UAlbany online science courses for refugee Syria medical students

By Paul Grondahl  Updated 7:06 am, Wednesday, August 31, 2016

ADVERTISEMENT
Albany

Languishing for years as political prisoners in an Iranian jail on sham charges of attempting to overthrow the government, brothers Dr. Kamiar Alaei and Dr. Arash Alaei endured harsh treatment because they found hope in the act of learning and teaching.

The imprisoned medical doctors, pioneers in the treatment of HIV and AIDS in repressive regimes, scrounged up old textbooks, organized classes and spread a feeling of optimism inside the notorious Evin prison in Tehran. Despite shackles and bars, their minds remained unfettered.

Now, the Alaeis, who are the recipients of international humanitarian awards, are paying it forward. With the help of colleagues at UAlbany — where the brothers created the Global Institute for Health and Human Rights — they've developed an online program of science classes in Arabic for former medical students in war-torn Syria.

The courses are delivered over cellphones with a mobile app platform under development by UAlbany computer programmers.

The Banks are Sweating

The banks don't want you to know about this.

So far, 320 displaced medical students have signed up for the free online courses. They are among an estimated 200,000 Syrian university students whose education was interrupted by the war.

A UNESCO study found that more than 90 percent of college-age refugees and migrants around the world had cellphones, which serve as their lifeline.

The students can be anywhere. They're scattered across the embattled country and
beyond, from the besieged city of Aleppo to relatively safe zones just over the border in Turkey and Jordan.

If they are in danger of gunfire or mortars, the students dart through rubble-strewn streets — cellphones safe in their pockets still playing that week’s lecture in Arabic through ear buds.

"It reminded us how hungry these young people are for knowledge and to keep learning," Dr. Arash Alaei said. "Every day can seem like a year to them. We must not let them lose their hope. These are great minds we cannot waste."

The students’ lives were upended by a five-year civil war in Syria that has left more than 250,000 dead and 11 million displaced. The students were forced to suspend their medical courses after the fighting shut down universities.

In the UAlbany program, which began in June with a course on genetics and a few other medical-related science courses, live online sessions have been interrupted by explosions, emergency sirens and power outages.

"We're all volunteering our free time out of a passion to help these Syrian students," said Dr. Arash Alaei, 47, who in 2011 after three years of imprisonment was released following a vigorous international campaign by physicians and activists. "So many people helped us when we were in prison. This is our chance to help other people."

"We never lost hope in prison because we taught classes and many people around the world were working to get us released," said Dr. Kamiar Alaei, 42, of UAlbany’s Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy. He was released from prison in 2010 after two years. "We are trying to keep hope alive in these medical students as they flee war."
Our program is sending them a strong message they have not been forgotten."

The Alaei brothers, both of whom teach in UAlbany's School of Public Health, praised their colleagues' willingness to volunteer to put their idea into action after just two months of planning.

"Other universities are still talking about doing something like this, but UAlbany took action," Kamiar Alaei said. "Action speaks louder than words."

The program hit home for Sumayya Alchalabi, a doctoral student in biomedical sciences, who was displaced from her home in Mosul, Iraq, by warfare. She sought asylum in Albany in 2014 with her husband and family members who had fled to a refugee camp in Kurdistan.

"I understand their situation and all the difficulties and obstacles they've overcome," said Alchalabi, who is bilingual and who teaches sessions via live video in Arabic, interspersed with medical terms in English. A dozen or more students huddled around a laptop screen in a darkened basement, where they took cover from bombings. When alarms sounded, a few excused themselves to treat the wounded.

"The effort everyone has put into this is phenomenal. We're bringing challenging courses from Albany to Aleppo," said professor Doug Conklin, whose Introduction to Genetics course at UAlbany is videotaped and later translated into Arabic. He leaves out puns and jokes likely to be lost in translation.

A major component of the courses is the accompanying intensive English-language tutoring.

"It's very rewarding to see the community of Syrian students building and to see how they interact and help each other," said Krassi Rangelov, a faculty member in UAlbany's Intensive English Language Program and a volunteer teacher.

"It's very inspiring," agreed Amy Bonser Feldman, a colleague in the IELP program and also a volunteer teacher. "They face so many obstacles and yet they persevere." "This project is rewarding for them as well as for us," said Ibtihal Altalhi, an intern with the Alaeis' institute who emigrated from Saudi Arabia and earned a master's degree in
political science from UAlbany in 2015. She is a project coordinator who also assists with Arabic translation.

"We're helping them continue the education they deserve," said Dhanisha Nandigana, a sophomore molecular biology major and an intern who sets up audio-visual equipment to record lectures.

In mid-September, the Alaeis have scheduled a conference call with officials at the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations as they seek funding to expand the program. They have an eye to taking their program global.

The Alaei brothers are fond of a Persian saying: "If you want to achieve a big goal, you must swim in the ocean."

Their ocean is a cellphone, an internet connection, passionate volunteers and minds that refuse to be imprisoned.

pgrondahl@timesunion.com • 518-454-5623 • @PaulGrondahl

© 2017 Hearst Communications, Inc.