



Finding Connection

BY CIERRA WILLIAMS



“I feel so blessed to do this work, because it’s reinforced that everything in life unfolds as it should.”

—MONA FLYNN

SIX YEARS AGO a local nonprofit in Greensboro, North Carolina, called yoga teacher and exercise physiologist Mona Flynn out the blue. The city, which had become something of a hub for international refugees, had started to welcome a large population of people from Syria. Since Flynn—who works with vulnerable, disabled, and compromised patients—was Syrian and Arab American, the organization thought she might meet the families and help them feel welcome.

Flynn immediately agreed to help, acting as a translator and connecting families to vital resources. As an immigrant herself, she was more aware than most that millions of refugees have been forced to flee their homes. While she couldn’t directly help her extended family in Syria who were suffering

as a result of the conflict there, guiding others helped her feel useful.

“It was a way for me to not feel heaviness around that personal connection. I couldn’t send aid to my family, but I could help the people showing up here,” Flynn says. “We can all help the people in front of us.”

Flynn understood that starting a life in a new country can be overwhelming. The isolation of the language barrier, the difficulty of adapting to a new culture, the separation from community, and even things like navigating transportation are stressful.

Working with the refugee families in Greensboro—which is home to people from more than 140 countries—Flynn realized that many

of the women spent so much time looking after their families and households that they had little time for themselves. She had practiced yoga for 30 years, so she knew how healing and unifying it could be. So in the spring of 2019, she called on local yoga practitioners and teachers to help her develop and teach an eight-week series of classes for immigrant women, organized under the umbrella of her company Life Fit Yoga (lifefityoga.com). She called the collaborative effort Yoga Therapy for Refugee and Immigrant Women. Over time, she changed the name to The Yoga Connection and began to shape the volunteer group into a more formal organization. Their mission is to, among other things, “provide opportunities for community engagement while giving attention to immigrant and refugee women, and to empower all participants with an accessible mind-body practice, addressing social, physical, and emotional issues.”

Along with offering asana, the group helps teach English skills through the “word of the day,” which also became the daily mantra. Childcare is provided while the women practice. Over the course of the yoga sessions, Flynn saw the women become more connected to themselves, and bond with one another. “Something like this would’ve been so helpful for my own mother when she first came here,” she says.

Through Flynn’s dedication, The Yoga Connection earned a Seva Award from the International Association of Yoga Therapists in 2020 and received a mat grant from the Give Back Yoga Foundation. Participants have told Flynn that practicing yoga helped them feel more grounded and connected in their communities—and helped them see themselves beyond their day-to-day work and family duties. Now, the program is offered twice a year, continuing to help women in the area. “I feel so blessed to do this work,” Flynn says, “because it’s reinforced that everything in life unfolds as it should.”

82.4 million

The number of forcibly displaced people worldwide as of 2020