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IMPORTANT DATES

Board of Education Meetings

Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021

7 p.m.

Administration Building

1220 Howard St.

Visit [kalamazoopublicschools.com/boardmeetings](https://www.kalamazoopublicschools.com/boardmeetings) for more information

Nov. 2

PreK–12 No School

Nov. 19 and 22

Grades 9–12 Half Day

Nov. 23–24

PreK–12 No School

Nov. 24

No County Programs

Nov. 25–26

Thanksgiving Break

MORE STORIES ON
ESL/BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Refugee Aid Needed

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Congolese Family
Shares Story

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Afghan Refugee Finds
Success with ESL

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Enroll in ESL

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ESL Program Recognizes, Builds on Special Talents of Bilingual Students

Wessam Abdelaziz understands why some parents don't feel that their children belong in English as a Second Language and bilingual classes — he didn't. After he and his family moved to Kalamazoo and enrolled his son in KPS, his son was identified as a candidate for ESL services after completing the home language survey and the ESL assessment process.

"Why? He was born here. We've only visited our home country twice since he was born. We try to have him be fluent in our native language — Arabic — but he is more comfortable in English. Why does he have to be an English language learner?" said Abdelaziz, who is a doctoral



Arcadia Elementary School ESL teacher Mohammed Mohammed helps third-grader Shamah Kabu work on reading a story about using math while making pizza.

candidate in Evaluation, Measurement, and Research and the new coordinator of English as a Second Language, World Lan-

guages and Bilingual Services for Kalamazoo Public Schools.

But talking to the ESL teacher helped him reach the conclusion that the program could benefit his son. While his son's speaking and listening skills were fine, his reading and writing, the other two domains of ESL, were not as strong.

"He needed a little help with reading," Abdelaziz said. "He was not into books that much."

Now, however, after several years in the program, "he is loving books. That's the best benefit I can recall. He sees the importance of reading and I see the skills he has drawing inferences from the texts. I found the value-added element of having this support."

His son sometimes balks at being pulled out of his regu-

(continued on page 9)

KPS Preparing to Welcome Resettlers from Afghanistan, Congo

About 150 Afghan refugees were expected to begin resettling in the Kalamazoo area beginning in October. While those refugees have been highlighted in the media, Kalamazoo was also expecting to see an influx of Congo refugees during the same period. For Kalamazoo Public Schools, planning how to meet the needs of refugee children —

many of whom come into the area as unaccompanied minors — means ESL and bilingual staff have been busy planning how to assist students not only learn a new language but also get acclimated to a new culture. While social agencies such as Samaritas and Bethany Christian Services will handle many of the needs of refugees, KPS works with these groups to provide

additional support for families coming into the community. "Our primary work has been in language support," said Geoff Howe, director of School Improvement, Title I and Assessments for KPS. "We are both helping students become English language learners and making sure we can find the supports, such as teachers and translators, they need to succeed in school."

The pool of teachers who speak Kenyanwanda is nonexistent. That certainly is a challenge." Wessam Abdelaziz, coordinator of English as a Second Language, World Languages and Bilingual Services for KPS, said KPS is part of a community resource collaborative including churches, area colleges and universities, and social groups like

(continued on page 3)

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Giving Thanks for the District's Unsung Heroes

Breven Brill walked into Kalamazoo Central High School in the fall of 2017, more than a little angry about being there.

Part of a military family, he'd lived a half dozen places before his family settled in North Carolina for several years. North Carolina was the place he'd lived the longest — and it finally felt like he had someplace to call home.

Then circumstances changed, and his mom and siblings moved from North Carolina to Kalamazoo to be closer to family and to take advantage of The Kalamazoo Promise.

Things could have easily gone sideways if he hadn't found a good group of friends, which he did by joining the soccer team. But equally as important, he found a good group of adults to help him with that transition and to succeed in school.

There were obviously teachers and coaches who made a difference — Brill graduated in June with a school record 15 varsity letters. But there were others who had an impact — most notably an

unsung group of Kalamazoo Public Schools employees: the campus safety officers.

In an interview about his high school experience, Brill said, "I want to thank

all of the teachers and all of the coaches. I want to thank the security guards at our school too.

"I talk to them a lot. I don't think a lot of people recognize what they do for the kids. They always looked out for the kids and looked out for me. There was one, when I was a freshman, he picked on me a lot. Officer (Pledo) Dyson. It was kind of like he knew I was new to the area and to the school and for four years he took care of me. He messed with me, but it was more of a mutual thing by the end of the years."

He's not the only one to sing the praises of campus safety officers. In 2020, Loy Norrix graduate Diamond Dorsey also



Dr. Rita Raichoudhuri,
Superintendent,
Kalamazoo Public Schools

mentioned them in a farewell story.

"They're my favorites. I connected with all of them. Every time I was in the hallways, they would speak to me. They are proud of me and they made my day every morning."

Campus safety officers are just some of the many staff members who help to make a difference in the lives of KPS students.

Our teachers and administrators do such wonderful work teaching our children, it's sometimes easy to forget that there are many others within the district who help support and nurture students throughout their school days.

Every job within KPS is an opportunity to impact students' lives, make them feel successful, help them feel cared for, provide them with a chance to learn not just what is in their books but what it means to be a caring adult.

In Kearney Miller's shout out to Kalamazoo Central staff, the 2021 graduate had a whole list of influential teachers, but

she also had special thanks for two other people: KC athletic director Dylan Patterson and former, long-time athletic department secretary Mary Carter. They were influential not just because they helped her as an athlete, but because they created a sense of place and belonging for her.

When she was named an Excellence in Education winner, Miller chose Patterson as her most influential educator, saying: "Mr. Patterson values relationships with students over everything. The way that he connects with the Kalamazoo Central community shows how much he cares for every student that walks through our halls. Through my time working in our Athletic Department, I was able to find my place in our school community and feel more confident and connected thanks to the support of Mr. Patterson."

Creating an inclusive and caring community is at the heart of what every KPS employee does. This includes the bus drivers who are the first to greet students in the morning and get them safely to school, the activity helpers who make sure recess is safe — and fun, the food service staff who makes sure students have meals to eat every school day even when food may

be scarce at home, the paraprofessionals who provide help in the classroom setting; and school secretaries who can help when a student needs to call home, offer an ice pack for a bump, or just give a friendly "hello" in the hallways.

For recent Phoenix High School graduate, Kashyah Nabors, one of the staff people who helped make her high school experience successful was lead school secretary Sue Valler, whose calm radiates through the Phoenix office. Valler helped Nabors navigate Google Meets and gave her advice about completing classes, but Valler was more than just an educational resource. She was a real human connection during a time in Nabors' life when things easily became overwhelming.

"Honestly, when I felt like I couldn't do it, I would email her and express how I felt and she'd help me out," Nabors said.

This Thanksgiving season, I am so grateful for all of the KPS family who are there for our students when they feel like they can't do it, for those countless unsung heroes of the district who make it their mission to encourage students and lift them up and offer a smile that says, "You can do it. And, I am here to help you."

THURSDAY, NOV. 4 | 6 P.M.

Kaleidoscope EYES:

A Different Perspective on Autism, Art and the World PRESENTED BY DR. JOSHUA DIEHL

Join Dr. Diehl as he presents how autism represents a different way of processing the world, and how that difference leads to both talent and areas in need of support.

This online program hosted by Kalamazoo Valley Museum compliments the exhibit "Expanding Scott's World: A Journey of Autism Through Art," on display through January 2, 2022.



The Kalamazoo Valley Museum is operated by Kalamazoo Valley Community College and is governed by its Board of Trustees.

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KPS Preparing to Welcome Resettlers from Afghanistan, Congo (cont. from page 1)

Gryphon Place.

"We want to have this overarching support for their well-being, not just their educational needs," Abdelaziz said.

While the number of refugees to the U.S. had declined over the past four years because of the political environment and COVID-19 restrictions, Howe anticipates the country as a whole will be more welcoming to refugee families and resettlers in the coming years. West Michigan is already recognized as one of the largest centers for receiving unaccompanied minors.

"Imagine the circumstances parents must be facing in order to agree to put a minor child on a plane and to send them to a foreign country," Howe said. "This is extreme trauma that is separating families. Parents do not know when or if they'll be able to reunite with their children. I can't imagine making that decision for my family."

ESL home school liaison Rebeca Arevalo-Visuet says her job is to help families find resources outside of academics, which might mean connecting them with food assistance, finding housing resources, or locating clothing.

For new resettlers, she is a conduit for the enrollment process, making sure they have the paperwork they need to register for school, know how to get the necessary immunizations, and understand how the ESL program works.

"Sometimes it takes a little while to build trust. I like to check in with families a couple of times before I dig in deeper into what their needs might be," she said. "Sometimes families feel that if they share information, they will get in trouble, and that's not the case. They need to get to a point where they understand I'm just trying to help and I want them to be OK."

Housing, Volunteers Still Needed to Aid Refugees

Community support for an expected influx of Afghan refugees has been overwhelming.

Afifa Thaj, coordinator of volunteer and co-sponsor programs for the social service agency Samaritas, said people have been generous with their donations. While many families were still being processed

through military bases around the country in late September, she expected the first Afghan refugees from the current crisis to begin moving into Southwest Michigan by early October.

Samaritas expects to work with about 120 Afghan individuals, while Bethany Christian Services expects about 30 unaccompanied minors from



Afghanistan.

The group was still collecting clothing at Trinity Lutheran Church, 504 S. Westnedge Ave., while household items were being collected at People's Church, 1758 10th St. N.

The biggest need remains

for housing for resettlers. The organizations also need volunteers to work with families to provide transportation, social support, and socialization, Thaj said.

People with information on available rentals or other housing options or who would like to volunteer can contact Thaj at athaj@samaritas.org.

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Congolese Family Pursues Educational Dreams for Children

By **Kawther Mohammed**

“She just wants to provide a life for us that she couldn’t provide for herself.”

As Bibiane Niangi spoke about her and her husband Flo-ry Muanda’s decision to move their family from the Demo- cratic Republic of the Congo to the United States in 2015, her daughters Alphine and Jean- necia translated for her.

Alphine and Jeannecia are a sophomore and junior, respec- tively, at Loy Norrix High School.

In Congo, Bibiane pursued an education in economics only to be met with obstacles. Congo

is the largest country in central Africa, a region that is often mis- construed as being war-torn.

“It wasn’t like we were liv- ing in the active wars, but we felt the economic effects of it. There were less opportunities that were less likely to succeed,” said Bibiane, who became a U.S. citizen this spring. As one of 12 children, Bibiane had to make sacrifices, putting her education on hold to work “extreme hours to help support my family.”

A common narrative for many families across the globe, Bibiane and her husband long planned to come to America,



Jeannecia Muanda, Bibiane Niangi, and Alphine Muanda share a laugh.

which would not have been possible without the Diver- sity Immigration Visa lottery in Congo. Currently, the DIV lot- tery allows for 55,000 people a year from the Democratic Re- public of the Congo to come to America to build better lives.

Arriving in America came with struggles as well. For ex- ample, Bibiane’s family lived with other family members un- til she and her husband found stable jobs. In order to ensure

the “American Dream” for their daughters, other sacrifices were made as well. Bibiane and her husband sacrificed the prom- ise of pursuing their own edu- cations and dreams to provide a better foundation for their daughters’ futures.

While Bibiane and her hus- band could not pursue the edu- cational aspirations they once had hoped for, educational dreams are why they chose to live in Kalamazoo.

“I want better education for my kids, better opportuni- ties. I want my daughters to become important people who work good jobs and are edu- cated people,” Bibiane said. The Kalamazoo Promise guarantees just that – a solid, educational future for her daughters.

Bibiane, and many KPS parents like her, have sacrificed being close to extended family members – parents, siblings, nieces and nephews – to give their children a promising fu- ture. However, despite all of the sacrifices they have made, there is one they will not compromise on: keeping their home culture and language alive.

Jeannecia and Alphine can navigate school in English, but they also are literate in French and can speak Lingala, a Bantu language from Congo. The fam- ily also cooks and eats Congolese dishes on a daily basis.

And, like many other par- ents, Bibiane says watching her daughters achieve academic ac- colades makes all of the difficult sacrifices worthwhile.

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Inquiries by students and/or their parents/guardians should be directed to:

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(269) 337-0161

All other inquiries should be directed to:

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Errin Corstange, art and digital media teacher at Milwood Magnet School, shared information on a cool art project that took place this summer.

Over the summer, 11 fourth- through sixth-grade Kalamazoo Public Schools students worked alongside mentor artists from the Artists of Color Network and Discover Kalamazoo to create a special community mural.

Artists' Corner

The mural is approximately 11 feet by 11 feet and was set up in a paint-by-numbers style. The completed artwork will be installed in downtown Kalamazoo.

Students who participated were: Max Bor-mann, Nia Coleman, Lilly Coryn-Schroeter, Cerentiy Hobson, Michael McDonald, Darek Roberts, Destini Snell, Rain Standish, Trinity Thrash, Nadiya Travis, and Nikki Wesaw.



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ESL Classes Prepared Woman to Take Advantage of Promise, Find Success

When Zee Amini arrived in Kalamazoo from Afghanistan at age 17, she didn't know any English, but four years later she graduated from Kalamazoo Central High School with honors.

Much of that had to do with self-determination, but another part of it was the support that she received as an English language learner. English as a Second Language classes, she said, helped her learn her new language and develop the skills she needed to succeed in other classes.

At 17, she was by far the oldest student in most of her freshman classes at Kalamazoo Central.

"When I was not in my ESL

classes, I was there physically, but I don't think I was learning anything. When you don't know the language everyone is speaking, the struggle was real," said Amini, 34. She says her first semester, she failed the classes taught in English.

"If you don't understand English, you need a slower pace. The ESL teacher was literally helping kids with the alphabet, basic shapes and names for things. It's nice to have that level of learning available. The ESL teacher, Mr. (Ryan) LaBudda, was able to recognize how to express concepts."

Her family landed in Kalamazoo totally by chance, she said.

Her father simply chose Kalamazoo from a list of possible resettlement sites. "We could have gone anywhere."

While some families worry about losing their native language once a student begins speaking English, Amini said that was never a concern for her because she was older than the average student. Today, she still speaks Dari, a variation of Farsi, with her relatives.

As she moved through KC, she learned that she could only stay in public school up to age 21 — then she'd have to switch to adult education or earn her GED, which might require more time.



Kalamazoo Central graduate Zee Amini came to Kalamazoo from Afghanistan. She graduated from KC with honors and now works at Stryker.

She did not want to do that, so she became laser-focused on taking — and passing — the core requirements for graduation.

Amini qualified for 65 percent of The Kalamazoo Promise when she graduated. "That was awesome, and I am so grateful," she said.

She went to Western Michigan University, but she said the language challenges remained.

"I found you can learn the language, and speak it, and read it, but when it comes to an academic level there can still be language barriers. And, there is no dictionary that covers all of our slang."

Still, she persevered and went on to earn a degree in biomedical science and chemistry. She works for Stryker Corporation in new product development and regulatory affairs.

Part of what she loves about her job is working for a global company with a diverse workforce. "It's cool to see different people exist and you don't feel alone or like the odd one out."

As Southwest Michigan prepares to welcome refugee families from Afghanistan over the coming weeks, she urges the community to be patient and help the families with the culture shock they are sure to feel.

"The culture and language barriers are the obstacles that could hold people back. When you don't understand the culture, you're at a loss," she said. "People can help them get acclimated to our community and culture, and also to make them feel comfortable culturally by helping them get involved in activities and help them understand what they can do to reach their goals."



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Roasted Sweet Potatoes and Kale with Goat Cheese

Sweet potatoes are a great root vegetable to use in the colder months because they are hardy and will last a while if stored properly. Early to late fall is harvest time for these tasty tubers which grow in Southwest Michigan, so they make a great addition to your Thanksgiving meal.

Sweet potatoes are full of nutrients including fiber, potassium, vitamin B-6, and beta carotene/vitamin A. The orange color of sweet potatoes comes from the beta carotene, which is a phytonutrient. Fruits and vegetables get their colors from different phytonutrients, which each have different health benefits. That is why it is important to keep a variety of colors in your diet.

So, don't forget to grab some sweet potatoes for your next fall meal! They pair won-

derfully with cinnamon, maple, apples, brown sugar, and nutmeg for a sweet dish, but can also be made into a savory dish by using onions, garlic, walnuts, pecans, kale, bacon, or chorizo.

Ingredients

- 1-2 sweet potatoes, diced with peel still on (there are lots of nutrients in the peel!)
- 3-4 cups kale, cleaned and chopped into bite sized pieces
- 1/2 large white onion, cut into half then slivered
- 1-2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/2 cup goat cheese
- Olive oil
- Salt and pepper

Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 400F.
2. Toss diced sweet potatoes in enough olive oil to coat, season with salt and pepper.



Chef Samuel Dunn

3. Roast on a baking sheet for 35-40 minutes.
4. Toss kale, onions, and garlic in olive oil, salt, and pepper. Combine onto the baking sheet with sweet potatoes.
5. Roast for 20 minutes. Sprinkle goat cheese before serving.

Servings: 4

How to Enroll in ESL Services

English language learners are identified through Kalamazoo Public Schools' enrollment process. This involves:

Home Language Survey — Parents/guardians complete a Home Language Survey which is found at the bottom of the registration form asking if the student's native or primary language is other than English.

Communication of Possible Eligibility — If the parent or guardian indicate on the Home Language Survey that the student's native or primary language is other than English, the ESL/bilingual department is notified to determine eligibility for services.

Screening — Students who are identify as potential English Language Learners are assessed with the WIDA Access Placement test (W-APT) to determine English proficiency level for eligibility.

Eligibility — Results from the W-APT along with the scores from other states and local assessments are used to determine eligibility.

Notification — Parents/Guardians are notified by a letter, which includes their student's WIDA-APT proficiency level, a description of the pro-

gram, and services provided.

Placement — Once it is determined that a student will receive ESL support services, the ESL/Bilingual Department works with student services to place the student in an ESL center.

ESL/Bilingual Staff

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ESL Program Recognizes, Builds on Special Talents of Bilingual Students *(continued from page 1)*

lar classroom to attend his ESL classes, but Abdelaziz said all it took was for him to reframe the situation for his son to accept it. “Think of it as an academically talented class. Don’t look at it as something bad. You have another talent that you are being pulled out for.”

Abdelaziz said ESL has six overarching goals:

- To enable students to become proficient in English.
- To enable students to achieve at grade level in content area instruction.
- To help improve the self-concept of students.
- To increase parental involvement.
- To increase the effectiveness of all mainstream teachers and other staff when working with English language learners.
- To increase awareness and understanding of language acquisition and the strategies that support the learning of English language learners.

Geoff Howe, director of School Improvement, Title I and Assessments at KPS, said the district serves approximately 1,000 English language learners during a typical school year. Although KPS students represent more than 50 languages, the languages most commonly spoken by English language learners in the district are Spanish and Arabic, with a recent surge among students who speak Swahili, French and Kenyawanda.

The district maintains ESL centers at six elementary schools, two middle schools and both comprehensive high schools. While there are ESL personnel throughout the district, the most intensive supports can be found at the centers, which are located at: Arcadia, Lincoln, Spring Valley, El Sol, Woods Lake, and Edison elementaries; Maple and Milwood middle schools; and Kalamazoo Central and Loy Norrix high schools.

ESL students are identified through the student registration form, which includes a



Wessam Abdelaziz,
Coordinator of ESL, World Languages and Bilingual Services



Geoff Howe, KPS director
of School Improvement, Title I and Assessments



Rebeca Arevalo-Visuet,
home school liaison, ESL/bilingual education

home language survey that asks what is the primary language spoken at home.

“We know we have ESL students who we have not identified,” Howe said. “That’s an issue across the country – underreporting.”

Much of that gets back to that feeling of stigmatization that Abdelaziz identified. Parents may opt out of the program, because they feel that their children are disadvantaged by being labeled English language learners – or they may fear that the program will cause the students to lose touch with the family’s native language and customs.

So, ESL staff works hard to build relationships with parents to help them understand the goals of the program and to ensure they feel comfortable with the staff, because research says that the earlier that students access ESL services, the more likely they are to build the skills needed to help them fully engage and participate in school, Howe said.

“We know it’s not always an easy conversation to have with a family, but we want them to know the benefits to the family and the students. We are about setting students up for success,” Howe said.

Rebeca Arevalo-Visuet, the home school liaison for the ESL/bilingual program, said spending time with families is an investment to ensure they understand how the staff is there to help families. Some families are coming from traumatic experiences or oppressive cultures. She works

hard to overcome those fears.

“If you restate and restate what you do and that you are there to help them, eventually they open up to you,” she said. “That’s when the trust starts building up. We just want them to know that we are there to support the whole family and make sure their student is succeeding in school.”

But ESL is about more than just ensuring students are proficient in English and supporting them in the classroom.

KPS sees ESL and bilingual services as a way to build and celebrate diversity within the district.

“We want to honor who

our students are and what they bring to the City of Kalamazoo and to Kalamazoo Public Schools in particular,” Howe said. “Any time we have a more diverse learning environment, it’s a benefit to all students.”

In the past, speaking another language at home might have been seen as a negative. That’s not the case today, Abdelaziz said. Today, these language skills have high value, and, “we are asking how we can make sure that we honor and celebrate those students coming with a different language. And, we want to make sure that they have all of the communication tools they need to express their talents.”

Arevalo-Visuet remembers when she was a student in KPS, especially as she started middle school. The school system did not celebrate diversity the way it does now. Today, the ESL/bilingual program holds its own celebrations, and she sees diversity celebrated throughout the district.

“It’s important that students feel that they belong here

and that they feel they are free to share their culture and language and to be proud of that, that they are proud of being part of KPS,” she said. “We can give them that opportunity.”

Abdelaziz compares the situation of English language learners to that of American students participating in study abroad programs in other countries.

“When those students do study abroad, they are working really hard to learn a new language and to understand a new culture and society,” he said. “But, also, the country that those students visit, whether it is in Asia or South America, they look at those students as having a lot of value and they appreciate that and build on it.”

“Imagine ESL as a study abroad program. How can we make sure that we look at the skill level, the intellectual abilities, and talents that these students bring? When we see these kids, we need to see all of their abilities instead of just seeing what needs improving and what they lack.”

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KPS Grads in Action: Ben Lando Creates Opportunities in Iraq, Kalamazoo

Ben Lando didn't know what he wanted to do.

But when he figured it out, he ran hard with it.

Lando came to Kalamazoo Public Schools as an eighth-grader and graduated from Loy Norrix High School in 1998.

While at Norrix, he got involved with Knight Life, the student newspaper, and WKDS, which was then a student-run radio station.

"When I look back at high school, it was a rebel-without-a-cause-situation going on," he said. "But as part of the student newspaper, in particular at Loy Norrix, I think I found the benefit of having an organization behind your voice and figuring out how to be constructive within the limitations of real work issues."

The most memorable example of that was when he co-authored a comic strip about the superintendent at that time. After the then-principal pressured the teacher and the students to not publish the strip, the class decided to cut the comic from the paper. Lando and his co-creator then printed and distributed the comic on their own.



Climbing the stairs to the Tomb of Jonah, June 2012, seconds before a roadside bomb exploded just out front and two years before the biblical prophet's shrine was destroyed in a deliberate detonation by the Islamic State group. The photographer Kameran Najm, was later taken captive by ISIS and is believed to be dead.

"That situation provided a lot of good information for me to lean on when I eventually decided to go into journalism,"

Lando said. "It taught me to focus my concern for the community and to critique those that would negatively impact the



In rural Basra in southern Iraq, sitting with a sheikh, or tribal leader, in his Mudhif, a traditional reed structure.

community in a way that was constructive."

Finding a passion is key — not just for work but for life.

"Find what interests you," Lando advises students. "If it leads you to a career directly — great — but it's just as important if it makes you a well-rounded person, more interesting. Who knows you may just have something you enjoy as a hobby and you can make a career out of it."

After graduating from Loy Norrix, he attended Kalamazoo Valley Community College before transferring to Western Michigan University, where he again became involved in student media, working for the WMU newspaper and radio station. Lando was also a reporter for WKMI and WMUK during college. Following his graduation from WMU, he worked as a freelance reporter at the Kalamazoo Gazette, the Battle Creek Enquirer, and for United Press International, an international wire service.

In 2006, he moved to Washington, D.C., and began a full-time position with United Press International. There, he began covering U.S. energy policy, splitting his time between nuclear energy and international oil.

"That's when I started focusing on Iraq. It was the middle of the civil war, a few years after the invasion and occupation," he said. "I found it very interesting and very compelling."

During that time he started a side project, a blog called IraqOilReport.com. When he was laid off by UPI, that niche project was generating huge interest from oil companies, academics, and the transportation and security sectors.

He moved to Baghdad in
(continued on page 11)



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KPS Grads in Action: Ben Lando Creates Opportunities in Iraq, Kalamazoo (continued from page 10)

2009 and relaunched the blog as a news organization. He was also a freelance reporter in Baghdad for international news outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, The Economist, and Time magazine.

“I’ve only had one full-time job as an adult and it was based on my own hustle. I kept focusing on my interests,” he said. “Basically I started my own company to pay myself to do journalism.”

Living in Iraq at that time was “90 percent wonderful, 5 percent frustrating and 5 percent terrifying.”

“It was just wonderful to be living in a place that was extremely old and at the same time the very center of a lot of what’s happening in the world in terms of modern political and security issues,” Lando said. “To be doing that and experiencing something so very different in many ways from where I grew up and what I had professionally been involved in was a great experience a vast majority of the time.”

Today, he runs the company from Kalamazoo. It has 14 Iraqi journalists and editors working on the ground in Iraq.

He moved back to Kalama-

zoo in 2013, got married, and had his first child. He and wife Gabrielle Contesti, who works for Greenleaf Trust, realized the move made economic and logistic sense but it also made emotional sense for a growing family that now numbers six.

“We really like Kalamazoo for its combination of a small town, Midwest feel and the fact that it thinks and acts like a big city, for its ability to punch above its weight in many ways.”

Since moving back to Kalamazoo, he has reignited his interest in local journalism with a single edition magazine, The Homefront, which examined issues of homelessness. The publication, printed with publishing partner Encore Magazine, won four 2020 Michigan Press Association awards.

He has also launched the local news organization, NowKalamazoo.com, which operates under the wing of Public Media Network. NowKalamazoo is one of the founding members of a new effort called the Southwest Michigan Journalism Collaborative.

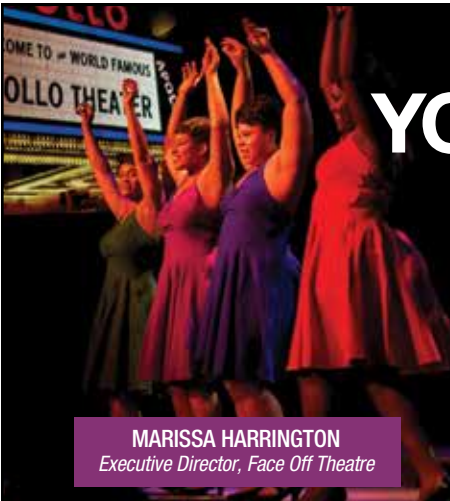
“I don’t think there is a one-size-fits-all answer to the future of the news industry,”

Lando said. “The answer to what the journalism industry is now and what it will be going forward is based on the quality of the news content, the scope

of the coverage, and having it match the audience.

“Local news has to be really attuned to what the local audience needs and wants. We

have to figure out what makes the most sense for each specific news organization. That requires a lot of creativity and a lot of experimentation.”



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