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## After a Two-Year Gap, Awards Ceremony Honors Achievement

Everyone has struggled over the past few years, and no one has had to struggle more than the refugees and immigrants who make up the bulk of Lincoln Literacy's students. Fortunately for them, the volunteers who give their time and skill as tutors remained undaunted.

The threat posed by COVID in the past two years forced us to cancel award ceremonies. Lamentably, the pandemic is still with us, but with vaccination and medication widely available, this summer we were at last able to reunite.

It was truly a joy to bring tutors, board members, staff, and students together on June 25 for a picnic and awards ceremony. More than 70 people gathered at Henry Park to celebrate remarkable service and achievement.

In this newsletter, we tell some of the stories of those who were honored — and we salute all those who volunteered their time to help others and all those who made time and gave effort to improve their skills. We start with Janet Eskridge, pictured at right in the yellow jacket. In addition to serving as president of our board, Janet continues to volunteer as a one-to-



Shee Paw holds her 2022 President's Language & Literacy Award one tutor. Shee Paw, in green, was one of two winners this year of the President's Award for Language and

Continued on p. 2

## Orphaned in a Strange Land, She Overcame

Few of us get through our teen years without turbulence, and many of us face troubles in those years — often of our own making. But, through no fault of her own, Alba Morales has had to endure the loss of both parents and a move from her native Guatemala to the completely unfamiliar terrain of Lincoln, Nebraska.

Having found lodging with a relative, Alba began to learn English at Lincoln Literacy. She rocketed ahead, going from a Level 2 learner in late 2019 to Level 6 at the beginning of this year. Not content to learn only in class, she was one of the first and most enthusiastic adopters of our English learning app. The practice paid off.

During the pandemic, Alba went through our CNA Prep class, got a scholarship, and completed the certified nursing assistant course at Bryan College of Health Sciences. She's now working full-time as a CNA at Elite Professionals Home Care, and she's passed her Med Aide certification. But she's not yet done. Alba's also studying to become a nurse. For all her achievements, Alba is a President's Award winner.



Alba Morales has vaulted steep challenges.

Looking to enrich your life and help another? Try the most satisfying volunteer gig in town!

Lincoln Literacy depends on volunteer tutors to get the job done. We offer training and support to the volunteers who teach our students. Both tutors and learners report satisfaction levels of well over 90%. See "Become a Volunteer" on our website, [www.lincolnliteracy.org](http://www.lincolnliteracy.org).

## Learning English, an Afghan Family Finds New Friends

After escaping the Taliban, Meraj Bibi Afghan, her husband Arif Shah Afghan, and their eight children arrived safely in Lincoln last year. But their challenges were far from over. No one in the family knew a word of English. Once they connected with Lincoln Literacy, however, the life-changing transition became significantly easier.

Having never attended school in Afghanistan, the family gained their first formal learning experience in our English classes. Arif soon found a job to support his family, but Meraj continued while her three youngest children, Zulaikha, Mustafa and Kamal went to FLAIR classes. Even after their eligibility for van services ended, Meraj remained committed. She learned to take a city bus and travel across town four days a week with three of her children in tow.

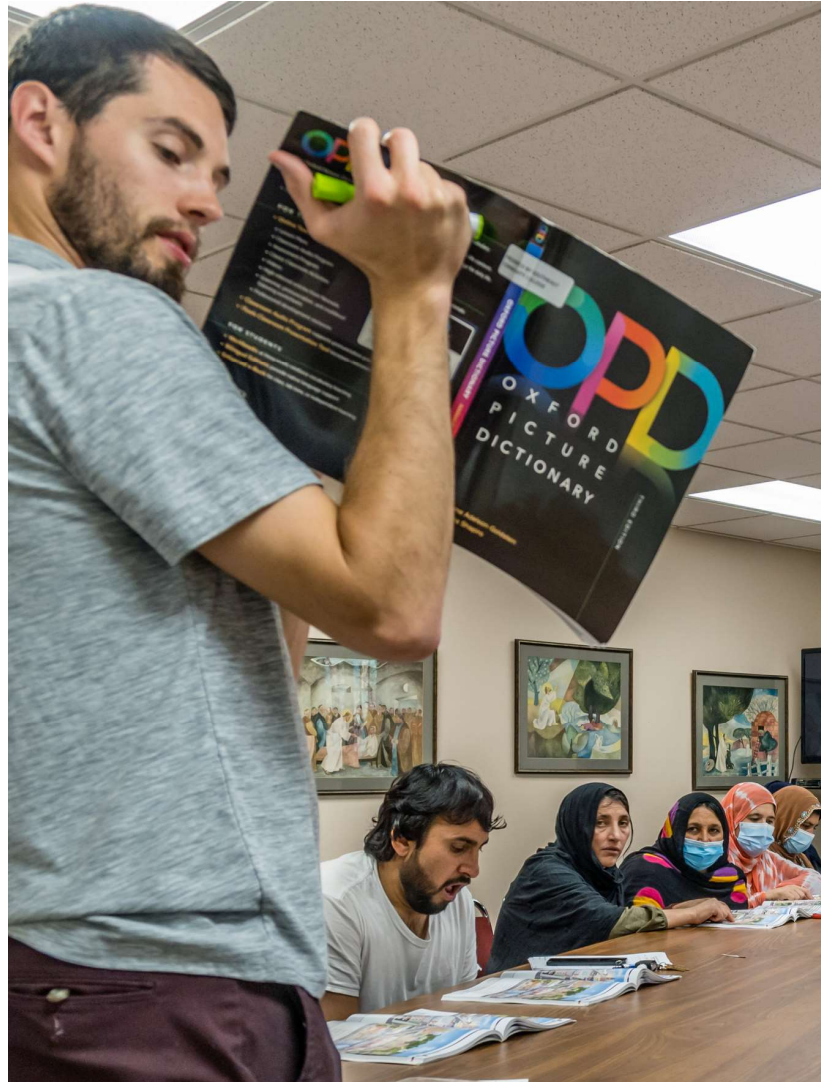
It quickly became clear to her how important learning English was, even for routine things like going to the doctor or to the grocery store. Such simple daily activities were nearly impossible for Meraj when she arrived in Lincoln, but after six months of classes she now understands most basic interactions, and can teach her children about life in a new country.

Five-year-old Zulaikha and her younger brothers Mustafa and Kamal found FLAIR a bit chaotic at first. They didn't understand instructions and found the classroom full of toys and other children overwhelming.

Once they became engaged in classes, however, they began to understand and adapt to their new environment. Within months, they mastered such basic skills as asking to go to the restroom, washing their hands before snack, and sitting down and waiting patiently to enjoy group activities.

Where the two young boys had previously engaged in a free-for-all play, they soon developed prosocial, age-appropriate behaviors like sharing, taking turns in games, waiting in line, walking together to the gym, and handling frustrations without confrontation.

The family recently moved to a new townhouse, and Meraj has been amazed at the positive interactions the children have speaking English with their American neighbors.



Afghan refugees like Meraj Bibi Afghan are striving to learn English. Photo: Charles Haacker

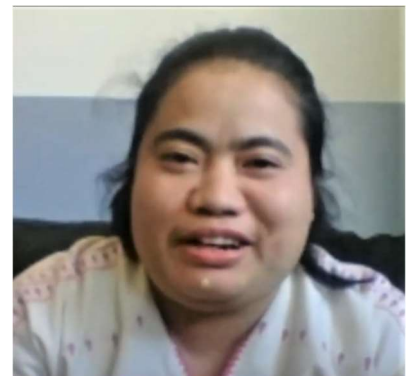
One American came over, hugged Meraj, and told her how happy she is to have them as new neighbors. Reflecting on her family's journey, Meraj says, "Thank you, Lincoln Literacy, you helped me to learn English."

## Awards, Cont'd from p. 1

Literacy Achievement. As a refugee from the brutal military in Burma, Shee Paw spent years in a camp in Thailand, where she voluntarily served as a teacher for many of the children there. Approved for release from the camp to come to America as a refugee, she arrived in Lincoln in 2019, and immediately enrolled herself and her children in Lincoln Literacy's classes. In a 2021 YouTube video, she talks about how helpful the classes were, and how receiving free home internet service and a Chromebook from Lincoln Literacy helped her continue when the pandemic shut down our in-person classes.

She dreamed of being able to work in a school once again. "I have no doubt you can do it," retired teacher Shari McCright, who heads our School Jobs program, told her.

Shee Paw has made the most of her opportunities, advancing from Level 2 to Level 6, and taking various adult skills classes, including computers, reading and writing workshops, and Paraeducator Prep. Last December, she landed a job working in the cafeteria of the school where her children attend. She continues to study toward her ultimate goal of being a teacher.



President's Award winner Shee Paw in her video at <https://youtu.be/O87sHV36O7Y>



## An Inspiring Rebound

Mosab al-Koutaini arrived in Lincoln recently as a refugee from one of the world's worst conflicts: the Syrian civil war. There, he had been a radiologist. To lose his country and his profession might well have knocked him down. But once here, Mosab pushed ahead with finding a job, learning English, and helping others learn. His tutor, Chris Stone, says, "Mosab helped so many people during the school year in a truly loving manner. He's gone all over Lincoln with his family to learn the city and enjoys relating his adventures to the class."



Award-winner Mosab Khoutaini at left, picnics with members of his family.

## A Student Turns Tutor, and More

Azadeh Hassani, known to all of us as Azi, has been a Lincoln Literacy student since she came here from Iran. She's done so well that she's now fluent in English. But of course she's even better in her native language of Farsi, which is a close cousin to Dari, one of the main languages of Afghanistan.

When refugees who fled the Taliban began to arrive in Lincoln, Azi volunteered as both a tutor and an interpreter for them. More than just tutoring or translating, she put in countless hours advising the newly arrived refugees and helping them over the many obstacles they faced while getting resettled in Lincoln.



Azadeh Hassani, with Clayton Naff

Azi was understandably nervous about tutoring, but Sandra Rojo, head of our English programs says she did great. Jeanne Baer, who was Azi's tutor, adds that the award meant a lot to her. For sure, Azi meant a lot to our Afghan refugees.

## Congratulations to All Award Winners and Nominees!

### Volunteer Awards

Honorable Mention for Dedicated Volunteer Service  
Lois Poppe Award for Dedication in Volunteer Service  
Lois Poppe Award for Dedication in Volunteer Service  
Teaching Excellence Award  
Teaching Excellence Award  
Tutor of the Year

Hetal Patel  
Azadeh Hassani  
Janet Walters  
Gloria Van Ackeren  
Mike Laughlin  
Linda Pawlenty

### Student Awards

Honorable Mention, Learner of the Year  
President's Award for Language & Literacy Achievement  
President's Award for Language & Literacy Achievement  
Learner of the Year  
Little Learner of the Year  
Student Leadership  
Student Leadership  
English Learning Couple of the Year

Radhi Al-Azawi  
Alba Morales  
Shee Paw  
Nastaran Aghili  
Zulaikha Afghan  
Mosab Koutaini  
Meraj Bibi Afghan  
Hilda Rodriguez & Jose Luis Loma

### Staff Awards

Distinguished Service Award  
Distinguished Service Award  
Distinguished Service Award

Erika Stewart-Finkenstaedt  
Maria Cruz de Pesina  
Tareq Abdulwahhab

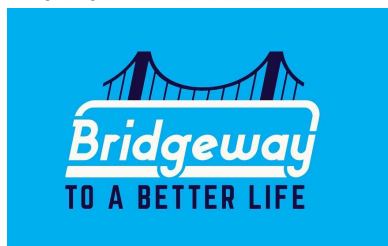


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Join us this Oct. 27th as we celebrate a half-century of service to the community!

Our mission: to strengthen our community by teaching the English language and a variety of literacy skills to people of all cultures.



Proud to be affiliated with:



**Return Service Requested**

## Beyond Words: Our Families Explore Morrill Hall

Our summer ABCs in the Park program culminated in a field trip to the University of Nebraska State Museum — aka Morrill Hall. Refugee and immigrant families from many countries joined in the July 15 expedition, led by teacher Erika Birky-Rios (holding sign in picture at right).

Inside, they explored huge mammal remains, dinosaur fossils, weird animals from the past, and cultures of the plains. Their visit was made possible by the museum's generous community access program, funded by Morrill Hall donors.

For weeks, the families had been meeting Mondays and Wednesdays at Bennett Martin Public Library for English classes, then gathering on Fridays for field trips. Each time, FLAIR provides a big box of books for all ages for families to take home and read. In their FLAIR classes, the children learned about Juneteenth, Independence Day, and exploring Lincoln. Using plastic straws and connector parts, kids made kangaroos, hats, windmills, snakes, and flags. They learned to ride city buses, visited parks, and even Gateway Mall. Thanks to Lincoln City Libraries for hosting and helping!



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