

Who Is Teaching Whom?

THE ROLE THAT REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS CAN PLAY IN EDUCATING CHILDREN

by **Tim Baldwin**, Executive Director, Refuge of Nations

with assistance from **Shawn Honey**

One of my greatest joys as a teacher is when former students return to my high school classroom for a surprise visit. They come to discuss career choices, to reminisce about experiences in the classroom or on the athletic field, to share photos, or to explore issues in their spiritual journey. One character even returned, guitar in hand, to try out some new riffs on a captive audience. But whatever the reason or age, the visit of a former student to his or her teacher suggests that their relationship was significant. As a result, I take note when former Refuge of Nations volunteers return to visit the refugees and immigrants with whom they served as high school students.

Students' Perspectives: Who Is Teaching Whom?

Andrew Miller, a senior at Miami of Ohio, is one such student. He worked alongside Mama Georgette at her in-



home day-care program four years ago and has returned to visit a number of times. But why? Why would a strapping young man like Andrew return to visit an elderly African refugee who doesn't speak much English? He explains, "I go back to keep the friendship alive and to see the kids again." With growing passion he continues, "She taught me by the way she modeled love, endurance, and faithfulness. We heard about these things at school all the time, but it is very different when you see someone model them. I was

always exhausted after my two hours helping her, but she just kept loving those kids." Andrew muses, "While we students prayed for only a few minutes at a time, Mama Georgette prayed with us whenever she could and at great length. Then she would pray "Merci, Seigneur" for one thing after another; her prayers were filled with gratitude."

Andrew's experience has been the norm. While our high school volunteers begin their experience with us expecting that they will serve as "teachers" for our immigrant and refugee friends, the students quickly discover that the refugees are their teachers. Georgette, Maria, and others have a wealth of knowledge from which to teach the students about life's most important themes—community, suffering, faith, hospitality, perseverance, forgiveness, and love. In fact, 90 percent of the students we surveyed indicated that their relationships with immigrants and



refugees have shaped their views of God, the world, other nations, American culture, poverty, and themselves.

In God's upside-down economy, he often uses the young, the weak, the poor, the sick, the disabled, and the "alien" to teach the strong. This truth was confirmed in the results of the entire volunteer survey. It is noteworthy, however, that 67 percent of the respondents indicated that their experiences with the "alien" have influenced their calling and career choices. A premed student, for example, describes a clinical experience in which she worked with patients who speak Kurdish, French, or Spanish. She says, "It is a challenge, but I feel better prepared after serving (and being served by) immigrants and refugees." An education major exclaims, "I have taken an interest in ELL (English Language Learners) and helping those students adjust to American culture, but also want to learn about their culture, appreciating it, and teaching my other students about the cultures of my ELL students."

Elementary Students' Experiences: Fruitful

While the experiences of our elementary age volunteers have been quite different in structure from those of the older students, the impact has



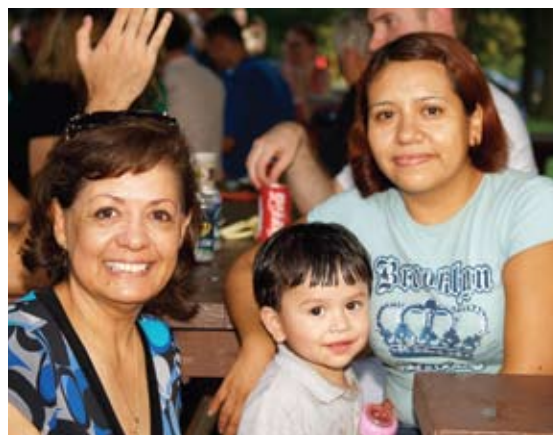
been equally powerful. Consider the learning that has taken place through Kirk Day School's annual field trip to Soulard Market.

Five years ago, KDS's second grade teachers approached us about organizing a field trip to the market in which the students would purchase fruit and vegetables for members of the Refuge of Nations community. The teachers hoped to expose their suburban, somewhat sheltered students to the beauty of the city and those who live in it. One thing led to another and the first trip took place with refugees from Liberia, Congo, and Colombia serving as guides and teachers.

Over the years, the connections have deepened and the KDS students' vision has grown. Last year the group of students who participated in the first field trip initiated several fruitful projects on behalf of their refugee friends, invited the refugees back to KDS to teach, and prayed faithfully for them. Their younger siblings now participate: Individual students have collected books and raised money through "dog sitting," and a KDS Girl Scout troop planned an extracurricular field trip for a group of Liberian children.

Parents' Perspectives: Mind-boggling

A tremendous bonus for the Christian home and school is that students' experiences with immigrants and refugees frequently have a powerful impact on their parents. One of the KDS mothers who



participated in the first field trip to Soulard Market, for example, has been a volunteer with Refuge of Nations ever since and now serves on our board. Another KDS parent, Brooks Moore, whose church now has African refugees as members, says, "Getting involved with immigrants and refugees has made me a different person. . . . Our whole family has been amazed and challenged by our friends' contentment, gratitude, and optimism. These are people who value education, prize friendships, and remain loyal. They are not just survivors: they are *overcomers!*"

Christan Perona, a Central Christian School parent and staff member adds, "When someone from another culture enters our children's lives, our children immediately must make a choice: Will their education remain in their heads or will what they have been taught begin to bear fruit? . . . The beautiful thing is that as our children are exposed to cross-cultural situations that stimulate spiritual growth, we parents are exposed too." Brooks Moore concludes, "It is mind-boggling. Our refugee friends have nothing, yet they have much more than we do—perspective, wisdom, compassion, patience, and perseverance."

Teachers' Perspectives: Skills & Chills

Teachers at every grade level have been effusive about how much their students have learned from immigrants and refugees. Joan Dudley, a teacher at Westminster Christian Academy, regularly brings her middle and high school Spanish students to provide child care for Refuge of Nations' activities. She insists that doing so "provides a more authentic cultural environment that could never be simulated in a classroom. Relationships develop that break down false ideas and barriers." She adds that her students "come away overwhelmed with the stories they heard, and knocked off their feet with the way they have been able to interact and communicate so personally. They are spurred on to improve their fluency and language skills."

Josh Crane, Central Christian School parent and Head of School, states that "immigrants and refugees connect our children to places they had only studied on a map or looked at in textbooks. They bring their stories, which are deep reservoirs for teaching and which orient young children to a life beyond themselves." Melissa Kriegshauser, a veteran second grade teacher at Rossman School, underscores the importance of those stories: "Former students remember the fascinating stories the refugees have told them. They are captivated by the knowledge that many of these people are very educated and held good jobs in their own countries and then had to flee for their lives. . . . It made a *big* impact on the students when an older Cuban man told us that the money we collected for him was almost the exact amount he needed to

purchase medicine for his very ill wife. Things like that give you the chills. It's wonderful when our children truly realize that the simple things they take for granted are really the essentials that many people need to survive."

Immigrant & Refugee Perspectives: Relationships

Gabe Kapate, a West African political refugee who was educated in France and now is a Refuge of Nations board member, has often visited schools and co-led student orientation programs. Whenever Gabe has the opportunity to teach, he does so because he eagerly desires that young people know "the Church is larger than just one nation" and God created us as "one humanity," consisting of many different colors, cultures, and languages. Gabe also longs for Americans of every age "to learn to have greater respect for African culture and its values." He believes, for example, that people in America "often neglect their relationships because they orient their time around work and making money rather than around building relationships." Children and adults continue to learn from Gabe about the great value of God-given friendships!

Like Gabe, Georgette Djona, a former Congolese cabinet member, relishes any opportunity to teach young people. Much of the teaching she does takes place in her home where she mentors volunteers while caring for refugee children from all over sub-Saharan Africa. She teaches because she wants the *Andrews* and *Abduls* to know that God's love for those who trust in Christ never fails. This is her mission because she knows that "anything can happen in life, but in each situation, no matter how bad things

may seem, God is always present and in control." Georgette also educates young people about the realities of the refugee experience: "To be uprooted because of war is horrible. Imagine being forced to leave the place you have always called home because suddenly you are told that you are better dead than alive. . . . God is the only giver of life, and we refugees feel blessed to be here."

A Broader Curriculum

Andrew Miller says that God has brought people like Georgette to North America to bless us. So who is teaching whom? He observes, "Students learn more from these good teachers, and they learn different things than what they think they are learning. The teacher has a broader vision with a goal that the student eventually recognizes the broader curriculum." Refuge of Nations dreams that, by God's grace, immigrants and refugees will broaden the "curriculum" in every home and school, enriching our lives and giving us a glimpse of life in his enduring country (see Hebrews 11:12-16).

The reflections of one of our young volunteers provide a final, fitting challenge: "Life really is about loving your neighbor and loving God. American culture is very individualistic when what we need is community. There are so many stories in people's lives that we can learn from if we just ask and listen."

Tim Baldwin is the Executive Director of Refuge of Nations in St. Louis, Missouri. He co-founded Refuge of Nations in 2005. Previously he served at a church-run non-profit, and before that as an award winning teacher at Westminster Christian Academy.

ABOUT REFUGE OF NATIONS

OUR MISSION

“Mentoring our immigrant & refugee neighbors for new life in St. Louis and beyond.”

WEEKLY ACTIVITIES

Acculturation & Assimilation, Advocacy, Childcare, Community Meeting (Bible teaching, childcare & meals), English as Second Language (in partnership with Redeemer Church), Home Visits, Professional Counseling, Referrals, Support Groups for Men & Women, Transportation, Volunteer Training (onsite)

FINANCIALS

2007 Budget: \$172,000.00

2007 Donations: \$192,000.00

2008 Budget: \$190,000.00

LEGAL STATUS

Missouri Incorporation (3/10/05)

Federal 501 (c) 3 Non-Profit (4/23/06)

OUR COMMUNITY

At present, we have regular contact with friends and volunteers representing over 50 families and the following nations: Argentina, Bosnia, Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, Chile, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Iraq, Liberia, Mexico, Panama, Somalia, Thailand, Togo and the USA.

15-25 adults, 20-30 children, and 10-15 volunteers regularly, participate in our weekly Community Group Meeting. Both women's and men's support groups meet every week, and many people receive professional counseling on a weekly basis.

PARTNERS

Businesses: AMDG Architects, CTA Inc., The Beckemeier Law Firm, Cass Commercial Bank, Continuum Care, Edward Jones, Enterprise, Findstuff, Greentree Tire & Auto, Hayflich & Steinberg, Hughes, Los Catrachos, St. Louis Cardinals, Schaffner Machine Co.

Churches: Central Presbyterian Church, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Crossroads Presbyterian Church, Gateway to Grace, Kirk of the Hills Presbyterian Church, Immanuel Evangelical Free Church, Lighthouse Free Methodist Church, Old Orchard Presbyterian Church, Providence Presbyterian Church, Redeemer Evangelical Church, South City Church, The Journey, Trinity Christian Reformed Church, West Hills Community Church, Windsor Crossing Community Church

Schools : Central Christian School, Covenant Theological Seminary, Kirk Day School, Missouri Baptist University, Rossman School,

St. Louis Public Schools ESOL Department, Twin Oaks Christian School, Washington University, Westminster Christian Academy

Organizations : Catholic Charities, Center for Business, Industry, and Labor, Community Alternatives, Crossroads Christian Counseling, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, La Clinica, New Dimensions Soccer, Professional Latino Action Network, Southside Bosnian Coalition, The Family Justice Center

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OUR HOPE

“O Lord, both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.” The Psalmist

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