

GRATEFUL HEARTS 2025

The
Global
Village
Project
Storybook



I left the mountains, high and far,
Boarded a plane with no seats, just a star.
People whispered, hearts went thump,
Hope kept beating, jump by jump.

Engines roared, the metal shook,
Clouds were close, the sky I took.
Months in the camps, days went slow.
But dreams of learning helped me grow.

Books in my bag, dreams in my chest,
Step by step, I tried my best.
Voices hummed, tents swayed light,
I found my way through day and night.

Shahida, GVP Alumni

THE PATH OF POWER IN EVERY REFUGEE GIRL



A NOTE FROM THE CEO



At GVP, no girl walks alone. Each student's journey is connected as one with many others, and you'll find those journeys here.

These pages hold powerful stories from our students, graduates, parents, teachers, and volunteers. Stories of courage, growth, and resilience. You'll hear a new student's reflection on her first days at GVP, and an alum's experience returning as a teacher. You'll meet a proud father watching his daughters flourish in the classroom, and the dedicated teachers and volunteers who make that possible.

Each voice offers a glimpse into the heart of our Village, and together, their stories form a beautiful song. That song is the power of GVP.

Every GVP student arrives with her own unique strengths. Too often, those strengths have been hidden by circumstance or trauma. Our mission is to help each girl rediscover her light: to find her strengths, claim her voice, and unlock her power.

The path of each GVP student is unique, but one thing is universal: she does not walk alone. She is surrounded by a Village of dedicated teachers, volunteers, mentors, and supporters who walk beside her, helping every girl find her path and chart her future.

So find a cozy chair, perhaps a warm cup of tea, and settle in with these stories. We're honored to share them with you and hope you'll feel inspired.

If these stories move you, we invite you to make a gift in support of GVP's mission, and to share this storybook with someone who believes in the power of every refugee girl.

Thank you for helping us ensure that no girl walks alone.

Allison

Allison Ezell,
CEO & Head of School



Make a Gift

THE COURAGE TO BEGIN AGAIN

The first step on every girl's path. Courage to step into the unknown, discovering the power that opens the way to possibilities.



POWER OF COURAGE

“ I can remember leaving my country. I was maybe three or four years old when we left Venezuela. It was my dad, my mom, and my brother. He was a baby. I felt sad and scared because we left all of my family. But we had to. They are still in Venezuela today.

In Venezuela, my dad owned a shop, my mom also did some work and sometimes she took care of us. First, we traveled to Peru. My dad started working in a manufacturing place where they make clothes. I did not like school in Peru. I can remember, in Peru, the ground was shaking, the Earth was moving, it did not feel safe. And so we left.

Next, we traveled to Ecuador. I enjoyed school there but it was hard for my father to make enough money to support our family. Again, we left. Finally, we came to the USA. It was eight months ago.

I started elementary school. This is where I met Esther. She comforted me with her friendship. I felt alone and lost. She gave me a keychain in the shape of a ladybug. I still carry it with me.

We made more friends. People helped us. They were nice and it made us to feel hope. One day, a woman from the church had good news, she helped us to find GVP. My parents were happy.

I want to go to GVP school because I want to get better in English.

It is important for me to be better, I want to be fluent in English. I still feel nervous about my speech. My dad says I should be journalist.

I want to be an artist. My favorite classes are Math and STEAM. I feel excited for school. I feel optimistic about my future.

Mariana, Form 1 Student

This is the power of courage. The start of a powerful journey. At GVP, teachers meet each girl right where she is, turning that first act of bravery into learning, confidence, and growth that carries her forward — and, one day, brings her back to guide others along the same path.



WORDS THAT OPEN DOORS

By Anne Garbarino
Lead Literacy Teacher



Meena is skipping down the hallway after lunch laughing with her friends, her long dark braid bouncing from under her hijab, eyes smiling at some joke in Dari. She leaves her friends and spots me heading from the library, and her smile returns, aimed right at me. “Miss, will you read with me today? I want to find my level.”

I want to say yes immediately. Usually, I have to invite students to read with me for this one-on-one assessment and am met with some post-lunch sluggishness. But instead I say, “I would love to read with you, but not yet. I still have a few more students to read with first. Soon we will read together.” She has asked every day for a week, but I need to focus on the students who have not asked—they may need a little push, but will benefit from seeing their progress.

Eventually, I will cave and bump Meena up my list of students. She has a determination that will serve her well in high school.

Right now she is more focused on her “reading level,” moving from one letter to the next on a scale of A to Z: a system we use to help students find books that fit their skills and see how much they’re growing as readers.

Watching students like Meena grow reminds me why we’ve worked so hard to strengthen our literacy program over the years. I’m grateful my fellow teachers and I could make programming changes over the years, like Guided Reading. Small class sizes and volunteers made it possible, and our community has always encouraged and backed it with trust in our teachers.

This year I’m so lucky to have Ehsoe, one of my former students, co-teaching in my classroom. Watching her stand where she once sat fills me with such joy. In talking with her, I’m humbled and deeply grateful

It warms my heart to see her teaching a lesson, connecting with students with the same warmth and care that once guided her. I am proud and inspired to see how far she has come and honored that she has returned to us for this part of her teaching life. Maybe, one day, Meena will do the same.

“ **Sometimes it is better to confirm that sheer will and persistence can achieve results. She is a wonderful model for her peers, and of what we strive to teach at GVP: self-advocacy and always reaching for your dreams.** ”



Meena choosing her next book.
Each new story opens another door.



Ehsoe, GVP alumni, now teaching assistant, reading beside her student: the story coming full circle.

POWER OF LEARNING

WE DO NOT WALK ALONE

By Suzanne Smitherman
Volunteer

Known to students as “Ms. Mama,” Suzanne volunteers across GVP classrooms, often alongside her daughter, Lead Math Teacher, Caroline Henry.



Volunteering at GVP has been one of the great joys of my life. I support teachers in their classrooms — including my daughter, Caroline, who teaches math — and each day I witness the quiet miracles that happen here.

A while ago, a refugee girl sat next to me and stared at her first test at GVP. Possibly it was her first written test ever. The question read: “*Where do you sit in class? A. Table or B. Desk.*” Ms. Johna, GVP’s newcomer teacher, had designed a language test that ensured success. The student moved her pencil toward the paper, then jerked it back with a sheepish smile. “*I can’t do it, Miss. I can’t decide.*”

After surviving war and being uprooted to this strange new place, the fear of failure was stifling, and my reassurance was little comfort. But amazing teachers and the GVP culture of support would be just what she needed.

Later that year, I was volunteering in STEAM class, where Ms. Danielle gave the girls motorized robot balls to program through a maze. For a test run, they sent them rolling and crashing down the hallway, a joyful frenzy. In the middle of it all was my once-reluctant test taker.

By now she was confident in school. She sent her robot crashing into a wall and back again, laughing freely. This child of war, once frozen by fear, was now in full command.

Other students watched. Teachers came out. They had never heard her laugh before. That day, she found her power, and it was beautiful to witness.

Moments like these remind me what makes GVP extraordinary. No girl walks alone here. Every step forward, every spark of confidence, every laugh, happens because she’s surrounded by a Village of support who believes in her power.

IN HER OWN WORDS...

**By Bathsheba
GVP Alumni**

At GVP, every student was paired with a mentor. I met Ms. Michelle when I was in Form 3, but she wasn't mine at first. My original mentor had to move away, and one day Ms. Michelle asked if I'd like her to be my new one. I said yes, not knowing that day would change my life.

Ms. Michelle became my mentor in 7th grade, and since then she has been like a second mom to me. She truly cares — not only about my education, but about every part of my life. My mother is a single mom who works full-time and speaks little English. We face many challenges navigating life in a new country, and Ms. Michelle has always been there for us. She helps with school forms, doctor's appointments, and everyday situations my mom can't manage alone.

Because English is my second language, I used to struggle with writing and speaking. Ms. Michelle practiced with me, word by word until I found confidence. She came to my soccer games, cheered whether we won or lost, and encouraged me to keep dreaming

She opened doors I never knew existed, showing me opportunities beyond my fears. Without her, I might not have believed in a brighter future.

That day she asked to be my mentor was the luckiest day of my life.



Michelle has been a volunteer and Mentor Program Coordinator at GVP for 15 years, connecting students with dedicated mentors who guide and support them.



“ I believe education is the key to succeed anywhere in the world, especially for immigrants.”

THEIR VOICES CARRY DREAMS

Reflections from Rafael
GVP Parent



When his daughters first came to Global Village Project, they were quiet and hesitant. Today, they read and write in English, speak confidently in public, and translate for their parents at appointments and meetings.

Their father's eyes fill with joy and pride when he talks about the first family conference he attended at GVP and the moment he saw their writing in English for the first time.

"I was surprised to see what my daughters had been writing," he said. "It gave me such joy. I could not imagine they could write those beautiful sentences in English."

For Mr. Rafael— born and raised in Congo — education had always felt like a dream just out of reach. The father of Esperanza (Form 1) and Ester (Form 3) never had the chance to pursue schooling growing up in poverty and instability.

"Getting a higher education was my dream, but I was not able to make it come true. I believe education is the key to succeed anywhere in the world, especially for immigrants. With it, my daughters will gain what they need to help others and to become very important in the community."

When asked to share a moment that made him proud, he didn't hesitate.

"Last week, we went to the hospital. I was not able to understand. No interpreter was available, it was one of my daughters who interpreted the whole conversation between me and the doctor. I was so proud."

In that moment, he realized how much his daughters have grown, not only in language, but in confidence and responsibility. Their education has opened doors, helping the whole family navigate life in a new country with greater ease and dignity.

Through his daughters' education at GVP, Mr. Rafael sees his own dreams taking shape. Their voices, once quiet, now carry the hope and future of their family:

"When they speak, they speak for our whole family. They carry us into the future."

FULL CIRCLE: THE POWER OF LEGACY

From Mae La Refugee Camp to earning her master's degree, Meh Sod's journey of learning became a legacy of teaching.

By Meh Sod
GVP Alumni & Teaching Assistant

“ In the early years of my life, I could often be found in Mae La Refugee Camp in Thailand, playing with friends under my big bamboo trees. I said yes to the things I liked and no to the things I didn't. For homework, I recited poems and practiced my times tables in the Karen language. On Saturday mornings, I caught colorful dragonflies. Some Sundays, I went to church. One rule I never broke was going past the fences around the camp. But sneaking into my big brother's room to read letters from girls didn't seem wrong. Sometimes, I complained about the food my mother gave me. Every day, it was rice and fish paste for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But these were the ways of life I knew best.

After years in the camp, my family was resettled to the United States. At my new home in America, I saw squirrels running through the pine trees instead of my friends. I stayed up late at night wondering if I could ever find my way back to them. I was lost behind too many streets and signs. I couldn't even tell what I liked or didn't like because I didn't understand the language.

Later in life, I realized that was just the first challenge. My journey was followed by learning that “Meh” was who I was, when all I had ever known was “Mehsodpaw.” The new things I learned to fit into the culture weren't always accepted in my home culture. To put it into words, my later challenges grew into feelings of loss, longing, and questions about identity as I realized the effects of coming from a war-torn country.

GVP played a huge role during my journey of discovering my identity. Not only did my loving and patient teachers help me understand words in different ways, but they also taught me how to use them, especially when I had just started at a first-grade level as a 14 year old.

GVP has not only helped me navigate my journey of establishing my identity through the words the school taught me, but also through my wonderful mentor, Ms. Mary Lou, who supported me in moving forward with my education, even earning my Master of Arts in Education, which I completed last semester at University of Northern Colorado.

After years of growing, learning, and dreaming, I've come full circle: back to GVP, the place that helped me find my voice. Today, I not only want to stand beside the GVP girls as their teaching assistant, but also to show them that they can take ownership of their story and take it wherever they want it to be, no matter where it began.

A former GVP student, Meh Sod grew up in the Mae La Refugee Camp in Thailand before resettling in the U.S. She earned a B.A. in English-Creative Writing from Agnes Scott College and a Master of Arts in Teaching from the University of Northern Colorado, and has since returned to GVP as a teaching assistant.

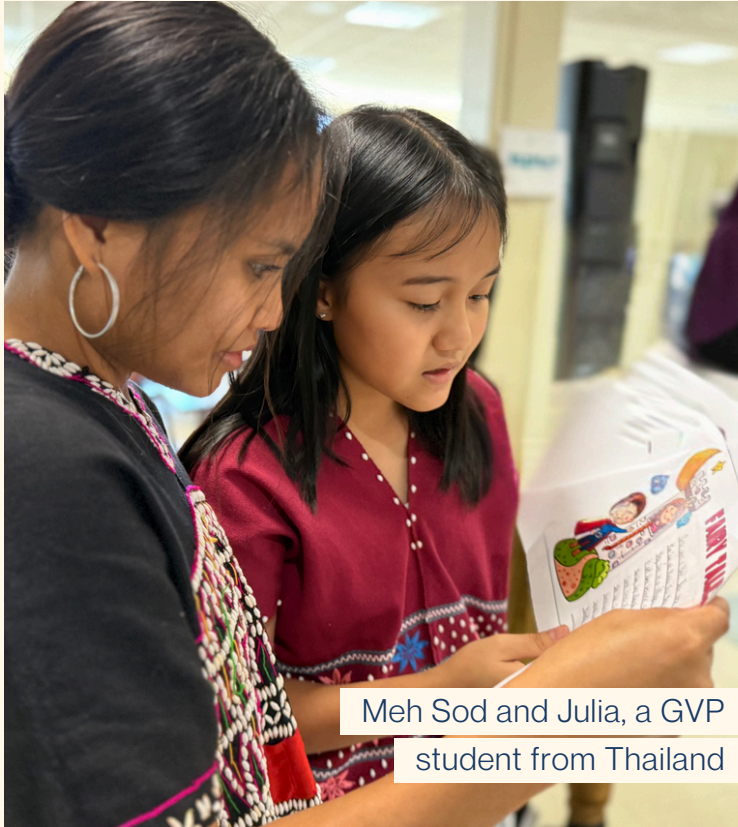
Possibilities



Meh Sod and her family
Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand



Meh Sod Graduation,
University of Northern Colorado



Meh Sod and Julia, a GVP
student from Thailand

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

Believing in GVP's mission, and in the girls whose power inspires it every day.

I feel deeply grateful to have experienced the full lifecycle of GVP from multiple perspectives: as a volunteer leading Agnes Scott lunches, a tutor in study hall and Science, a chaperone for overnight trips to Camp Wahsega and the Hike Inn, and also as Board Chair.

As a mother of two boys and the daughter of Korean War refugees, each day I enter the GVP school is truly a gift—to be surrounded by the energy and promise of these vibrant young women, never knowing what surprises await.

I cherish these moments, such as the day when Divine sang K-pop songs beautifully during our entire walk from school to Agnes Scott, or at Camp Wahsega, where students from Afghanistan pointed to the clear night sky, teaching us the names of constellations in Dari and Pashto. These moments reveal the path of power in every refugee girl: the power of cultural pride, intellectual curiosity, and unshakeable resilience.

As Board Chair, I have the immense honor of collaborating with talented leaders to set audacious strategic goals that match the boundless potential of these incredible young women. Together, we are ensuring that every girl walks her own path to power.



Sonya Ko,
Board Chair

Every step in our Village powers the journey & the power of every refugee girl

Every refugee girl who walks into GVP carries untapped power.

Education unlocks it.

The Village sustains it.

And gratitude fuels it forward.

Gratitude to the girls, who choose courage every day.

Gratitude to the teachers, who open doors.

Gratitude to the mentors, volunteers, alumni, and partners, who hold the path steady.

Thanks to you, her power will never be silenced.

Thanks to you, her education will not be interrupted.

Thanks to you, her future is full of possibilities.



INVEST IN GVP

Ways to Support:

1. Donate Through Our Website



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2. Write a Check, Donate Stocks, or Give through a Donor Advisor Fund

Mail checks to: Global Village Project - P.O. Box 1548 Decatur, GA 30031

Contact: Lane Strickland at Istrickland@globalvillageproject.org or Natalie Huyghe nhuyghe@globalvillageproject.org

3. Turn Taxes into Scholarships



Through the Georgia Tax Credit Program

Scan the QR code to get started!

Turn your taxes into free tuition scholarships for refugee girls at GVP.

A special thank you to **Graphic Solutions Group** for their invaluable support in printing Grateful Hearts. Their generous donation has made it possible for us to share our message and stories, and we're deeply grateful for their partnership in our mission.

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Global Village Project

PO Box 1548

Decatur, GA 30031

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