GOOD NEWS IN A DIFFICULT YEAR

Despite a pandemic, Viator House continues building an international, interfaith community where participants succeed in school, court and independent living with the support of dedicated staff, committed volunteers, 20 local faith communities and 500-plus generous donors.
The morning finally came. And we all exhaled.

After 12 months of pandemic restrictions that kept all participants safe from the coronavirus, participants and staff gathered on the second floor for their first vaccine shots.

By early April, we were all fully vaccinated.

It was a “good news” day thanks to the dedicated health professionals at Heartland Alliance in Chicago, which provides medical services to at-risk communities.

But it was only one of the many “good news” days that we celebrated at Viator House since the pandemic began. That’s because the men at Viator House, and the staff and community who support them, refused to let the health crisis stop them from meeting their goals. Though school went online, some jobs went away and masks became mandatory in the house, these men whose courage and dedication brought them to our nation refused to surrender to despair or defeat.

Here are a few of their stories. We have changed their names to protect their privacy.
“Carlos”

His mentor remembers meeting Carlos soon after he first arrived at Viator House on his 18th birthday three years ago. He was a quiet “kid...unsure of himself and his future,” she recalled. “He knew very little English and I knew very little Spanish.”

But yet they began a tutoring relationship that transformed into mentoring. And that quiet kid, so unsure of himself and his abilities, transformed, as well. Carlos developed an almost fluency in English, graduated high school last Spring and enrolled in Oakton Community College, where he earned As and Bs his first semester last fall.

Neither his mentor nor Viator House staff members were surprised, given the dedication he showed to studying and seeking out tutors, as well as his determination not to give up though the classes he studied for (in his third language) were so difficult. His case manager at the time, Sr. Rayo-Cuaya Castillo, whose support was one reason he never gave up, often commented on his stubborn drive. He now calls that graduation a “dream” come true.

But Carlos’ 2020 included more than school. He also volunteered for a second year with his mentor at a community garden, where they raised flowers to be given out to families who visited a local food bank for groceries. Still waiting for his immigration proceedings, and in the midst of a pandemic, Carlos brought joy to families struggling with hunger.

Because of him, their 2020 was a bit brighter, as well.

It costs 50% more to keep immigrants in detention than to house them at Viator House

$130 per day to hold an immigrant in federal detention

$80 per day for housing, food, case management and transportation at Viator House (we receive $0 from the federal govt.)

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“Abu”

Abu’s journey started when he fled from the military in West Africa at age 17 after he protested against the nation’s “president for life.” It included a dangerous trek to South America and through Central America and Mexico to the U.S. southwestern border and eventually Viator House.

But thanks to his hard work, dedication and commitment to his Muslim faith, the journey stopped briefly this winter for a special luncheon to celebrate his asylum victory, graduation from high school and new driver’s license.

“I am so excited. I just feel blessed,” Abu recently said. And when the pandemic pushed school online, this dedicated student bore down to study in English, his third language, as well. “It is very hard to study online,” said Abu, whose only education at home in West Africa was informal English and Math classes in the evenings. “But with hard work, everything is possible.”

His case manager, Marianne Dilsner, other VHH staff, his mentors and tutors deserve a lot of credit, he said. “Viator House is the backbone to my success.”

And like Carlos, Abu worked for his success without forgetting to help others. His money from work helped support his mother at home. Regularly volunteering with other VHH participants at a local mosque, Abu also helped pack and handout boxes of perishable food several Saturdays during the pandemic.

This hard year has deepened Abu’s hopes to study medicine, partly because “since I came to the United States, I have (felt) so much love from people I don’t know. So I just want to help.”
HOME TO 70 YOUNG MEN FROM 19 NATIONS SINCE 2016

TUTORS AND MENTORS
“Issa”

It was scary, Issa wrote.

Yes, he had survived a dangerous journey like Abu from West Africa through South and Central America to the U.S. southwestern border. But moving from Viator House into an apartment last Spring meant facing uncertainty all over again.

Yet, his long journey from Africa and time at Viator House, where he graduated high school and started community college, built a reservoir of confidence within him. “Moving on my own is not something easy,” he said. “But because I’m a hard worker and I trusted myself, I think that I will make it.”

Like Abu, Issa won asylum while living at Viator House. He was comfortable and successful there. But then came the pandemic. And for two months Viator House locked down, asking participants to give up their jobs until health officials knew how workers could stay healthy while at work.

That was when Issa’s courage and confidence kicked in again. Knowing that people back home relied on the money he regularly sent to help family, he sought help moving into an apartment where, with two other participants, he could continue working to help his family.

Issa, like Carlos and Abu, lives a life focused on helping others: those in the U.S. who he has helped on VHH volunteer trips and, importantly, his family back home. “I work two jobs … (for) the family back home,” he said, while also taking online college courses in his third language, like Abu and Carlos. He will complete his associate’s degree this year and hopes to study computer science at a university.

And despite all the responsibility he bears, Issa said, “I feel like I’m blessed” - particularly through his relationship with VHH staff, tutors and his mentor, with whom he still maintains a relationship.
HOLISTIC SERVICES

For about $80 per day, Viator House offers a young man seeking asylum in the US:

- Case management
- Housing and food
- Clothing
- Hygiene products
- Educational opportunities
- Tutoring
- Wellness checks
- Referrals for medical evaluations and services
- Referrals for counseling
- Stress management
- Interfaith spiritual accompaniment
- Physical conditioning
- Community service opportunities
- Cultural adaptation and integration
- Social outings
- Family reunification
- Basic employment training
A hard year passes into a more hopeful year

Hope in the midst of and despite a pandemic - and hope on the horizon, that’s what we see at Viator House. And we are grateful to you, our 70-plus volunteer house assistants, board members, tutors and mentors. We also grateful because those volunteers, as well as more than 480 others have generously donated to keep us financially strong during the pandemic. Like Carlos, Abu and Issa, you refused to let a pandemic derail your commitment and compassion to the men at Viator House. And, as a result, we have good news in a difficult year.
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Thank you to the local Muslim Community for supporting Viator House by raising more than $56,000 during Ramadan, 2020.

Thank you to all those below who donated in 2020. If you donated, but can't find your name, please contact us and accept our apology for the error. Only because of you can we continue to offer hope, healing and opportunity.

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