



Welcoming the Stranger

Minnesota Council of Churches Refugee Services

JULY 2010

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- **Fresh Start Community Garden**
- **Refugees get Job Ready**
- **Hear from a church volunteer**
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Fresh Start Community Garden

Many refugee populations coming to Minnesota are from areas in the world that are predominantly farming societies. When they are resettled into urban areas like the Twin Cities, access to and knowledge of where to garden is not always available to them. This spring, Refugee Services has been working with refugee families to start community gardens at an apartment complex where refugee populations are living.

After just two short meetings with sixteen families from Burma, one family from Nigeria and one American family living in an apartment complex in St. Paul the families were ready to break ground and grow food for their families this summer. The property owners agreed to provide the use a large flat green space as a garden and water from the apartment building. Refugee Services connected families with their

neighbors, churches, other gardeners, and material resources - seeds, plants, tools and a shed - needed for start up. Since that first meeting,



Ground-breaking day

community leaders have organized the families, and Refugee Services' role now is to help connect the families with gardening resources the families need. The Master Gardener intern working with us has also hosted information sessions to teach the families

about different plants that grow well in small spaces and when to plant in Minnesota.

Families are starting to eat their garden fresh veggies! The garden gives families access to nutritious, low cost food, a way to manage the stress of living in a new country and increases social capital that benefits the health and well being of families involved in the project. After talking to one of the women about how she liked the garden, she said, "It makes me feel like I am back home in Burma," because she brought some seeds with her from Burma that she hasn't been able to plant until now. She also mentioned that the families all water the garden together every night which she really likes because she is getting to know more of her neighbors.

A Volunteer's Reward by Colleen Woodley

The end of February ushered in an unexpected call for assistance. I received an email from my church stating that there was an urgent need for help with some "free case" families coming from refugee camps in Kenya.

Because I had been laid off from my job I had some free time, I decided that this would be a good thing for me to be involved in so I emailed our pastor and was informed of the arrival time and what would be needed immediately.

The family was probably enroute to Minnesota even

before I knew the story so we were mobilized quickly to meet them at the airport and set up their housing before they landed. I had some vague expectations of what this situation would be and who these new friends would be and how we would relate to each other. I was so far off in those thoughts and expectations that it really did shock me.

I had anticipated the young couple, Ahmed and Samara to be exhausted and maybe a bit shy and

bewildered in the new surroundings. What I found was an exuberant family, full of excitement and gratitude, smiling and continually thanking all who were in attendance. All of us who assembled to meet the family seemed to have a bond with them even before we could share any language. Some members of my family commented that they were just drawn to Ahmed and Samara upon seeing them and shaking their hands. It was moving and as I said earlier, an unexpected response from us.

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Public Speaking Skills Class

This May, Refugee Services once again offered its Public Speaking Skills class to 9 refugees from Somali, Bhutan, and Burma. The class is designed to prepare refugees for the Refugee Speakers Bureau, which gives them the opportunity to share their story with a variety of audiences including church and community groups.

The month long class helps speakers think about the expectations of American audiences, good public speaking techniques, and frameworks for explaining one's past as a refugee and their dreams for

the future. The course was developed and taught by a volunteer, Jan McFall, who is an ESOL professor at a local college. Jan did a great job of creating an encouraging classroom environment and students commented on how she helped them to translate a lifetime of experiences into a brief speech that would effectively bring unfamiliar listeners to a vivid understanding of their lives.

On last day of class, each speaker shared a brief version of their story with their classmates and guests and then celebrated with

snacks and certificates. As anyone who has heard a refugee speaker present can attest, sharing the experience of telling one's refugee story creates a special bond, and everyone was a bit reluctant to leave at the end of the last class.

We're pleased to announce that Refugee Speakers Bureau now includes representation from Somalia, Bhutan, and Burma, all new nationalities to the Refugee Speakers Bureau.

To request a speaker, please contact Kristin Zoellner at 612-230-3219.

"It is in those minor events that I can realize how much it means for our new neighbors to experience the things that most of us take for granted."

A Volunteer's Reward continued

As our relationship went on, I found that Ahmed had a better working knowledge of the English language but Samara and I seemed to be able to connect in a non-verbal way which seemed almost innate. She would nod or motion to me in a certain way or I would do the same and we seemed to acknowledge and understand each other beyond the level that one would expect. This was quite helpful in many ways and even more than the practical advantage, it seemed to foster a closeness and kinship between us. The practice of English and some of the cultural acclimation continued on through the weeks of winter into spring and the family grew in their confidence and ability to maneuver our way of life. The children learned at a lightening pace with the help of some community resources for new citizens. It became

apparent to me early on that these new friends of mine had a very healthy sense of humor. The kids and I would play and when I did something to make them laugh, they would laugh uncontrollably and then their parents would quickly join in. I was somewhat shocked that these folks who had undoubtedly been through so many trials had such a quick wit.

One of the things that I am most grateful for in all of this is the relationship that we have and the closeness that we feel in spite of our very different lives. Another wonderful thing is the ability that I have gained to look at my community, my country in a new way...through the eyes of immigrants who are new to it. Those eyes are filled with gratitude for the possibilities and the security of housing and

resources and food within close proximity. At one point one of the children had left her jacket in a chair at the clinic we were visiting and Samara looked for it and said it was gone. I assured her we could find it and went to the desk and asked for the lost and found at which point, the lady produced the jacket. Samara literally shouted out, "America is good!" and then told me that in the refugee camp where they had been living the jacket would have been gone. It is in those minor events that I can realize how much it means for our new neighbors to experience the things that most of us take for granted.

Ahmed and Samara and their family will face many struggles in the next months and years but they are so happy to be here and my life is so much better for me having met them and being able to share some of their journey.

Learn About Refugees: Policy Issues

The Hearth Act – One part of this act advocates for broadening the definition of homeless to include those who are “doubled up,” (living with family or friends). When newer refugee populations have housing crises, many times they won’t feel comfortable going to a shelter, but they will move in with friends or family members as an alternative. While they are without a home, they would not be considered homeless under the current federal definition. This makes them

ineligible for certain services. You can find more info about this Act at the website below. <http://www.npach.org/HEARTH/>

Refugee Protection Act 2010, S.3113 – This act increases protections for asylum seekers and makes sure that Asylum seekers aren’t unfairly denied because of persecution by terrorist groups. Lastly, it eliminates the one-year waiting period for refugees to apply for a green card, and it advocates

for adjusting the per capita grant level yearly for changes in the cost of living and inflation. <http://www.immigrantjustice.org/press/legislation/rpa2010intro.html>

Domestic Refugee Resettlement Reform and Modernization Act of 2010 – This is another bill to keep an eye out for in the near future. Al Franken is co-sponsoring this bill.

Refugee Services is need of shampoo, blankets, towels, and tables

We’re Registered at Target.com!

You can donate basic household items that still have good life to a refugee family and help them create a new home in Minnesota! Refugee Services is currently low on shampoo, blankets, towels, dining tables and coffee tables.

Would you like to host a

housewarming for a new refugee family? Refugee Services has recently created a target registry to make it even easier to know which items are needed by new refugee families as they move into their first American home. You can access it online at target.com or in

stores under ‘MN Council of Churches’.

Contact:

Dan Huynh- Housing Resource Developer
Dan.huynh@mnychurches.org
612-230-3227

Refugees Getting Job Ready



Practicing introductory handshakes

At the point at which refugees arrive to MN, the nature of their challenge changes from fleeing danger and persecution to becoming self sufficient in a new country. In order to help refugee clients tackle this new challenge,

Refugee Services provides employment services to new refugees. As part of their services, employment counselors and volunteers offer a monthly Job Readiness Workshop.

The workshop is a six hour class spread over three consecutive morning sessions. Its curriculum was designed by the employment counselors at Refugee Services and is taught by volunteers and staff. Refugee Services is very fortunate to have help from a retired human resources professional who began teaching the class on a regular basis this spring. He brings enthusiasm and real-world experience to class participants. The workshop covers

many different aspects of job hunting such as how and where to start looking for a job, network effectively, fill out paper and online applications, identify strengths and skills that are marketable to employers, and even prepares clients for interviews by facilitating mock interviews with human resource professionals. The Refugee Services employment team stresses that the workshops empower clients by giving them the necessary tools and information to successfully find a job. The job search process is supported by employment counselors, but refugees have an equal part in the efforts required.



Visit our Website! www.mnchurches.org

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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.

Recipe Corner: Fresh Burmese Tomato Salad



Fresh Burmese Tomato Salad

Ingredients:

½ cup peanuts plus 1 Tbsp
2 small dried red chilies
½ - 1 Tbsp sugar
1-2 Tbsp lime/lemon juice or vinegar
2-3 tsp. splashes of fish sauce
(found at any Chinese/
Vietnamese/Thai food store)

4 ripe tomatoes, sliced
Coriander to garnish

Instructions:

- Crush ½ cup peanuts, dice chilies and roast them together in a small amount of oil. Drain oil when finished.
- Add chilies and peanuts along with the rest of the liquid ingredients and sugar into a small mixing bowl. Stir well to make sure the sugar is dissolved and add salt and pepper as needed.
- Sprinkle liquid on top of the sliced tomatoes
- Add fresh chopped coriander and 1 Tbsp peanuts to the top

Recipe/photo credit: <http://www.grouprecipes.com/15525/burmese-tomato-salad.html>