
IRSC AmeriCorps Experience and Design Skills Combine to Address Challenges of Resettled Refugees in the US

Liz Irk

Human-centered Design Development Student,
Computer Graphics Technology Department
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907
eirk@purdue.edu

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Abstract

This paper describes my work and research experience with resettled refugees in the United States. I served as an AmeriCorps member for the Immigrant and Refugee Service Corps in Indianapolis, Indiana. During that time, many needs and barriers of resettled families became evident, and I began to dream up design ideas of how gaps in access to resource information could be addressed. I co-led a pilot study with a former professor that involved mentoring undergraduate students as they tackled some of the challenges resettled families faced, and this eventually led me into graduate school. My studies have since led me to facilitate modified participatory design workshops with resettled refugees, re-evaluate my initial project idea in order to let a solution emerge rather than jumping on an idea right away, and to continue to allow my research to evolve as I learn more about qualitative research methods, design theories, and participatory approaches to research and design. I believe my unique experiences in AmeriCorps and having a design background can contribute to the workshop discussion on the role HCI can play in addressing challenges faced by refugees, not to mention the rich interactions and

insights I would gain from participating in such a workshop.

Author Keywords

Resettled refugees; refugees; user experience design, UXD; participatory design, PD; design workshops with refugees.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

In May of 2014, I graduated from Purdue University with a degree in Computer Graphics Technology. In my undergraduate studies I focused in two areas, with the latter one being my main area of focus: 1. Architecture Illustration, and 2. Graphic Design; combining print and web design classes with traditional art and design courses and a Human-centered Design Development class. I held several internships and part-time jobs in graphic design or marketing assistant roles, as well as volunteer roles producing print and digital designs for organizations.

Outside of school activities as an undergraduate, I participated in and held leadership roles in a student ministry on campus. This ministry led many educational and service trips, one of which involved our students collaborating with a church of resettled refugees from Dallas, TX to work together to restore an impoverished community's nursery school in New Orleans, LA. This experience combined with the mentorship of a dear friend, and now brother, from Democratic Republic of Congo, helped nurture and develop skills and competencies communicating and working cross-

culturally. These developing skills and expansion of my mind in understanding, compassion, and learning about people, became a driving force as I continued my education and post-education pursuits.

After graduating with my B.S. degree, I decided to not seek out the often traditionally sought after industry jobs, but instead to seek out roles that would involve using my learned and natural skills to directly impact disadvantaged and misunderstood peoples' lives for the better, and preferably in a multicultural setting. To my great appreciation, this opportunity was granted a few months after graduation through my acceptance into an AmeriCorps program in Indianapolis called the Immigrant and Refugee Service Corps (IRSC). This service role sparked an idea for addressing some of the challenges resettled families face that eventually led me back to school, where I am now studying Human-centered Design Development. I am specifically focusing on how to apply UXD principles, concepts, and methods when designing tools to address challenges for resettled refugees. Additionally, I am researching and learning how to modify participatory design methods and workshops to work and design as much as possible *with* resettled refugees, instead of *for* them.

The remaining sections of this paper further describe my AmeriCorps experience that inspired my project idea, what the project idea is, where my research stands currently, and what my research project plans are moving forward.

IRSC AmeriCorps Experience

The Immigrant and Refugee Service (IRSC) AmeriCorps program hosted twelve adult AmeriCorps members (myself included) from a wide spectrum of

demographics and backgrounds (age 22 to 52; male and female; U.S-born, 1st and 2nd generation immigrants, and resettled refugees from Eritrea and Togo; both high school and college graduates; and Buddhist, Christian, Catholic, Jewish, and Non-theists).

The IRSC Member's Role

Each IRSC member was to serve full-time at a different non-profit organization (we called them host sites) in Indianapolis. The IRSC role was to listen, learn, and become aware of and compassionate towards the disadvantages and cultural and religious differences and barriers immigrant and refugee families face in the U.S., and to assist the twelve non-profits in beginning to serve families that fall into these classifications, or to help expand and support existing programs already serving families in these categories.

In addition to our service roles, as part of our AmeriCorps contract, we were to live off of a small living stipend that would be acknowledged as living below the U.S. poverty line, and often meant we needed to attain food stamps, aka SNAP benefits, to support ourselves, creating an opportunity to live in the challenges and lack of resources that so many families face. This aspect added to the richness of our learning experience and increased compassion.

Responsibilities at my Host Site

The types of responsibilities my IRSC team accomplished in our roles at our host sites varied from site to site. Some of us were assigned to serve at resettlement agencies, some at community and faith centers, some at arts and cultural centers, and some at healthcare-centered organizations. I was assigned to serve at a non-profit that provides holistic (educational,

physical, spiritual, and mental and emotional) support programs for families facing cancer. My specific duties at this host site were to develop events, programs, and support groups for resettled refugee and immigrant families facing cancer, and to provide feedback on how to modify any existing programs and organization procedures to be more accommodating to their needs.

IRSC Team Meetings

Every other week we met as a full team to share about:

1. What we were learning and experiencing in our host sites,
2. Challenges we were facing in developing programs and seeking to serve families or in seeking to educate our host sites on immigrant and refugee barriers,
3. Meet with other groups and agencies around Indianapolis fighting for social justice and the right of immigrant and refugees,
4. Visit each member's host site,
5. Meet with refugee and immigrant families to hear their stories and discuss challenges they face,
6. Plan events as IRSC members outside of our host-sites that educate the city about barriers, cultural differences, and misconceptions of refugee and immigrant communities,
7. Volunteering and educational opportunities, and
8. Plan opportunities and events to bring education and healthcare access to refugee and immigrant communities.

Responsibilities outside my Host Site

My responsibilities outside of my service at my host site involved organizing, leading, and planning an ACA health insurance enrollment event for resettled families from Burma (thirty families were enrolled); coordinating and collaborating with health organizations and facilities, ethnic minority groups, and other non-profits; making referrals for families with needs beyond my host-site's services; serving as a community

partner member and representative of my host site in the Indiana Minority Health Coalition, the Marion County Refugee Health Forum, and the R.E.D. Alliance for African American Breast Health Disparities; organizing events, support groups, and educational sessions for non-English speaking families with cancer; and attending cultural, religious, and social justice events, conferences, discussions, and lectures throughout the city in order to learn more about the diversity, values, and lack of privileges within communities.

Insights gained from IRSC Service

When trying to develop cancer support groups for resettled refugee communities, it became difficult to find community groups with families that have cancer and if I did find any, it was difficult to provide service to them. Community leaders from Burma said that they knew of no one in their communities with cancer. A breast cancer survivor from Ethiopia shared that there were many women in their community with breast cancer, but they were too afraid to discuss that with others. They said that in their culture cancer is often a taboo topic because people do not understand it well. If someone gets cancer, they usually do not tell even their close family and friends, and often go untreated and suffer great pain. They would feel uncomfortable in a support group and in individual counseling due to cultural and language barriers (personal communication, 2014). This was valuable insight that led me to see that the models of support that the organization offered might not be suitable for the community's needs, barriers, and challenges, and further ideation for how to provide support needed to happen and be discussed. As a result, my direction transitioned into focusing on developing support groups

for Spanish-speaking families who were at that time actively seeking the service since no group offered that form of support in Spanish in the city.

Another important insight I gained was that while community leaders have very good ideas of what challenges families and individuals are facing, it is impossible to group everyone into having the exact same challenges and barriers. What is a challenge or barrier for one cultural community, is not necessarily a challenge or barrier for another, and some may not be perceived as urgent by families as service providers perceive them to be.

Project Idea

In the various committees and meetings I was an active participant or representative in as an IRSC member, there were patterns of need and gaps in resources that existed. One area of need in particular, is for a centralized location where resources, services, and programs that serve refugee and immigrant families can be looked up (both via search and filters and via a map) and accessed for free by either a resettled person themselves or by a social worker/service member. My proposed tool would also include important information about public transportation, interpreters, and documents needed in order to access the service or program. Hours and hours are spent searching for services and facilities for families. Tools like 211 Help exist, but do not address refugee and immigrant needs. When a family has adapted to the U.S. and to the English language enough, they are still limited in accessing information and resources by not knowing how to easily and effectively search for information, by having too many incomplete sites to search from, or by having to depend

on an organization or employee to get back to them with the information they need, in an often untimely manner.

Current Status of Research Project

I originally presented this problem and idea to two of my former professors at Purdue for a real-world scenario for their students to attempt to solve. Both professors responded, but only one class decided they wanted to work on it. I spent about 2 months driving back to Lafayette, Indiana from Indianapolis in 2015 to mentor (alongside the course professor) a freshman class as they worked in groups to consider the barriers families face, the design considerations, and design ideas they were developing to address this problem, which became their final project of the semester. The last meeting I brought IRSC members with me to help critique and provide feedback on their projects, one of which was formerly resettled as a refugee. Upon the end of their semester, the course professor, Dr. Esteban Garcia, and I continued to discuss how this project could be continued. After declining a partnership (due to a mismatch in vision and intentions) with a company that expressed interest in developing the project for us, Dr. Garcia encouraged me to come to grad school so that I could guide the direction of this project and learn the necessary research methods, theories, and procedures to do so in an ethical and empowering way for a community that I care about. I agreed and was accepted into Purdue University's Master's program for Human-centered Design Development in the Computer Graphics Technology department. Dr. Garcia became my advisor.

In one of my studio classes during my second semester of graduate school, I learned about UXD methods called

Participatory Design (PD). PD brings the intended users of a product or service into the design and development process of said product or service, ensuring their voice, ideas, and needs are included every step of the way. Some of these principles were applied during two modified design workshops in Indianapolis with Karen and Karenni refugees from Burma, which required two separate interpreters and several visual hands-on activities. Approximately twenty participants attended each workshop. The workshops taught me valuable lessons about the difficulty in applying theories and methods of research and design in cross-cultural settings.

I am now in my third semester of graduate school, learning more about qualitative research methods and approaches that include the values of users into research and design projects.

Insights from my second and third semester coursework led me to re-evaluate my research project and to further investigate qualitative research methods, and to realize that there were some assumptions made in my original project idea that I needed to go back and re-evaluate by doing more formal research. For example, before starting graduate school and in my first semester, I had an idea already of a solution for addressing challenges that I saw, but I did not allow that solution to emerge from my research and from participants in my research. What I perceived as a need and a possible solution, may not necessarily match the values and desires of the resettled refugee population my research focuses on. Therefore, I have taken some steps back in order to not jump to conclusions or solutions too soon, and in order to ensure the values, beliefs, needs, and desires of the population I intend to

help empower and level the playing field for with my research are included in the research and design process.

Moving Forward

My research continues to evolve and transform as I learn more about qualitative research and design theories. Moving forward, I will be conducting more field research and modified participatory design workshops with groups of resettled refugees as well as their service providers. I will also be taking measures to let a solution emerge through my research on addressing challenges of resettled refugees in Indianapolis, rather than making premature guesses. By time I graduate, the research project solution that emerges from my research should reach the mid- or high-fidelity prototyping phase. The Refugees and HCI Workshop would be a tremendous opportunity to learn from others in the field, collaborate, and provide insights from my experiences learning to design with resettled refugees.

Acknowledgements

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