

# Aline Sara

## Connecting foreign-language students with refugee tutors



**A**line Sara '14SIPA, a former journalist who spent several years in Beirut covering the Arab Spring, was applying for humanitarian jobs in the Middle East and trying to brush up on her Arabic when she had the “aha” moment that would lead to an ambitious business venture. “What if there were a startup that helped you learn Arabic, and your tutor was a Syrian refugee who really needed income?” she asked herself.

The year was 2014, and more than a million Syrian refugees had migrated to Lebanon to flee the civil war and ISIS. Denied work visas by the Lebanese government, most had no way of earning a living. “When refugees cross borders, the vast majority, especially the educated middle class — the doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers — have a very slim chance of finding work,” Sara explains. “Just imagine: you’ve watched your country crumble, you’ve likely lived through trauma — loss, incarceration, near-death experiences — and then you escape to a place where you can’t restart your life.”

TOP: VINCENT COLIN; BOTTOM: NATAKALLAM

Sara, who was born in New York City to Lebanese immigrants and grew up speaking English and French, decided to do something to help. She teamed up with her Columbia peer Reza Rahnema '14SIPA and launched NaTakallam (Arabic for “we speak”), an online language-learning and cultural-exchange program that hires refugees as freelance contractors. Sara runs the for-profit company from the Columbia Startup Lab in New York City, while Rahnema, the COO, heads operations from a Paris office.

NaTakallam connects language students with refugees from the Middle East, Latin America, and Francophone Africa for conversation practice over Skype. For fifteen dollars an hour, anyone can sign up for a session in Arabic, Persian, Spanish, or French, though the company gets most of its business through organizations. More than twenty universities — including Columbia and Yale — have partnered with NaTakallam to incorporate conversation practice into their foreign-language programs, and NaTakallam has helped more than two hundred K–12 schools to bring refugees into their classrooms (also through Skype) as virtual guest speakers. A social-studies class, for example, can invite a migrant from Venezuela to talk to students about the human impact of the country’s economic collapse.

NaTakallam, which also offers translation and transcription services, strives to pay contractors at least the minimum wage in their host countries. Sara says that the company has distributed some \$600,000 to 150 displaced individuals. But the impact goes beyond financial. In facilitating face-to-face interaction, NaTakallam promotes empathy for refugees and combats negative stereotypes. “We try to bring awareness to the fact that there are all kinds of people in refugee populations, because the media tends to give a very negative image,” says Sara, who adds that some of NaTakallam’s tutors have found more work and even opportunities for resettlement through their students.

“Being a refugee is isolating,” Sara says. “A lot of social enterprises will hire displaced people to do artisan work or data entry behind a computer. Those jobs are important because they generate income, but they’re still isolating. Human connection and warmth have ripple effects, and what we’re doing is creating new, empathy-filled virtual networks.”

An Iraq-based Syrian refugee speaks at a NaTakallam event.

