



Welcoming the Stranger

Minnesota Council of Churches Refugee Services

JANUARY 2011

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- **Aiding in the job search**
- **Refugee Speaker's Bureau**
- **Church Co-Sponsorship**
- **Teaching Housing Basics**
- **A Volunteer's Journal**

DONATION NEEDS:

- Pots, pans, pillows, and towels (please only bring in new or very clean items)
- Laundry baskets, bakeware
- Kitchen table with chairs, dressers, couches, twin, full or queen bed with box spring, bed frames
- **Please call Holly at 612-230-3249 if you are interested in donating.**

Celebrating Volunteers

This month we recognize the volunteers who give generously to welcome refugees to Minnesota. Volunteers drive refugees to important appointments, befriend recent arrivals, help with the job search, give and sort donations, set-up apartments, help with outreach, and so much more! On behalf of the refugees we serve together—thank you!

It Takes A Village to Find a Job



Students from the Carlson School of Business practicing interviews with refugees in MCC's employment program.

There is a common proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child." Refugee Employment Services has come to understand the truth of this expression in a different capacity: we've found that "it takes a village to *find a job*!"

Employment Services has found that the more people engaged in the job search, the better the success rate! The Job Readiness Mentor program was launched this fall. So far we have had 4 volunteer Job Readiness

Mentors help refugees apply for jobs online, work on job-specific vocabulary, and occasionally provide transportation to a work-site. One of our Job Readiness Mentors gave her partner a ride to his first day of work at FedEx. Another Mentor, Brian accompanied his partner on a "walk-around" as they applied to jobs in-person at various stores. Because of Brian's assistance, his partner got a seasonal, part-time job at Kohl's!

In November we hosted a group of University of MN students belonging to an organization called Net Impact in their annual "Carlson Goes to Work" day. Eight students helped ten refugees identify their marketable employment skills and how to showcase their gifts and strengths in interviews with employers. Also, two human resources professionals, one from the DoubleTree Park Place Hotel and the other from Brigham Group Staffing, came to the final day of our Job Readiness Workshop to be Mock Interviewers and give feedback on the students' performances.

When done alone, looking for work can be discouraging and tiring—especially in such a competitive environment where employers are cutting back on hiring. With the help of "the village," however, refugees realize that they have support from the community.

Refugees Tell Their Stories



A Liberian man tells his story in the public speaking class.

From the beginning of human expression, storytelling has been a way of keeping a record of history. It is a powerful way for the older generation to pass on their knowledge of the world to the generations after them. In many societies past and present, oral tradition is the medium of choice to preserve a culture's stories. Spoken aloud, stories have the power to captivate and draw the listener into a world they may never be able to experience themselves.

Refugee Services has a program built specifically for

the telling of stories—the Refugee Speaker's Bureau (RSB). At the end of a public speaking class offered by Refugee Services, the refugee speakers have the chance to join the RSB as volunteers. These volunteer speakers go to churches, schools, and other local organizations to tell their refugee story. It gives the listeners the rare opportunity to absorb this oral history and understand the refugee experience in a personal way.

In 2010, 761 people in the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota were present at

RSB speaking events. Thanks to these volunteer speakers, stories from Burma, Bhutan, Somalia, Cameroon, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have been told. The audiences are all different, but all gain similar things from hearing these stories of courage and hope—a greater understanding of what Minnesota's newest residents went through to be where they are today and their dreams for the future.

Contact us if you would like to host a refugee speaker.

*Special thanks to
volunteer Dan Long
for all of your hard
work delivering
donations!
We couldn't do the
work we do without
you.*

Learning the Basics of Housing

When refugees arrive in the Twin Cities, one of the most essential, as well as bewildering, aspects of life in the United States is understanding the American rental system. While refugees may find their first permanent home in decades, they also encounter an entirely foreign system of leases, security deposits, and rental and utility payments.

Fortunately, they also find a whole host of volunteers who are willing to help them navigate that system through Refugee Services' Renter Education Program. Refugees begin by attending a Home Orientation which covers topics like safe community, landlord/tenant rights and

responsibilities, and how to clean apartments using natural, environmentally friendly cleaning supplies. These classes would not be possible without the dedication of volunteers Linda O'Malley from St. Clement's Episcopal Church and Janice Dames from Messiah Episcopal Church, who have mobilized their congregations to donate supplies and have volunteered to teach the classes to the Karen and Bhutanese community in St. Paul for a full year.

Refugee Services is also grateful for the support of volunteer interpreters who allow us to offer classes in refugees' native languages. Ahmed Ibrahim is one such volunteer, an Arabic interpreter who has assisted in both the Home Orientation and Renter's Ed, an in-depth class that equips refugees to understand the

housing system in the United States.

Other volunteer interpreters have accessed MCC Refugee Services at some point themselves, such as Sharmake Muse and Abdissamad Nadif, who have gone from attending classes to interpreting them, generously donating their time to serve new arrivals from their native Somalia.

With the addition of a new intern, Sarah Longstreth, MCC will be able to offer these classes in both St. Paul and Minneapolis on a regular schedule, ensuring that all refugees we serve know their rights and responsibilities as renters in their new homes.



Co-Sponsorship Success



Greeting a Karen family at the airport.

Following several years without church co-sponsorships, in 2010 eleven families received significant support from churches! That's 43 individuals from Somalia, Burma, Iraq, and Bhutan. Christians, Muslims, and Kirats who fled to Thailand, Uganda, Kenya, and Nepal now call MN home. The co-sponsoring churches represent many denominations as well: Vineyard, Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Assemblies of God, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, and

Methodist communities all reached out to provide help and support.

Refugee Services staff has had the privilege of witnessing many sacrificial acts of welcome from both churches and families. We watched all 20 members of a church group wait three hours for a delayed flight to welcome a Bhutanese family and a Somali family include church volunteers in the welcome feast for newly arriving family.

We know Somali families who have honored church members with the title of grandparents and church members who have advocated for refugee families to receive the health care and repairs they deserve. Church groups have encouraged some of the most vulnerable families we serve—those with histories of trauma, single mothers, religious and ethnic minorities, and those with medical challenges.

In addition, many other churches have helped to provide needed household items, coats, home orientation training, gardening assistance, and so much more!

Refugee Services is so grateful to the faith communities of MN for their inspiring support for refugee families this year. Their ability to help refugees feel socially connected and at home in Minnesota is absolutely unmatched!

If your church would like to participate in this ministry, there will be many opportunities in 2011. Contact us for more information.

Insight into a Befriender's Experience



The following are excerpts from a student volunteer's journal kept during her time as a Befriender volunteer. Befrienders are volunteers who commit to walking alongside a newly arrived refugee for the first 3-4 months of life in Minnesota. It is a chance for the refugee to become better acquainted with their community and both volunteer and refugee to be transformed through their new friendship. The special relationship this student formed with her Bhutanese refugee friend is an encouragement and joy to see!

The volunteer's journal was a class project, but she shared her thoughts with MCC too!

Entry #1

I met with Phul Maya this morning for the first time on my own. I brought a magazine to give to her, and had her read just to get a feel of how much she understands. I also got to hear a little bit about their life in Nepal and how she and her husband met. Phul Maya told me she loved music and her husband said that she was a very good singer. I asked her to sing for me, and to my delight she did! She sang a traditional wedding song that a bride sings on her wedding day about leaving her family and all she has known to go on a new journey. By the end both Phul Maya and I were close to tears. I suppose we were both thinking about how that song is relevant today.*

Entry #2

Today Phul Maya and I worked on her English again, looking through the magazine and learning some new words and phrases. She also handed me a paper from DHS that her landlord needed to sign so at the end of the lesson we went on a search for the business office. We were able to find the business office and the landlord was very kind and signed the papers. Phul Maya was very grateful, and I was happy to be able to help her.

Entry #3

When I arrived this morning, as usual there was a family member/guest there. It's always nice to see that the family has other people surrounding them. Before I left, I ran out to my car to grab some bus tickets to give to Phul Maya that I obtained for free from a friend. Phul Maya walked out with me and informed me that she had already ridden the bus by herself because she wanted to know how it worked. I was so surprised! "You are a brave woman!" I told her, as she smiled shyly. Even I have never ridden the bus in St. Paul! Her perseverance amazes me.

*Name has been changed
- Photo credit: morguefile.com



Minnesota Council of Churches Refugee Services

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Minnesota Council of Churches
manifests the unity of the body of Christ and builds the common good in the world in partnership with 24 member Protestant, Historic Black, and Orthodox judicatories representing more than 2000 congregations and their one million members.

Refugee Services Our Mission Statement:

Refugee Services is an ecumenical ministry welcoming persecuted people from around the world into new lives of freedom, hope, and opportunity in Minnesota.

Our Vision:

Refugees are abundantly supported as they move from addressing basic needs to achieving their dreams. *And* faith communities are transformed by partnering in this ministry of hospitality.

Ethiopian Dish: Atkilt

Ingredients:

¼ cup olive oil
4 carrots, thinly sliced
1 onion, thinly sliced
1 teaspoon sea salt
1 teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon ground turmeric
½ head cabbage, shredded
5 potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes

Heat olive oil in a skillet over medium heat. Cook the carrots and onions in the hot



Atkilt is the vegetable dish at about 11 o'clock on this plate of food served on injera.

oil about 5 minutes. Stir in salt, pepper, cumin, turmeric and cabbage and cook another 15 to 20 minutes.

Add the potatoes; cover. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook until potatoes are soft, 20 to 30 minutes. Serve on injera (traditional flat bread can be found at most African grocery stores)

Adapted from: <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/ethiopian-cabbage-dish/Detail.aspx>

Photo credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bunchofpants/3662859302/>