

## PEOPLE TO WATCH IN 2024



**Kathir Kalyanaraman sits at his workspace in his Johnston home. The high school student is the founder of Tech Gift Foundation, which donates refurbished laptops and other personal electronics to refugees.** PHOTOS BY CODY SCANLAN/THE REGISTER

# JOHNSTON TEEN IS CREATING AN IMPACT

He repairs hundreds of laptops, delivers them to refugees in Iowa

**Phillip Sitter** Des Moines Register | USA TODAY NETWORK

A Johnston High School student has gotten hundreds of laptop computers and handheld electronic devices to refugees and other immigrants across Iowa – efforts he wants to expand in 2024, maybe even out of state.

As one of the Des Moines Register’s People to Watch in 2024, Kathir Kalyanaraman, 16, said he wants to show that “age doesn’t determine how much impact you have on the community. You could be 70 years old, older or even younger than I am to really create an impact within the community.”

Kalyanaraman has had a long-running interest in robotics and software. He has been on a robotics team since he was in first grade, a pursuit reflected in the trophies in his family’s house in Johnston. They include math competition trophies as



**Kathir Kalyanaraman holds a thank you letter and photo from one recipient of his refurbished technology.**

**See IMPACT, Page 2A**

# Impact

Continued from Page 1A

well.

He's president of the HOSA-Future Health Professionals club at his school (formerly known as the Health Occupations Students of America), is on the associated state-level board and is part of the student council. He has also taken classes at Drake University.

But beyond his busy academic and extracurricular schedule, Kalyanaraman also refurbishes electronic devices back to working order, devices that are destined to be used by organizations that work with people in need, especially among immigrant and refugee communities in Iowa.

His work has connected hundreds of laptops, phones and smart watches to nonprofits that work with refugees, students and people with low incomes.

Kalyanaraman will sometimes gather the devices himself to fix and donate. He also will receive devices that have already been donated to organizations and need repair – be it a new battery, a charger or a software update.

Kalyanaraman often delivers the devices in person, too. He also started a nonprofit to do that work, Tech Gift Foundation. (The foundation's website is [techgift.org](http://techgift.org), where contact information is available.)

Kalyanaraman, whose own parents immigrated to the U.S. from India, saw a high, unmet demand for technology among people who had recently arrived in the Des Moines metro after fleeing their home countries, places such as Afghanistan, South Sudan and Ukraine.

"That's why I wanted to start Tech Gift Foundation, to really bridge that gap between technology and the underserved community," he said.

## 'Thank you for your kind heart,' a family wrote after getting a laptop

Olena Hubkova knows firsthand what something as simple as even one computer can mean for someone who's trying to start a new life.

"The only thing I use here is this computer," Hubkova said. It's helped her get a job and stay connected with loved ones.

Hubkova came to Ames in August 2022 after leaving Kherson, Ukraine, by the Black Sea. At the time the city of around 280,000 was still occupied by Russian forces, who seized the city in the first week of Russia's 2022 invasion.

Hubkova met up with her husband in the Czech Republic after he left Ukraine shortly before the invasion. Together they came to the United States.

She worked as a nurse in Ukraine, but professional qualifications from other



**Kathir Kalyanaraman sits for a portrait Dec. 12 at his Johnston home. Kalyanaraman is the founder of the Tech Gift Foundation, which donates refurbished laptops and other personal electronics to refugees.**

CODY SCANLAN/THE REGISTER

## About Kathir Kalyanaraman

**AGE:** 16

**LIVES:** Johnston

**EDUCATION:** Junior at Johnston High School and has taken classes at Drake University.

**CAREER:** Wants to be a medical doctor.

**FAMILY:** Mom, Kaviditha Kalyanaraman; dad, Kalyanaraman Venkatraman; sister, Karshana Kalyanaraman.

## About the Des Moines Register's 2024 People to Watch

It's a Des Moines Register tradition to close out each year and open the next by introducing readers to 15 People to Watch – individuals expected to make an impact on Iowa in the coming year.

This year's nominations from readers and our journalists totaled nearly 60 people and posed hard decisions for staff members charged with winnowing them to just 15.

The final 15 include people in business and the arts, those who train the world-class athletes of the future, chefs on the cutting edge, farmers teaching refugees how to run their own farms, and people fighting for representation through cosmetics and medicine. We hope that you are as inspired by reading about them as we were in profiling them.

countries are not always accepted in the U.S.

Meanwhile, an opportunity presented itself for Kalyanaraman when his dad's business – Cerebral Group, based in Des Moines – decided to upgrade its technology, leaving a lot of leftover lap-

tops, phones and other tech.

"I didn't want to have them recycle it," Kalyanaraman said. "That costs money to recycle it, and it otherwise could go into a landfill, and I thought there could be a better purpose for that. And I just connected dots."

He got in touch with Des Moines Refugee Support, his first main connection and one that opened doors for him at other organizations, including United We March Forward in Cedar Rapids, Refugee and Immigrant Association in Iowa City, Ames Interfaith Refugee Alliance, Knock and Drop in Des Moines, and Latinx Immigrants of Iowa in Des Moines.

Hubkova had not met Kalyanaraman, but she received a laptop from him through the Ames Interfaith Refugee Alliance.

She and her husband brought a 20-year-old computer with them, but the laptop she got from Kalyanaraman allowed her to start taking certified nursing assistant classes online through Des Moines Area Community College.

Hubkova said she got a job at a retirement community in Ames and has since received her CNA certification – basic and advanced. She plans to continue studying to be a certified medical assistant.

The laptop doesn't just help her career. She uses the computer to stay in touch with friends in Ukraine and catch up on news from there. And she watches YouTube videos to teach herself knitting projects.

Getting help from other people surprised her and her husband.

"Maybe for people here it's normal, but for us it wasn't," she said. For that, "we would like to say a lot of thanks to him, for his help."

Kalyanaraman shared a handwritten card he received from another Ukrainian family in Ames, signed Katy, Olena and Oleksi.

"We want to thank you for your kind heart and noble deeds that you do!" it read. "It was a big surprise for us to receive a laptop from you, which we needed so much. It touched us to the core. Thank you and thank you to the universe that sends such wonderful people with big hearts to earth!"

Kalyanaraman said the gratitude from people he's helped has been his most rewarding experience. Receiving the card "really showed that I am doing something right for this community, and it's just fueled me to do even more."

## Kathir Kalyanaraman wants to take his work to a regional level and beyond

A pile of about 100 laptops in Kalyanaraman's basement awaits some tender loving care after they were donated by Principal Financial Group to Des Moines Refugee Support. As of early December,

he had refurbished and given away 233 devices.

The count includes a couple of smart watches for Des Moines high school cross country teams.

In addition to Cerebral and Principal, Kalyanaraman said he's also received computers from EMC Insurance.

Now that he has his driver's license, Kalyanaraman wants to expand his network to nonprofit organizations as far away as Kansas City.

He's thinking about pursuing a pre-med undergraduate degree at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, but he hasn't yet decided exactly where he wants to go to college.

He's already thinking about how to pass on his work in Iowa to a successor.

"I do want to go out of state" for college, Kalyanaraman said. "But I want to create a community within wherever I'm going, because there's always going to be a need, like nationwide. So I want to create a footprint there and then just keep the connections here in Iowa."

He's also thinking about Minneapolis, Sioux Falls and Omaha as places where he could connect with nonprofits.

Alison Hoeman, founder and director of Des Moines Refugee Support, said that when Kalyanaraman first contacted her, she didn't realize he was not an adult until the volunteer who met him told her.

Hoeman said the group had received a batch of 100 laptops before. Those devices were particularly helpful for Afghan refugees, who could take English classes online while the COVID-19 pandemic was limiting in-person options. And often, the entire family would have only one cellphone.

Like Hubkova and friends in Ukraine, Hoeman said laptops and cellphones let families stay in touch with loved ones still in Afghanistan. And cellphones are vital for the youth soccer players her organization transports to and from practice.

Hoeman said refurbishing that initial batch of devices was more than her organization could handle. She's grateful for Kalyanaraman's help.

"He's obviously very smart," Hoeman said. "He's very aware of not everybody lives like him. There's people in need that he has this talent that he is really good with technology, and he has found a way to make that helpful. I think that's rare among 15-, 16-year-olds."

Kalyanaraman said starting a nonprofit was easier than he expected.

"If you have a will, there's always going to be a way," he said.

*Phillip Sitter focuses for the Des Moines Register on reporting on suburban growth and development in the western metro areas. Phillip can be reached via email at [psitter@gannett.com](mailto:psitter@gannett.com). He is on X, formerly known as Twitter, at [@plsifeisabeauty](https://twitter.com/plsifeisabeauty).*