

Walking with Little Amal to Raise Awareness for Refugees

by Danielle Ward

Did you know that world-wide, the number of displaced children is over 43 million or that 1.2 billion people are estimated to become climate refugees by 2050? These are not statistics you typically hear about in the news, but they speak to how vital it is for us to have interactive tools for teaching our children about this topical issue.

That is where Amal, a beguiling 12-foot puppet representing a 10-year-old Syrian refugee, comes in. She is searching for her mother as well as a new place to call home. After trekking over 5,000 miles to cross [multiple countries](#) in Europe, and then visiting all five boroughs in New York, Little Amal is journeying through the rest of the United States. Starting in Boston on September 7, this international symbol of human rights will spread her message of unity and hope to 35 cities.

Little Amal's journey began when she left home in July of 2021, and headed towards Gaziantep, Turkey, a neighboring country. There lanterns slowly revealed a path of light for Little Amal to follow. She has since been welcomed by millions in communities across the globe at various artistic-led events that are authentic and meaningful to the local people she meets.

This event, Amal Walks Across America, is produced by The Walk Productions, in association with Handspring Puppet Company, the South African group famous for creating the life-sized animals for the award-winning play *War Horse*. Founders Kohler and Basil Jones, who came out of retirement to create Amal, offer a beautiful exploration of their puppetry style in this [TED Talk](#).

Built in a style reminiscent of [mojigangas](#)—the name for large human-like puppets popular in Spain and Mexico—Amal comes to life thanks to the magic created by a talented group of puppeteers, one of whom walks inside the puppet on stilts, looking through her cane constructed chest. It is incredible to see the emotion that comes through the simple movement of Amal's eyes or a wave of her arm as she connects with individuals, especially children.

If you live in one of the following states, you can meet up with Amal in person. She is traveling through various cities in Texas (October 19-26), Arizona (October 27-28), and Southern California (Nov 1-5), with [multiple events](#) hosted by local arts and culture organizations in each stop. As Amir Nizar Zuabi, Artistic Director of The Walk explained, "Each artist, organization and institution has a story to tell about their unique slice of American history and culture, and is inviting Amal and all Americans to learn about what makes this country's heart beat."

There is also an extensive [educational curriculum](#) (available in 8 different languages) and [artistic project ideas](#) that connect with the themes of Amal's journey available for **free** online. The educational activity pack covers six themes: home, migration, fear, climate change, adventure, and welcome (which encompasses community and friendship). Each activity is noted for elementary, middle, and/or high school levels, which makes for an easy incorporation into your

homeschool syllabus. You can also devise your own learning opportunities, such as exploring the [history of puppetry](#) before crafting a particular style of puppet. Leaning into geography, our family will be charting Amal's travels from Syria to San Diego with a world map and pins.

This uniquely interactive theatre experience, at the intersection of arts and humanities, is an example of artistic activism, or [artivism](#), which combines creativity, culture, and innovation to cultivate awareness around a given topic.

"It is because the attention of the world is elsewhere right now that it is more important than ever to reignite the conversation about the refugee crisis and to change the narrative around it," noted Zuabi. "This is a walk of pride. We want to challenge the perception about the refugees. We want to talk about them not as an issue...[rather] to talk about the potential they bring, about the cultural riches they come from and honor their experience. We want to turn this into a celebration of shared humanity and hope.

So many contributions to our country have been made by those seeking to build a new life here. That includes the creators of Curious George, Hans Reyersbach and his wife Margret Rey, Jewish refugees who travelled from Germany, over 1,000 miles by bicycle, before crossing the Atlantic into New York with their manuscript in hand. (That means Curious George is also a refugee). Adolph Levitt, a Russian refugee, invented the first doughnut machine in 1920, popularizing America's new breakfast treat for decades to come. Philip Emeagwali came to the U.S. from Nigeria through a scholarship when he was 17. He became the computer scientist that built the formula for connecting a large number of computers across the world. This technology led to the creation of the internet.

If you are interested in exploring more on the topic of refugees, but aren't able to join Amal in person, you can still utilize the above online activities, follow Amal's journey on [social media](#), or watch some [videos](#) about the making of Amal. Additionally, there are audio guides exclusively developed for the app [Bloomberg Connects](#), highlighting the voices of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers from across Amal's route.

There are so many entry points into this topic. Whatever path you take, will help to humanize an issue that often goes unnoticed. And, if you are inspired, you and your student could even start a local fundraiser to help [The Amal Fund](#), which supports grassroots groups who provide academic training and education for young people and/or supply people with food, shelter and medical services.

For more information and to see a video of Amal, visit <https://walkwithamal.org/>.