

The Detroit News homestyle

Friday, March 10, 2017

Section H

Let your decor bloom

Breathe some spring air
into your home. 10H

MAUREEN FEIGHAN

Newcomers get
a welcome with
conversation. 5H

GLENN HAEGE

Windstorm reminds
us to be prepared. 12H



**FOLLOW
HOMESTYLE ONLINE**
FACEBOOK.COM/
DETROITNEWSHOMESTYLE
INSTAGRAM.COM/
TDN_HOMESTYLE

Juggling Act

Welcoming immigrants can be easy as small talk

Melanie Grund of Berkley approached five men at a table in a classroom at a Troy church late last week, smiled and sat down.

Four of the men, whom Grund had never met before, were from Iraq. The fifth was from Mexico.



**MAUREEN
FEIGHAN**

Together, they had a job to do: making small talk.

"How long have you been here?" Grund asked one man.

"Six months," he said quietly.

"Six cold months," said Melanie. "But it'll be warmer soon."

Grund volunteers with Welcoming Michigan. Founded in 2012, the group lives up to its name by welcoming refugees and immigrants in Metro Detroit in various ways, including helping them practice their English. The men were part of an English as a Second Language class offered by Samaritas, the state's leading refugee resettlement agency.

For Metro Detroiters struggling to make their voices heard in a sharply divided political climate, Grund's volunteer work goes beyond writing a check, protesting or calling her local senator.

It's a tangible way she and others are making a difference in the lives of people starting new lives in the United States. And for Grund, who has been volunteering with Welcoming Michigan for more than four years, it's her favorite day of the month.

"I think I get out of it so much more than I give," said Grund. "I feel like I learn so much."

The ESL class draws more than three dozen students from countries such as Iraq, China, Russia, Nepal, Mexico and Russia. There are young families — Faith Lutheran in Troy provides child care and Samaritas offers a bus since transportation is such an issue for refugees — and seniors who've been coming four days a week for years.

Sabah Kano of Sterling Heights, who fled Iraq for the United States because of religious persecution in 2007, has been coming almost daily for 10 years.

"I come here every time to learn one word, and I do," said Kano, 74.

Ever since President Donald Trump imposed a travel ban against refugees from seven majority-Muslim countries — he modified the order on Monday — Samaritas has seen a spike in the number of people asking about how they can help. And while the number of refugees arriving in Metro Detroit is down, Samaritas



Maureen Feighan/The Detroit News

Melanie Grund chats with immigrants from Iraq and Mexico at an English as a Second Language class in Troy last week. She is a volunteer with Welcoming Michigan.

president Vickie Thompson-Sandy said they still have plenty of work to do to settle those already here.

The agency first finds each refugee affordable, stable housing where he or she can integrate into the community. But within 90 days, refugees are expected to be self-sufficient. That includes a job.

Carmen Bordea, a program coordinator for Samaritas, said one of the easiest things Metro Detroiters can do to support the region's immigrants and refugees is to simply reach out. Many are embarrassed about their English skills and view Americans as superior. A little small talk can go a long way to boost their morale, said Bordea, who herself emigrated from Romania in 1998.

"They're afraid," said Bordea. "Just going up and saying 'Hello' makes such a difference ... Once you say 'Hi,' you remove that barrier."

Back in the Faith Lutheran classroom at Troy, roughly eight Welcoming Michigan volunteers were seated at tables, making chit-chat. Worksheets labeled "Birthdays & Anniversaries" were spread out on each table.

At her table, Grund chatted about the upcoming St. Patrick's Day Parade in Detroit and the differences between raising boys and girls. She asked one young man with a baseball cap about how long he'd been in the United States.

"Two weeks," he said.

"Two weeks?" said Grund. "Wow! Welcome."

Nearby, Kano chatted with another volunteer. The retiree said there is no comparison between life in Iraq and the United States.

"I can't compare," he said. "It's the best."