



"This family bursts with joy, love and gratitude," says Marian Yoder Catania (back right) who, along with Pattie Riordan (front row, second from right) poses with the Syrian family they have welcomed to Milwaukee. "And we are so, so thankful. They have blessed us beyond measure."

HOLY ANGELS WOMEN

live up to their name

Members of the Holy Angels Academy Class of '62 open their hearts to a new family – from halfway around the globe.

In 1958, seven young women from metro Milwaukee began their tenure at Holy Angels Academy.

They graduated four years later in 1962, went off to college, started working, had careers. Most got married, raised families, welcomed grandchildren, served their communities and lived their faith.

Then, in the fall of 2014, they began doing something none of them could have imagined.

They took that faith and caring spirit and extended it halfway around the globe.

It all started in 2012 when the women got together to plan their 50th Holy Angels Academy reunion. After it wrapped, they kept getting together. They'd do lunch, dinner, movie nights. They loved working as a team, organizing, bringing people together.

Then one day, one of the women, Mary Ward, proposed a new endeavor.

"I told everyone, 'Let's get together for lunch. I have an idea, but I'm not going to tell you what it is.'

"We sat down, and I told them I wanted to adopt a family from Syria and that I wanted us to do it together."

There had been a mass exodus from Syria and Iraq taking place, Ward explained.

Her friends were aware: Italy was being inundated. Hungary was closing its borders.

"No one was taking these people but Germany and Jordan."

While the world saw a massive problem with no solution, Ward saw the faces of children and parents who were powerless to change their situation.

"To be a refugee means you can't go back to your home, ever," says Ward. "These people have lost everything.

"And they were dying in the ocean, most of them searching in vain, hoping to be taken in."

The other women needed little convincing. For many of them, that has to do with their Catholic Christian faith.

“In addition to each of us having our own feelings about taking action, Pope Francis has called for compassion and generosity to refugees,” says Ward. “We take that literally.”

In addition to Ward, the core team of “sponsors” would include Holy Angels alums Anne Catalane, Marian Catania Yoder, Carol Seelman Johnstone, Connie Wittig, Pattie Riordan, and Madeleine Mace Klug.

Hoping to embrace

“We hoped there was a role for us to be a warm, welcoming presence that would, in a very human way, embrace a family upon their arrival,” says Ward.

There is definitely a role for people like them, says Mira Hayes, assistant to the director of the Refugee Resettlement program at Catholic Charities, who Ward connected with early on. Catholic Charities is one of three refugee resettlement agencies in Milwaukee.

“People like Mary and her group can really supplement the work we do. They expand the effect we have on the refugees, augmenting our services. They help the refugees to integrate faster and better.

“What they do is extremely helpful for the families.”

The Holy Angels women needed to find out what role they could play, what agencies took refugees in, what the different processes were. They started with the thought that they would “adopt” a Catholic family, but soon dropped that idea.

“Religion is inconsequential to the State Department,” says Ward. “So we couldn’t say we wanted to adopt a Catholic family and, as Christians, we knew we were ready to help anyone and everyone.”

Mary learned a lot from Catholic Charities about vetting procedures for refugees. From the time they apply for resettlement to the time they arrive in the United States – usually about two years – five different organizations have vetted them: the United Nations, the National Counter-Terrorism Center, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department.

“They even check that the children are the actual children of the parents,” says Hayes.

Hayes says resettlement agencies receive advance notice of refugees coming to Milwaukee anywhere from four weeks to only about three days before they arrive.

Catholic Charities’ intake role encompasses virtually all of the refugees’ physical needs. The agency finds them housing, enrolls children in school, coordinates English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, gets them to medical and dental appointments, and even helps them secure Social Security numbers. Catholic Charities resettled more than 600 people in 2016.

Preparing the way

While waiting to learn who their adopted family would be, Mary emailed other Holy Angels alumnae for monetary donations, which went through Catholic Charities. Many classmates rounded up furniture and household necessities – enough to ultimately furnish a seven-room house.

“This is why we consider ourselves a team – because with everyone who pitched in, we are really a group of 30 women, along with numerous husbands, doing this.”

Then, one day in April 2016 – more than two years after the quest to adopt a family began – the group was told a family of six was on its way.

“We thought, ‘Oh, that’s a big family!’” says Ward.

But that family never came, nor did the next family of nine the group heard was coming.

The would-be adopters learned again and again the unpredictability of the refugee intake situation.

Hayes explains that many times documentation or paperwork from an embassy not matching at the airport can cause an eleventh-hour halt to relocation.

But, finally, the family they would adopt was identified.

“It was the biggest one yet,” says Ward.

(continued)

ALUMNAE

CHANGING THE



Mary gives thanks

Holy Angels alumnae Mary Ward says the earthly angels surrounding Turki and Aisha are too numerous to mention – but there are three women who have been of indispensable help.

“Maysoun, a native of Jerusalem and their main connection with the Muslim community, has been indispensable, as has Sheila, who speaks Arabic and volunteers with Ma’ruf, one of the social service agencies. Then there’s Maria, who helps the family every Sunday with English. They are all amazing, and we couldn’t do the things we do without them.

“We have found that it truly does take a village.”

The Refugee Resettlement program at Catholic Charities resettled more than 600 people in 2016.

“Pope Francis has called for compassion and generosity for refugees. We take that literally.”

– MARY WARD,
HA '58

“And we were elated.”

At last, America

In the Fall of 2016, the Milwaukee Archdiocese received word that a Syrian family of 13 – father Turki, mother Aisha and their 11 children ages one to 16 – was on its way to Milwaukee.

On September 28, at 8 o'clock in the evening, the Holy Angels women and several of their husbands welcomed “their” family at Mitchell International Airport. Three Catholic Charities workers, two of whom spoke Arabic, officially received the family and began intake procedures.

“They were so tired, just shell shocked from everything they'd been through,” says Ward. “But they were so gracious, and they were so relieved to be here.”

Before arriving at the airport, the women had found the Arabic translation for “Welcome to America” on their smartphones.

“We held our phones up, along with some little American flags.”

Ward finds it difficult to describe how she felt that night.

“Small,” she says. “I just felt small.”

“We don't really have a clue what these people go through. We are a very small part of what is an amazing effort.”

Life now

Following many warm embraces and quickly snapped photos, the Catholic Charities staffers took the family to transitional housing near one of its facilities on Milwaukee's west side.

The next two weeks, says Ward, were spent finding them permanent housing, teaching them to use a washer and dryer, going to the grocery store, learning the practicalities of their new life.

In mid-October, Catholic Charities moved the family to a seven-room house on Milwaukee's south side.

Life for the family now continues to be one huge learning curve, says Ward – figuring out transportation, school, learning more English. Two months after their arrival, Turki was still seeking work. He is being helped to learn how to use public transportation, as he does not drive.

Blessings abound, says Ward. All the school-age children are settled into Milwaukee Public Schools. The two youngest children are at home with Aisha.

And the Holy Angels women?

“We have come to see our role now as



Marian Catania Yoder, HA '62 communicates with mom Aisha via a translation app on her smartphone, while eight-year-old Nisrine looks on. Such modern technology has been an invaluable tool in communicating about the simplest aspects of daily life.

getting the kids into the community – whatever we can do to help them assimilate into this culture,” says Marian Catania Yoder. “We go to their house twice a week to play with the kids, speak a little English, do art projects. Our role is to stay open to seeing what they need most from us.”

Marian says Connie Wittig, one of the core group, volunteers at the St. Casimir food pantry on Milwaukee's east side and has helped the family to get food there once a month – basics like produce and meat.

“It all helps.”

All once in this place

The women see parallels between Turki and Aisha's situation and the time their own forebears came to this country, knowing nothing about America.

“We've talked about how it was the same for our grandparents – Irish, German, whatever,” says Marian.

“Dad went off to work. He would pick up English. Mom would be at home. It was not uncommon for our grandmothers not to learn English. We think about the difficulty of this kind of situation, and we try to be there for Aisha and the children.”

Arriving 150 years later does have some advantages. Hussein, 16, the eldest son, is a gung-ho techie, Marian says, and he has

a voice-activated app on his phone that translates the spoken word.

“We can talk in a very basic way. It is really a delight to be able to communicate.”

Strengthened by strong women

Mary Ward ponders this road she's taken with her Holy Angels sisters.

“Thinking about where this all came from, we realized when we were getting ready for our reunion that we had one thing we all really treasured.

“That was our Holy Angels education.

“We were taught by such strong women who believed in themselves as people who made a difference. Because of those nuns, we knew from day one that we could do anything. That's what they instilled in us.

“We were taught by such strong women who believed in themselves as people who made a difference... We knew from day one that we could do anything. That's what they instilled in us.”

“The mission has remained the same – to prepare young women to go forth and live a life that will make a difference.”

So while they couldn't imagine their adopted family's struggle, or what it's like to be more than 6,000 miles from home, the Holy Angels women, Class of '62, knew they could do something to help.

“We couldn't imagine their journey. But we're so glad we can help.”