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# SPOTLIGHT



Insaf (center) and daughters Saida and Selma



Afrah



Inna and daughter Liliana

## Embracing Diversity

Inna Makarskaya, Insaf Khouaja and Afrah Alfareh embraced a new environment when they moved to America: new cultures, new customs, new landscapes -- and a new language.

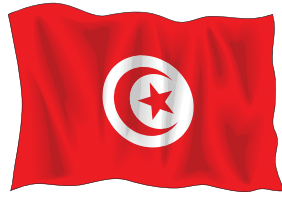
Each of them moved halfway around the world from Russia, Tunisia and Yemen, respectively, to join their husbands in the Illinois Valley. They began raising families, and enrolled at IVCC.

Here, they found a college system that's unlike any at home: it's affordable and accessible, doesn't require hours of travel to attend, is filled with helpful instructors and staff, and is preparing them for careers in nursing (Inna and Insaf) and elementary education (Afrah).

Though all three are multilingual (Inna speaks three languages, Insaf, four, and Afrah, two) and familiar with English, studying in their adopted language brings special challenges.



USA



TUNISIA



RUSSIA



YEMEN

Like their classmates, they absorb new terms and concepts specific to their programs, but their comprehension as non-native speakers can be derailed by rapid-fire delivery or unfamiliar sentence structure or different-sounding accents.

“It’s hard to explain what is the difference to study in a different language. Only if you’ve tried to do it can you understand how you have to convert it in your brain two times,” said Inna. “I speak Russian – and I **THINK** in Russian. I don’t think in English, and that’s the challenge.”

“Sometimes it is hard for me to connect with people. My accent is not like theirs,” said Afrah, who remembers tearful moments of frustration that she couldn’t understand what was happening around her.

Even the simplest conversation takes courage, Inna said. “I had a fear even to have a conversation to go shopping.”

Dictionaries and translator tools leave out much. Insaf describes herself as speaking “book’ English,” and explains, “I don’t know every word or all meanings.”

Even with translators, says Afrah, “there’s a lot I can’t come up with.” But, she added proudly, she relies less on translators.

Covid-era remote learning threw things into a tailspin, isolating them from classmates and instructors and depositing them in virtual labs.

“It’s easier going when I can see it” live, Insaf says.

“In the real world, you don’t pause a program to decide what (surgical) tool to use,” Inna observed. “If you had a question you could always ask (classmates or instructors) but you don’t have that opportunity in simulation.” The upside, she chuckles: remote learning shortened her daily commute to just down the hall. “You can get up in the morning and come in your pajamas and study right away!”

IVCC is a key in realizing their American dreams, and it also introduced Insaf and Afrah – though not on campus. When they met in Walmart, “we found out we study at the same place!” Afrah said. Their friendship flourished.

“She is like my sister. She means a lot to me,” Afrah said. And Insaf adds, “If I have a bad day, I call her, and she will understand. She knows!”

Their families are close. Two of their children (Insaf’s middle child and Afrah’s first) were born the same years their mothers became naturalized citizens.

*“I say to myself: I am not permitted to fail because everything is around me. Nothing is missing that would make me fail a class. Back home, I would never have been surrounded with so much!” - Insaf*

When nearest relatives are scattered halfway around the world, video chats or phone calls aren't the same as being there. Family illness or holiday gatherings compound the loneliness, Insaf said.

She takes comfort in her parents' advice: "They told me, 'You are far away and don't have father and mother nearby, but you take care of (your patients) like they are your father and mother.'"

In America, choosing to make a difference led all three women to switch gears and careers. Insaf, who holds a bachelor's in English and loves science, turned to nursing. Inna's childhood visit to her hospitalized mother and watching nurses in action turned the economics/accounting major to nursing. Afrah always dreamed of teaching children.

Insaf is excited to serve her new country through nursing. "I'm looking forward to becoming a nurse that saves lives, that makes a difference!"

Inna is "happy finally to study and do something I really love! In the United States if you put in the effort, you can be successful in any field you choose!"

America is a land of opportunity, hummingbirds – which Inna loves – and wide horizons. "Here I have a sense of freedom. You can see as far as you can see!"

Higher education wasn't easy in the countries they left: unsettled by war, expensive, lacking technology and absent support systems. Nothing compared to the American community college system.

"Everybody wants to study in America," Afrah said, adding she's thankful to be one of the lucky ones who do.

Insaf was overwhelmed by the new system, uncertain where to begin. She started in the Learning Commons, and discovered that more help was everywhere she turned. Now she's following the nursing graduates she admired through the program.

In the process, she's teaching her three children to work hard and take nothing for granted. "I work and go to school, and it's for them, so they can carry on their education and go to university. That's how it gets you in good shape for the future. Education is everything."

## ADVICE TO ANYBODY IN ANY LANGUAGE WHO HAS A DREAM ...

- **"My daughter is at an age to have tantrums. I always try to teach her not to give up. Do not get mad so easily – try one more time." -- Inna**
- **"Never say that you cannot do it. You WILL do it. It's not easy being far away in another country and starting from scratch, or even for an American student. But determination and being an optimist will get you through everything!" -- Insaf**



## ONE CAMPUS, MANY CULTURES

**216** Students indicated their primary language was other than English

**146** Students indicated their native language was other than English

**75** Students served by IVCC's English as a Second Language Program

Languages: Albanian, Arabic, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, German, Gujarati, French, Italian, Czech, Russian, Tagalog

Sources: Admissions & Records office and ESL Program Fall2020/Spring2021 Semesters

## INNA'S STUDY STRATEGIES

- Pair up with a classmate as study buddies, compare notes and teach each other.
- Don't study "like a fanatic." Take a break, focus. "I study in the morning and after a walk to get some fresh air, I come back and study."
- Don't procrastinate! Use all the resources you have. "The college provides all kinds of support, and you need to ask for help if something doesn't work well for you. There will be those people who can help you!"
- Review after each test. "I want to understand, whether my answer was right or I wasn't sure. It helps fix your knowledge."

## COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT YOU!

- Their husbands, who share the childcare, support their ambitions, appreciate their battle to juggle motherhood, college and jobs. They ask "why not?" rather than "why?"
- Joan Horwitz, who came to tutor Afrah in the English as a Second Language program and stayed to be a friend. She "comes to visit when she doesn't teach me."
- The children who ask how that test went as they head off to school. The toddler who is so excited by mom's laptop and textbooks she won't put them down.
- Instructors, like Amber Knowlton and Anna Bruch, who make sure students comprehend, are prepared for exams, and who review and encourage.
- DSO coordinator Tina Hardy, who arranges extended test time for them all, and who advises and listens, and who coaches in maintaining a can-do attitude.
- "Everybody, from front desk to library to instructors, who don't hesitate to help you." -- Afrah
- Professional colleagues who let them share some of their experiences for practice.

### THE LAST WORD

*iya ochen schastliva!*

Russian: I'm very happy!

Inna

*saida!*

Arabic: Happy!

Afrah

*ana fakoura binafsi!*

Arabic: I'm proud of myself!

Insaf