A teacher inspires this 12-year-old Syrian refugee to lead future generations.

In a corrugated metal building in Zaatari, a Jordanian camp near the Syrian border, a small group of girls forms a circle. They stretch their arms up, their fingers nearly brushing the brightly colored paper chains decorating the ceiling. Twelve-year-old Azeh grins at her teacher Khawla, and her smile is as expansive as her wide-open arms.

Since coming to this camp of 80,000 refugees, Azeh has transformed from a withdrawn young woman to an outgoing, confident leader who wants to someday become a teacher like her role model, Khawla. Roughly 2.5 million Syrian children like Azeh have been forced out of their homes since the civil war there began. They have left behind family, friends, school, and everything they have ever known. Although no one can erase the hardships they’ve endured, the youth centers in this sprawling refugee camp provide a safe place for children to process trauma, and a nurturing link between the shattered past and a hopeful future.

Azeh’s connection to her teacher Khawla—also a Syrian refugee—was not forged by accident. Mercy Corps, the nonprofit organization that runs the youth center Azeh attends, works with Syrian adults to teach leadership, computer skills, sports, art and other subjects to young refugees like Azeh. Developing deep relationships with role models who come from the same country can make all the difference, providing hope for a better life.

“I build a good relationship with [the girls] and help them feel that they are heard,” says Khawla, who was a primary school teacher in Syria before fleeing to Jordan with her own seven children. Acknowledging the trauma of the past—yet validating a child’s goals for the future—can be profoundly healing.

Displaced youth face alienation and psychological issues from living under constant stress. Community centers give refugee children the opportunity to simply be a kid. Azeh is evidence of the transformation these programs make possible. “I hope I will be happy,” the fifth grader says. “I would like to be a teacher. I want to be like Khawla, someone who makes others laugh and talk, always open to others.”

Khawla knows her student can do it. “I always encourage the kids about the importance of education to build their future,” she says. “Azeh can attain her wish if she continues her education.”

Azeh is one inspiring example of how a safe space gives refugee children room to grow—and to follow their dreams. She’s pursuing her education, but she’s also learning to trust adults again, to feel safe in the world. While she paints murals, practices English and laughs with her new friends, she’s also gaining the confidence that she can one day inspire others, too.