

Forging Opportunities for Refugees in America Acquires Historic Former Northtown Library Building from City of Chicago

Restored building to serve scores of additional recently arrived refugees

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Opportunities for Refugees in America (FORA) – a West Ridge, Chicago, non-profit organization that ensures that newly-arrived refugee children are

provided with a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy so that they can thrive in school and beyond – is delighted to announce the acquisition of the historic Northtown library building at 6435 N. California Ave. from the City of Chicago.



On the left, FORA's new empowerment center in the former Northtown library building. On the right, FORA's current storefront.

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As more and more refugees arrive in Chicago from Afghanistan and Burma and all over the world, we want to make sure that all of them can access the educational support they need to succeed.”

Michael O'Connor, Managing Director of FORA

The 11,700 sq. ft. mid-century modern gem, located next door to FORA's current empowerment center, near the corner of W. Devon and N. California avenues, will become a beacon of learning and literacy for generations of refugee children and their families. FORA aims to complete renovations and move into the new building this year, enabling it to provide enhanced educational programs to scores more students of diverse nationalities.

The former Northtown library building has a rich history as a hub for language learning and literacy, having served as a cherished resource for immigrant and refugee families since its construction in 1962. Over the years, the library

provided a space for generations of first-generation refugee and immigrant students to learn how to read, write, and do math. Its doors welcomed individuals from diverse faiths, ethnicities, and backgrounds, fostering a sense of community, intellectual growth, and multi-ethnic respect. Closed in 2018, the library was replaced by the new Northtown Library and Apartments on Chicago's Western Ave. The new library and home to affordable senior housing apartments was

designed by global architecture and design firm Perkins&Will and has won numerous awards.

Now Perkins&Will has generously committed its pro bono services to FORA for repurposing and revitalizing the shuttered old Northtown library, demonstrating its “above and beyond” dedication to empowering communities and fostering educational opportunities. Salas O’Brien, the employee-owned engineering and facility planning firm, known for its cutting-edge focus on energy sustainability, is also providing its services pro bono; Rebecca Mati is serving pro bono as FORA’s in-house advisor; and Thomas Raines is serving as our pro bono attorney. This dedicated A-list team is ensuring that the building will provide an inclusive and nurturing environment that meets the unique needs of Chicago’s refugee students. The building itself is already fully paid for by generous supporters of Chicago’s refugee community, and we are energetically working on raising the money needed to complete the rehabilitation of the building. All donations are 501(c)3 tax deductible.

FORA opened in 2019 with just twelve refugee students. Prior to the opportunity to purchase the library, FORA had expanded to 60 students, cobbling together a series of storefront rentals in the West Ridge area. But with a waitlist of approximately 100 students, and without the space to serve them, FORA acted decisively – buying the former library. When the newly repurposed space reopens later this year, we will be serving more than 100 students a day, two hours a day, five days a week, year-round, providing approximately 50,000 hours a year of intensive individualized tutoring, focusing on building foundational reading and math skills for refugee students who have missed years of schooling or are first-generation readers.

FORA’s goal is to serve 150 refugee students a day at this location, changing the lives not only of the students served, but also of hundreds of FORA volunteer tutors. Within the walls of a once abandoned library, refugee students from Burma, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Syria, Bhutan, and Eritrea will gather together with scores of Chicago-area volunteers to pursue knowledge and build community -- honoring the motivation behind the creation of libraries and bringing the story of the former Northtown Library joyously full circle.

About FORA: FORA offers individualized after-school High Impact Tutoring (HIT) to refugee children to build foundational reading and math skills, empowering them to succeed academically, so that school becomes meaningful and that learning becomes a joy. FORA exists because its volunteers, staff and supporters believe that literacy and numeracy are human rights and that our newest neighbors deserve meaningful access to such rights. For more information, please visit www.refugeefora.org.

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