



Program helps bridge tutoring gap

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OAKLAND -- All those years hitting the books in school might benefit more than just yourself. Refugee Transitions, an organization assisting refugees and immigrants in becoming self-sufficient, has launched a program called the Bridge-2-Success Youth Partnership, where volunteers tutor 7- to 17-year-old refugee students.

The organization focuses on Cambodian and Bosnian students in Oakland, and Afghan students in Fremont -- survivors of atrocious wars in recent years -- and receives referrals from other social service groups.

But the program has as much to do with mentoring as it does with academic tutoring. Victor Smallberg of Oakland joined the program in September and spends a few hours each week with his Bosnian student, Alen Ruznic, a 15-year-old who attends a charter school in Oakland.

"We spent the first session talking a lot -- first about sports, then about Bosnia, drawing maps of where he came from, talking about what it had been like there," Smallberg.

Now they meet regularly at the Oakland Main Library, studying mathematics, science and English together, while also writing stories and talking about horses, Ruznic's favorite subject.

"It's really different than just plugging someone into a program that they signed up for," Smallberg said. "They're appreciative of the help but they have to see who you are and what you're all about."

Smallberg's bond with Reznic has grown. They attend sporting events together and are hoping both their families will connect in the near future. Like all volunteers in the program, Smallberg had to go through a training orientation in San Francisco and a background check with fingerprinting.

The program has proved to be popular -- the organization has a waiting list for Afghan refugees in Fremont and is trying to meet the tutoring needs of the community.

"There are a lot of youth programs out there but none of them that work specifically with refugee youth," said Laura Vaudreuil, executive director of Refugee Transitions. "Often times, the kids

are bridging two cultures. Each have different values."

Vaudreuil said any volunteer who went through the U.S. school system can help a refugee student in more ways than they realize.

"(Volunteers) are not their therapists or saviors but (they're) somebody who would support them both academically and socially," she said.

The organization is hoping to serve 60 students by the end of the year. For more information about the Bridge-2-Success program or Refugee Transitions, call or email reftrans.org.