
◆ Refugee Transitions Bulletin ◆

www.reftrans.org

Winter/Spring 2003

Greetings! The year 2002 was a busy one. Refugee Transitions has welcomed new programs, new goals for the future, new board members and new staff. Like many other organizations and individuals in the Bay Area, we too have felt the burden of an economic turnaround, and shrinking donations. In the face of these challenges, however, RT remains focused on its mission and continues to develop and deliver valuable services to refugee and immigrant families, many of whom are especially vulnerable to a weakened economy.

Our home-based programs continue to be the hallmark of our services. This issue profiles one of our dedicated volunteers, Chris Modell, who has tutored 3 students over the last year and has spent the last 5 months helping his third student who is from China to learn English and to access community resources. Nilar, a refugee from Burma, also shares her story in this issue.



You will also be informed of the latest activities of our Bosnian Youth Art project, and although the program came to an end in December, our presence in Oakland remains strong. We look forward to deepening our relationship with Survivors International (SI), a non-profit organization dedicated to the treatment and support of survivors of torture. SI plans to co-locate with us in the Fruitvale District of Oakland in order to provide exercise classes, support groups and therapeutic movement classes for members of the Bosnian and Cambodian communities. We will continue to work together closely to develop programs that are sensitive to the needs of the refugee and immigrant community in Oakland. We also look forward to launching our new *Bridge-2-Success Refugee Youth Development Partnership*, which will allow us to provide critically needed mentoring and academic assistance to Afghan, Cambodian and Bosnian youth in the East Bay.

Many thanks to all of our supporters, and to our tireless volunteers who contribute over 7,200 hours worth of community service on an annual basis. However, as we move into yet another uncertain year, we need your financial support now more than ever. Thanks in advance for your generosity and for supporting RT as it continues to help clients like Hien, a refugee from Vietnam, who when asked about the role RT has played in her life said, "I no longer feel frustrated and hopeless as I did before. I feel confident to continue and to do more, learn more, express more, obtain more... surely, I will see my future, a better one."

Sincerely,

Nora Heaphy
Executive Director

Special thanks to the following for their financial support

The Clorox Company Foundation
The East Bay Community Foundation
The Junior League of San Francisco
The San Francisco Foundation
The Van Loben Sels Foundation

The Federal Office of Refugee Resettlement
The California State Department of Education

2002 A Great Year for Media Exposure!

Refugee Transitions' *Bosnian Community and Family Strengthening Project* was featured in *The San Francisco Chronicle*! See story on page two.

REFUGEE TRANSITIONS' FUNDRAISING EVENT A BIG SUCCESS!

Refugee Transitions held its 4th annual fundraising event at Brunos, a warm and inviting restaurant in the Mission District of San Francisco, which proved to be an excellent venue.

Despite competition from the World Series, the event drew many supporters and generated much needed revenue for RT's programs.

A special thanks to Carnival of Chaos for their spectacular jazz performance and to Tory Hansen for bringing us a slide show of his travel experiences throughout Africa and South East Asia.

Also, two of our former students provided delicious Bosnian burak and Mexican tamales. Thanks Araceli and Muliya for sharing your tasty dishes!



Board members, Joe McCrossen and Jenny Everett enjoying the evening.

Thanks to our donors for the fabulous silent auction prizes!

Brandon Small	Bikram's Yoga College of India
Wandering Spoon	Funky Door Yoga
Mission Ranch	Rainbow Foods
RNM Restaurant	San Francisco Zoo
A.C.T.	World Affairs Council
Embarcadero YMCA	Toutalis Restaurant
California Canoe & Kayak	Rohan Lounge
Sugar Bowl	Healing Center
Family Dental	

And thanks to our attendees!

Ibrahim Alickovic, Shanan Alper, Sunnee Billingsley, Marina Binsack, George Bosse, Will Chang, Wally Cheng, Panha Chheng, Vanja Danilovic, Suzanne Delbanco, Chris Dragan, Jenny Everett, Seni Felic, Laura Fichtenberg, Sophie Froelich, Chris Furgivele, Ann Grodnik, Gretchen Harrison, Michael Harrison, Mahad Ibrahim, Lee Johnson, Eric Kattwinkel, Talie Knazek, Senad Kulenovic, Anna Lazo, Yin Leung, Brett Malone, Jeffrys Mason, Chris Mayo, Cristen Miller, Louise Nelson Dyble, Rory O'Brien, Kerry Philp, Katherine Pitarys, Michelle Ruettinger, David Schultz, Laurel Seely, Jodie Stein, Thy Tran, Deanne Travis, Aaron Travis, Kristine Zeigler



More event attendees with local caterer, Luis Diaz, who donated delicious food for the event.

MEDIA EXPOSURE (continued from page 1) Since October 2000, Refugee Transitions has maintained a Bosnian Community Center in Oakland, where staff have offered ESL classes for Bosnian parents and have provided Bosnian youth with after-school tutoring, art education workshops and traditional Bosnian dance classes. On May 9, 2002 *Chronicle* writer Annie Nakao visited the Center and witnessed the talents of 20 young performers practicing 600-year old traditional dances. She left with an inspiring story about the life Bosnians left behind and about the new community they have built in Oakland. The article, titled, "Bosnian Refugees Dance to a New Life" can be found online at www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2002/05/09/DD36239.DTL.

Additionally, Refugee Transitions was invited to participate in two local media productions. Last July, Executive Director Nora Heaphy and Volunteer Coordinator Muhamed Tokmic took part in a half-hour long interview at KPFA 94.1 Free Speech Radio in Berkeley. Together they answered questions about the refugee and immigrant community in the Bay Area, and also talked about the services and activities that Refugee Transitions provides. The show aired on July 5, 2002. Muhamed Tokmic made his second media appearance last November when he participated in the production of a documentary film produced by PCTV-Oakland which focused on the refugee and immigrant experience in the Bay Area. During the interview, Muhamed described his journey from Bosnia and talked about the culture shock he experienced when first arriving in the United States as a refugee in November of 1997.

All in all it was a great year for attracting recognition for Refugee Transitions' staff and programs. We look forward to more opportunities in 2003!

Mobile Computer Tutoring off to a Great Start!!

As part of our *Newcomers Technology Empowerment Program*, Refugee Transitions is proud to announce our new mobile computer tutoring program! We are now able to bring computers and computer instruction into the homes of the most technologically isolated members of the immigrant and refugee communities. So far 10 volunteers have begun to integrate our new ESL Computer Literacy Curriculum into their home-based ESL tutoring sessions. This comprehensive curriculum connects language teaching and computer instruction, and helps students who have never touched a computer to overcome their fear of technology and to learn the basics of word processing, and internet connectivity. The agency has purchased laptops for volunteers to borrow and is providing on-going trainings. If you are interested in contributing your time, expanding your teaching skills and exposing a student to new technologies, please call Muhamed Tokmic at 415-989-2151.



Volunteers training for our mobile computer tutoring program: Pablo Crisologo, Eddie Espinosa, Mila Gelvezon, Geordie Armstrong, and Susan Brooks

Additionally, group instruction continues in our community computer lab in Oakland. Since the majority of participants are young mothers with few child-care resources, we have added a new child-care exchange program. Through this unique program, mothers exchange one hour of childcare for one hour of computer instruction. This model is especially effective because it facilitates a sense of community in the class, while also promoting self-sufficiency and a sense of empowerment amongst participating students.

A Volunteer's Story

Chris Modell, began volunteering at Refugee Transitions in October 2001. Since then he has helped 3 students learn English and access community resources. Also, he recently received additional training to become a tutor in our *Newcomers Technology Empowerment Program*. Like many of our volunteers, Chris is dedicated, hardworking and provides invaluable service to Refugee Transitions' clients. We recently asked Chris to describe his experience as an RT volunteer, and to talk about the successes and challenges his student has faced as a newcomer to the United States.



Chris at one of our recent volunteer appreciation parties.

RT: Tell us about the student you're currently working with. Where is she from? What has changed in her life since you started tutoring her?

Chris: My current student's name is Feng He, although she prefers to go by the name Juanite. She is from the southwest part of China and has been living in the United States for many years with her two children, Amy and Danny. She had never studied English before arriving in the United States and lacked a lot of confidence in her ability to learn a new language. She has made a lot of progress in the last five months, however, and tells me that people (especially her children) have noticed the improvement in her English skills. She is very thankful that Refugee Transitions was able to find a match for her and continues to show interest and motivation to keep learning so she can become more and more confident using English. She is also eager to start learning computers so she can improve her job prospects.

RT: What has been the most rewarding aspect of your volunteer experience?

Chris: The entire experience has provided me with a deeper understanding of the process of second language acquisition and the challenges that many adults face when learning a new language. I often use these new skills in my current job, working with high-school youth in San Francisco. It has also been especially rewarding to see my student making progress on a weekly basis, and to show her that there are actually people who will be patient with her as she learns a new language.

Thank you to Chris and to all RT's volunteers for dedicating their time to help a new member of our community!

ANOTHER SUCCESS STORY!!

Every Tuesday and Thursday, Nilar strolls her son Museo 10 blocks from her home in the Fruitvale district of Oakland to attend Refugee Transitions' on-site computer classes. She's been enrolled in our *Newcomers Technology Empowerment Program* for six months now and prior to that was enrolled in our home-based *ESL Civics Education Program*. It's hard to believe that only one year ago, Nilar could not speak, read, write, or understand any English. Furthermore, she had never touched a computer in her life!

Nilar recently shared her story with RT, describing her long journey from Burma to Thailand and her subsequent resettlement in the US as a political refugee. It all started when she joined thousands of others in a demonstration against the economic policies of the Burmese government. "In 1988 the Burmese National Union united with elementary, high school, and university students for victory against the government." She asserted that the government was unfair and did not take care of its people. "Many people didn't have money for food." Afterwards, government officials came to her home state of Thaon to threaten her at gun-point. For safety, Nilar went to Thailand where she resided for 4 years until she was resettled in the U.S. on March 15, 2001.

Transitioning to daily life in the U.S. was difficult for Nilar, especially since she didn't know English and came from a non Indo-European language background. Nilar had never been exposed to the Roman Alphabet— she couldn't read simple street signs, menus, food labels or even write A,B,C. Fortunately, seven months after her arrival, Nilar was referred to Refugee Transitions, and was matched with a very qualified, dedicated volunteer—Jae Hoon Lee, who spent an average of 15 hours per week for 8 months helping Nilar to read, write and speak in English. He also helped her find childcare for her son, to access the library, and exposed her to computers. Nilar is now reading, writing, typing letters, and using the internet. She even contributed to the writing of this article!

Nilar has made extraordinary progress since she arrived in the U.S, which is especially evident when reflecting on how much conversations with her have changed. Nilar often talks about getting a job using computers and even recruits other students for Refugee Transitions' computer program, always talking to them about the importance of learning new technology. Proudly Nilar said, "when I go look for a job I always tell employers that I am taking computer classes at Refugee Transitions."

Nilar never ceases to amaze us. A few weeks ago she called Refugee Transitions and told us she had bought a used computer and needed help setting it up. Her next call was to ask about Windows 98. It's hard to believe one year ago she couldn't converse in English at all. Imagine what we'll be talking to her about in a year from now!



Nilar, learning to access the internet at RT's computer lab in Oakland

We know there are a lot more success stories out there!!
If you're a volunteer and would like to tell us about your student, please call us at 415-989-2151.

Bosnia-Oakland -Iraq
Bosnian Youth Art presented at Som arts
Annual Day of the Dead Exhibit

Refugee Transitions' Bosnian Youth Program presented *Bosnia-Oakland-Iraq* at the SomArts annual Day of the Dead Exhibit in San Francisco. The exhibit ran from October 12th through November 2nd and was attended by over 5,000 visitors. The installation represented the artists feelings about living through a war in Bosnia, their subsequent transition to Oakland, and about what they sometimes consider to be war-like conditions they face in their daily lives in their new communities. Youth also used the exhibit as a platform to express their feelings about our country's looming war with Iraq.

On one wall, youth exhibited two, three-dimensional story boards: *Nas Zivot u Bosnia* (Our Life in Bosnia), and *Nas Zivot u Oaklandu* (Our life in Oakland), which were created with found objectives, arranged to create a visual representation of their neighborhoods in Oakland compared to the villages they left behind in Bosnia. During the creation of the installation, youth also wrote about their first hand experiences living in a war zone: "In a war you are hungry." "Your house can be destroyed and your family can die." They then transferred these quotes onto evenly cut squares of cloth and strung them along an adjacent wall.

Another section celebrated the richness of Bosnian culture and featured images drawn on cloth squares of people in traditional dress, elders remembered from their childhood, recollections of village life and pastel self portraits. The entire exhibit was framed by free-flowing chalk written graffiti, which helped to bring the entire exhibit to life.

Bosnia-Oakland-Iraq was an impressive display, intertwining youth's memories of their homeland with visual imagery of their current lives in Oakland. Great job guys!



Story board: Nas Zivot u Oaklandu (Our life in Oakland).



Muhamed, one of the young artists, showing the completed exhibit: Bosnia-Oakland-Iraq.

Special thanks to Ann Schnake, Art Program Director and founder of the "Quilt of Many Colors Project" for her dedication to the youth program and for the creative energy and inspiration she imparted to participating youth. We are sorry that the program came to an end in December. Ann and the kids will be missed!

Refugee Transitions' New Youth Program !

Thanks to a \$15,000 grant awarded by the San Francisco Foundation, RT is now able to begin the implementation of our new *Bridge-2-Success Refugee Youth Development Partnership!!!* Refugee Transitions will collaborate with Jewish Family & Children Services (JVCS), the Cambodian Community Development (CCDI) and the Afghan Coalition to provide Afghan, Bosnian and Cambodian youth with the support and opportunities they need to succeed academically, to form healthy attachments and to develop supportive relationships with adults and peers. Activities will include one-to-one mentoring, academic assistance and mental health counseling.

Refugee Transitions
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Announcements

Come join us for our next
Volunteer Appreciation Party

WHEN: Friday, February 28, 2003 from
5:30-8 p.m.!

WHERE: EL Rio
3158 Mission Street
San Francisco

Come enjoy El Rio's famous oyster fest along with tasty ethnic appetizers. Volunteers who have completed their six month commitment will receive certificates of appreciation.

One complimentary drink provided to all current volunteers!!

Interested in Working Overseas?

Join the Peace Corps!

The Peace Corps sends volunteers overseas on two-year assignments in over 70 countries around the globe. As a volunteer, you'll receive a stipend to cover all of your living expenses, \$6075 upon completion of service, full medical and dental coverage, 24 days of vacation per year, and memories that will last a life time!!!

Volunteers who complete four months of ESL tutoring with Refugee Transitions qualify for overseas teaching positions with the Peace Corps. Contact Kate Kuykendall at kkuykendall@peacecorps.gov or call 1-800-424-8580/option 1 for more information.