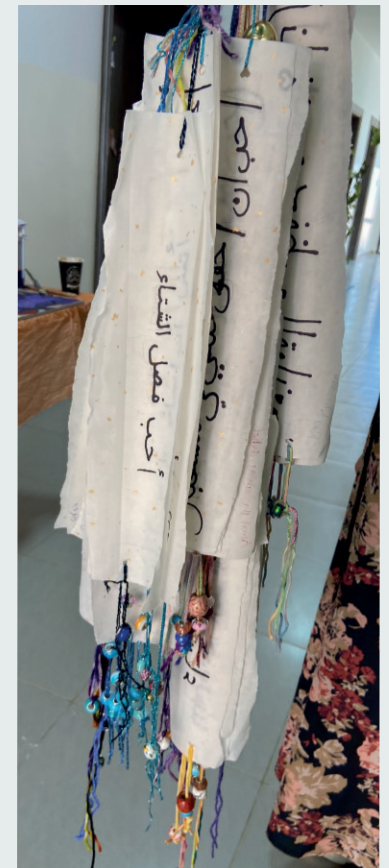
The Butterfly Project had students create poetry, ceramics, and ultimately a three-dimensional mural for the school. Works explored the parallels between a teenage girl and a butterfly; both fragile, mysterious, beautiful, and self-sufficient.



## The Wind Poems

Students crafted poetry to inscribe on rice paper. It was then decorated with colorful yarn and artistically assembled with beads and bells.

Members of VOTC will present the same project in Washington classrooms, with selected poems translated into both English and Arabic to make the connection. Through pictures, videos, and some of the actual poems, the children are able to communicate cross-culturally through their art and poetry. Before the wind carries their messages away, installations in Washington and Azraq will share their voices.



*“The earnestness of the students to conjure up sensory images for the Wind Poems we presented was heart-warming. The enthusiasm of the teachers in wanting to participate alongside their students was beautiful to witness.*

*In our projects, as in life, you have to create a safe place, build trust, and give children time to open up. They share their dreams and their hopes. They share their love.”*

Treva King | Voices of the Children

# THE WIND POEMS

Excerpts From Our Students

*I am the fresh smell and rain as it hits the ground,  
A reminder of the first day of winter in Syria.*

*I am the smell of jasmine,  
As fragrant as my grandmother's hug.*

*I am the sound of birdsong in the morning and coffee brewing.  
My message is for hope and for people to remain optimistic in life.*

*I wish to become a psychiatrist, a scientist of the soul.*

*I am proud of my beautiful and large family and my loving friends.*

*I am the smell of my grandfather,  
A reminder of family gatherings and the stories he used to tell.*

*I love the wind that carries Peace and Safety to all countries.  
My dream is for war to stop in all of the world and for peace to come to all children.*

*I am proud to be an adventurer who explores and accomplishes new things.  
Life is a trial. Take all opportunities and try hard.*

*I wish to cure my brother from his lack of hearing.*

*I am the sound of early mornings and my mother humming as she makes breakfast.*

*I have touched icy frothy seas and seen tall evergreens that reach to greet the clouds,  
I have found hope in the kindness and compassion of strangers and in  
tomorrow's words,*

*I have held a new-born baby, tiny and innocent, free from expectation,  
I have listened to stories of fishing adventures and mountain and forest excursions.  
I have ridden my bike through a deluge of rain, worried that it would swallow me up.*



# SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE

Addressing food insecurity and other challenges that create barriers to education are key pillars of our work. Throughout the year, we provide food boxes with essential items like beans, rice, oil, and whole chickens or meat, to the most vulnerable families at The Azraq Center and the larger South Azraq community.

We also partner with medical and dental service organizations throughout the year to provide assessments and treatments for the community. We are proud to use our center as a hub for programs that benefit all of Azraq.



# SUCCESS STORIES



## Asayel in IT Class

***"I saw that Asayel was uninterested in class and that she was not interacting with any of her peers. But I kept my attention on her, motivating and encouraging her to complete simple tasks, because, it became clear to me after sitting with her, she felt she had no real role to play in the class."*** - Anood, IT Teacher

As Asayel began to find her confidence, she became one of the first students to arrive at the computer lab each day, with enthusiasm saying: ***"I am the first one to arrive at class, and today I want to learn a new skill."*** The situation progressed, and she became very interested in the lessons and completing assignments. Now, she even supports her classmates who are behind in completing projects.

Asayel has applied her IT knowledge to create an interactive e-book titled ***The Heritage Food of Countries.***

## Jaber, Hussein and Khalaf

Three energetic and rambunctious friends, Jaber, Hussein, and Khalaf underwent a significant behavioral change after the teachers instituted a rewarding system for the good students. They began using their energy for good, such as being proactive in class and assisting the younger students or those in need.

The three friends are now aware that the entire center has a distinct educational system that they should adhere to rather than doing things their own way.

They understand that if they behave nicely, help others, and respect the teachers, others will respect them as well, and they will be rewarded for their good deeds.



Jaber | Grade 5

# INVESTING IN OUR TEAM

Our teachers are role models for their students and the larger community and we are committed to helping them develop their teaching and leadership skills!

This year, trainings for our staff included an English teacher training program with Amideast Jordan and intensive Montessori training with international Montessori educators.



“ This year, my favorite moment was when we had a big, communal Ramadan dinner because it brought all of the students together at the Center to enjoy delicious food and form new friendships. ”

**Elham I Grade 10**  
(Student of the Azraq Center since 2016)



English Teacher Renad Bdour is using what she learned in the Teacher Training course to provide our students with more engaging and dynamic classes!

# A FEMALE-LED TEAM



Lexi Shereshewsky  
US Executive Director



Alia Al Saad  
Program Director & Principal



Nofa Fayiz  
Jordan Strategic Lead



Martine Stilwell  
Canada Project Head



Wa'el  
Operations & Outreach



Suleiman  
Operations & Outreach



Asil, Development Director  
& Art Educator



Alia  
School Cook



Anwar, Level 1



Manar, Level 2



Areej, Level 3



Amal, English



Malak, Science



Sham, Math



Rinad, English



Anood, IT



Yusra, Arabic



Nour, Montessori



Haneen, Montessori



Haneen, Montessori



Abeer, Montessori



Aameera, Special Ed



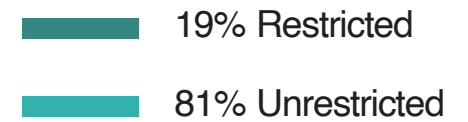
Aysha, School cook



Thekra, Substitute

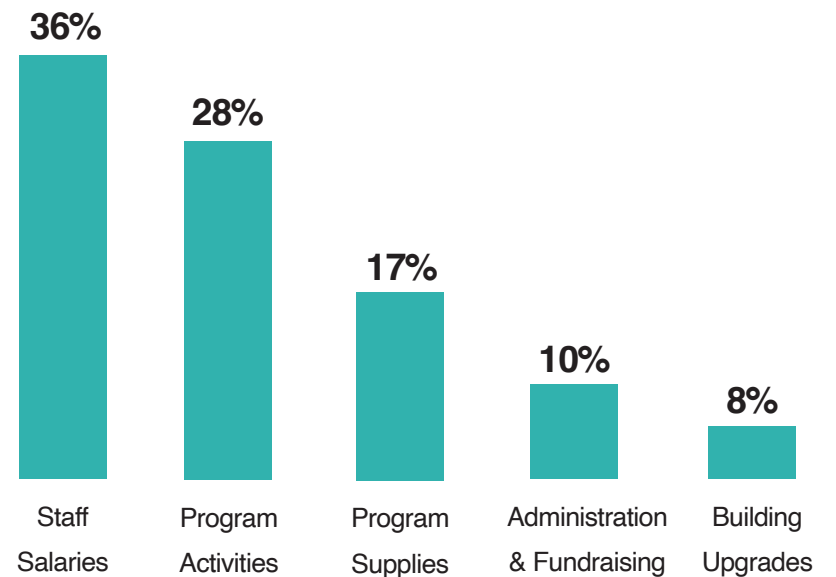
# 2022 FINANCIAL SUMMARY

## 2022 REVENUE



## 2022 EXPENSE BREAKDOWN

In 2022, we spent \$512k on the following:





# AECF BOARD OF DIRECTORS

## **Lexi Shereshewsky**

Lexi Shereshewsky was inspired to start The Azraq Education and Community Fund after spending time living and studying in Damascus, Syria throughout 2009 and 2010. In addition to her role as Executive Director and board member, Lexi is the Director of Marketing for DailyMail.com. Lexi uses her extensive experience in branding and communications to craft AECF's story and bring it to life for the 1000s of donors across the United States. Lexi leads partnerships and communications with AECF's team on the ground and with organizations and foundations across the U.S.

## **Demetri Blaisdell**

Demetri lived in Damascus, Syria from 2009-2010 studying Arabic and teaching English before moving to New York to attend Columbia Law School. In addition to co-founding and serving as Chief of Business Affairs of The Azraq Education and Community Fund, Demetri Blaisdell is Litigation Counsel at The New York Times Company, where he specializes in complex commercial litigation and media law.

## **Dr. Martine Stilwell**

Martine Stilwell is a retired Psychiatrist and Physician based in Vancouver, Canada. Born in The Hague, Holland, Martine lived in Australia, Tasmania, Indonesia, and Ecuador before finally settling in Canada with her husband and children. In 2014, after coming into a substantial inheritance, Martine went to Jordan and founded The Azraq Education Center with the help of Catherine Ashcroft of HRJ. Martine plays an integral role in the management of the Azraq program and travels to Jordan multiple times per year to help out.

## **Z. Joe Moosa**

Joe was born in Tanzania and emigrated to Canada at the age of 14 as an economic refugee with his family. After attaining his engineering degree from the University of Waterloo he worked in the engineering and computer systems fields for a number of years before embarking on his serial entrepreneur career. Joe co-founded and managed a diverse array of companies in the technology, construction, seniors housing and real-estate development sectors. Joe and his wife Alina became involved in the Azraq Education and Community Fund in 2018 with the goal of helping expand the organization's activities and infrastructure.

## **Mary Murano**

Mary Murano is the Development Manager at Career Resources, Incl, a non-profit organization focused on workforce development based in Bridgeport, CT. In this role, she is responsible for fundraising through public and private sources and grant writing. Prior to working in the non-profit sector, Mary was a media executive for over 30 years working in television content distribution, contract negotiations, and affiliate relations. She has held leadership positions in several media companies including NBCUniversal, Oxygen Media, Rainbow Media (now AMC Networks), and Al Jazeera America.

## **Jerry Shereshewsky**

Jerry Shereshewsky brings over 45 years of experience in marketing and branding and a passion for philanthropy to The Azraq Education and Community Fund. Jerry is the co-founder and Chief Grownup at Grownup Marketing and the recipient of dozens of awards in his field. He uses his extensive experience to help engage a wide network to support the organization's mission. Having spent time traveling in Syria in 2010, Jerry is committed to helping those affected by the conflict.

## **Ken Bernhard**

Ken Bernhard is a principal in Cohen and Wolf's Municipal, Business & Corporate, Real Estate, and Family Law Groups, representing municipalities and a wide range of businesses, as well as individuals, in litigation, real estate, matrimonial and commercial matters. Ken is a passionate philanthropist and has volunteered around the world to support impactful projects and promote education and prosperity to those in need.

## **Yasir Dhannoon**

Yasir is an entrepreneur and project manager with expertise in technology and innovative solutions. He has created numerous apps and digital platforms for global companies, including HarperCollins Publishers, Verizon, General Mills and more. Yasir has a personal connection to The Azraq Education and Community Fund's mission because he lived in Syria for over three years as a refugee from Iraq. Yasir has also worked for several years with the International Refugee Assistance Project, a non-profit dedicated to supporting refugees in life or death circumstances.



Boys from grade 3 and 4

## PARTNERS AND DONORS MAKE OUR WORK POSSIBLE

*A special thank you to our major partners and significant 2022 donors:*

Zahur & Alina Moosa  
Blossom Hill Foundation  
Dr Scholl Foundation  
Carry The Future  
Westport Sunrise Rotary Club  
Skagit Rotary Club  
Tous Pour La Syrie  
Helping Refugees Jordan (HRJ)  
Adnan Sakiri  
Beryl Shereshewsky & Her YouTube  
Community  
The Duggan Family  
The Michaelson Family  
Rob Norman & Dee Soloman  
Chris & Bev Sumpton  
Shiva Sarram & Family  
Annabel Grossman  
The Wagner Family  
Catherine & Jerry Shereshewsky  
Karin Klein  
Linda Villani  
Sujata Gupta  
Dana Matthow  
Azim Jamal  
Afsaneh Djabbari  
Jaideep Khanna  
Susan Barr  
Susan Mandel  
Martin Allemann  
Wendy Zendejas  
Suzan Noser

The Segal Family  
Katy Palizban  
Gladys Chang  
Belinda Hindmarsh  
Ekrem Cinar  
Sue Serwan  
Zahra Salisbury  
Simone Brumis & Bob Blaisdell  
Fiky Prayudi  
Faye Foroutanpour  
Joumana Jaber  
Urszula Konopacka  
Seham Alhusaini  
Evalyn Van Allen-Shalash  
Kenneth Wirfel  
The AECF Board Of Directors  
The Hundreds Of Donors & Volunteers  
Across The U.S. And Around The World!

### **PROGRAMMING PARTNERS**

Nachmyat Eastern Badia Society  
Voices of the Children  
Full Court Peace  
Luminus Technical University College  
Amideast Jordan & U.S. State Department  
Jordan River Foundation  
Atlantic Humanitarian Relief  
Healthy Teeeth Project  
Paper Airplanes  
CARE Jordan  
Science United Project



Abdallah | Kindergarten

[THEAZRAFUND.ORG](http://THEAZRAFUND.ORG) | [@THEAZRAFUND](https://www.instagram.com/THEAZRAFUND)

[CONTACT@THEAZRAFUND.ORG](mailto:CONTACT@THEAZRAFUND.ORG)