



Refugee Transitions

www.reftrans.org

Summer 2004 Bulletin

Help the community...change your world.

Bridge-2-Success Youth Development Program Update!

Helping Refugee Youth Succeed

It's hard enough being a kid in this world: Peer pressure, illness, and nightly news filled with violent images all belie a parent's reassurance that the world is a good place. Add to these pressures refugee camps, war, forced prostitution, and having to flee to a country where one doesn't speak the language or understand the culture. Unfortunately, this reality faces too many children forced from their homes by poverty, ethnic conflict, or civil war. Ironically, children are probably better than adults at learning new languages, assimilating in new cultures, and relegating to the past violent conflicts—yet children cannot do this by themselves.

In September 2003, RT, together with the Afghan Coalition, Cambodian Community Development (CCDI), and Jewish Family & Children Services (JVCS), launched the Bridge-2-Success Youth Development program, which helps Afghan, Bosnian, Cambodian, Liberian youth succeed academically and form healthy and supportive relationships with adults and peers. Through one-on-one home-based tutoring and mentoring, volunteers and staff participating in the Bridge-2-Success program assist youth with homework, help them develop skills to find jobs and obtain their GED, and participate in activities with the youth. For troubled youngsters, counselors at JFCS provide mental health counseling.

Recently, RT started serving Liberian refugee youth. In the month of June the agency matched 9 newly arrived Liberian youths in the East Bay with tutors. Most of these children have had close to no formal education while living in refugee camps and are in need individualized support to prepare them for school and to help them acclimate to their new life in the U.S. One 15-year old youth who is reading at the 1st grade level was matched with Hilary Modell, a Nurse Practitioner from Oakland, to help develop his reading and writing skills and prepare him to start 7th grade in the Fall.

RT recruits, trains, and matches volunteers with youth referred to us by our partnering organizations. Currently we serve 57 youth in the East Bay. Since the program's inception, RT has held five orientation and training sessions for prospective volunteers. To date, 34 volunteers have been matched with youth, ranging in age from 7 to 19.



RT Volunteer Nealan Afsari meets her youths from Liberia. L to R: Titos, Adralyn, Carmalita, Princess, Beatrice (back)

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Our volunteers are extremely dedicated and resourceful. Not only do they spend two to four hours per week tutoring and helping their youth with homework, but they also regularly speak with the youth's teacher and academic counselor in order to get updates on their progress. One of our volunteers, Mike Michel, went to his youth's English and Math classes in order to get a better sense of how the material is taught. During this visit, Mike realized that his youth was having difficulty reading the blackboard. With RT and JFCS's assistance, Mike was able to make his youth's father aware of the problem and help him find an eye doctor.

Many of our volunteers regularly accompany their youth to the public library, encouraging and assisting them in checking out books that will develop their English listening, reading, and writing skills. Our volunteers also spend time with their youths doing other activities such as walking dogs or playing basketball and other sports. As the summer is approaching, we emailed a list of summer camps to our volunteers, who shared the information with their youths and parents and helped their youths fill out the required application and financial aid forms. One youth is going to attend basketball camp, while another is going attend a camp at the San Francisco Zoo and go to the San Francisco Shakespeare Festival.

In addition to one-on-one tutoring and mentoring, RT organizes a tutorial once a week at our Oakland community center to help students find jobs and study to earn the GED. With an initial class of three students, the tutorial has grown to six, with more expressing interest each week. Many of the students attending these tutorials are high school students who have lost credits and are at risk of not graduating.

As classes end and we head into the summer months, RT continues to match volunteers with youths. In addition to the home-based mentoring and tutoring program, we will continue to hold weekly tutorials. We hope that by the end of the summer at least six students will earn their GEDs. This will enable them to move on to the next phase of their life and turn their dreams into reality—a college degree, a career, and emotional, social, and physical stability in their lives.

Recent Press Coverage of Bridge-2-Success:

May 14, 2004

San Francisco Chronicle

Sanel Halilovic, a seventh grader attending Westlake Junior High in Oakland, made tremendous academic progress after he met Ajit De Silva, a computer programmer at Kaiser Permanente. Ajit meets with Sanel every Friday afternoon and helps him with his homework. Sanel, his three brothers, and their mother came to the United States six years ago as refugees from Bosnia. All four boys were doing poorly in school, and their mother, Ezma, who speaks very little English, contacted Refugee Transitions asking for help. We matched all four boys with volunteer tutors and are pleased to report that they have made significant academic progress in school. You can read the article "Making the Grades: New Tutoring Program Provides Helping Hand for Refugee Students," at: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/05/14/EBG2O6H9E61.DTL>.



Cambodian youths at RT's community center in Oakland. L to R: Sokchetra, Nareen, Dara, Bo, Sre, and Phaneer

February 19, 2004

The Argus

Sandhya Somashekhar, a staff writer for *The Argus*, writes about the academic progress Sam Khaksar, an 11-year-old Afghan refugee, makes after he is matched with RT tutor Arianna Vaewsorn. Sam's mother tells Somashekhar that Arianna "spends a lot of time helping him (Sam) with English and things he doesn't understand." To read this article, 'Nonprofits Help Local Afghan Students,' please contact our office.

January 21, 2004

Oakland Tribune

Ali Farad, a correspondent for the *Oakland Tribune*, visited with RT volunteer Victor Smallberg of Oakland and his youth, Alen Ruznic, a 15-year-old who attends a charter school in Oakland. After speaking with Victor and Alen, Farad discovered that the few hours that they spend together as tutor-student have resulted in a strong bond. You can read the article, "Program Helps Bridge Tutoring Gap," at: <http://www.oaklandtribune.com/Stories/0,1413,82~1726~2124713,00.html>.

Newcomers Technology Empowerment Project and Peter Su: A Perfect Match

A few months ago, Peter Su came to Refugee Transitions' office seeking an English tutor. He had seen a tutor visiting a neighbor in his Tenderloin apartment complex and was interested in getting help too.

Peter was born in Vietnam and moved to the United States in 2000. Peter's speaking skills were pretty good, but he struggled with reading. His goal was to develop marketable skills so he could get a job. Peter's interest in learning to use a computer became evident when he started asking questions about a computer on the floor. We recommended that Peter enroll in Refugee Transitions' Newcomers Technology Empowerment Project, a project which addresses the "digital divide" faced by the immigrant and refugee community by providing home-based instruction through trained volunteer tutors and on-site computer courses in our community computer lab in Oakland. Since Peter had never attended a traditional classroom, was at a basic literacy level in both his native language and English, was disabled, and had never used a computer before, he was a perfect candidate for the project.



Student Peter Su (left) with his volunteer tutor Dia Shanneb

For students such as Peter who don't own a computer, RT seeks donations or provides volunteers with laptops to bring to the students' home. The next week, Peter came back to our office, packed up all the computer parts in the back pocket of his wheelchair, put the monitor on his lap, and off he went through downtown San Francisco to his apartment.



Peter Su telling RT about his computer goals

Anticipating Peter's excitement about setting up his new computer, RT staff quickly matched him with Dia Shanneb, a volunteer who had attended our trainings for teaching English and basic computer technology to non-native speakers. We gave Dia ESL books, the agency's computer/ESL curriculum on CD, and a typing tutor to help Peter develop the skills needed to access community resources and eventually seek employment using a computer.

A few months later, Peter sent an e-mail to RT to reschedule a meeting he had set up to enroll another student in our program—he was going to Sacramento to protest budget cuts. We couldn't believe it. In just two months, Peter, with Dia's assistance, could already use e-mail. Later we were told that Peter had even begun paying bills online. Impressive!

When Peter arrived at our office on the day of our meeting, he had a proud look on his face. He handed us a marine aquarium screen-saver program that he had just purchased and said that he wanted us to have fish jumping out of our screen too. *Thank you Peter, Dia, and all of our other wonderful students and volunteers! You inspire us all!*

Newcomers Technology Empowerment Program Bridges Digital Divide

Since July 2002, Refugee Transitions' Newcomers Technology Empowerment Program has helped over 60 of the most technologically isolated members of the immigrant and refugee communities access vital resources using a computer. RT has recruited and trained over 30 volunteers to provide home-based instruction using either a laptop computer, which the agency loans to volunteers, or donated computers. Volunteers integrate the agency's English-as-Second-Language (ESL) and Computer Literacy Curriculum into their home-based tutoring sessions. This comprehensive curriculum connects ESL 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. Students enrolled in the program have looked for jobs on craigslist, gotten e-mail accounts, begun paying bills online, and accessed travel web sites, such as www.transit.org, to facilitate public transit in the Bay Area.

In addition to providing volunteer-directed home-based instruction, the agency also provides on-site instruction in our community computer lab in Oakland. Our most recent group of students consists of Cambodian women who are both illiterate in English and in Khmer, their native language. Having never used a computer before, the students have made impressive progress. They have developed their literacy skills on the computer through site recognition and can now turn the computer on and off, open programs, and fill in personal information using Microsoft Word. To connect students' learning to familiar environments, staff members have directed students to web sites from Cambodia and helped them download pictures of the temples of Angkor Wat!

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.

Not Just English Language Instruction

Refugee Transitions' English-as-Second-Language (ESL) Civic Education and Orientation Program is more successful than ever in helping recent refugees and immigrants succeed in their new communities! Each month RT recruits and trains at least 12 volunteers to provide individualized tutoring for this program. Muhamed Tokmic, the agency's Volunteer Coordinator, interviews volunteers and then matches them with refugees and immigrants to provide individualized home-based English language and civics education instruction. Refugee Transitions' volunteer tutors use the curriculum that the agency provides and also incorporate information about American culture and institutions into their lessons, helping students understand and adjust to a new way of life. The volunteers act as the bridges many refugees need in order to integrate into U.S. society and access vital community resources. Joseph Kim, one of our volunteers participating in this program, helped his student Nang, from Burma, apply for asylum by referring her to a community agency in Oakland that provides pro-bono legal assistance for refugees. Tenley Harrison, another volunteer, helped her students Irina and Gennady pass the citizenship exam. The agency has provided individualized tutoring to over 100 clients in the last year.

With the help of our volunteers, RT's students achieve learning gains far above the state average (according to the California Adult Student Assessment System), and many have reached a point where they can leave public aid, attain better jobs, take advantage of educational opportunities, and pass the U.S. Citizenship exam.

The agency has long waitlists of students requesting this tutoring service, so if you'd like to volunteer, please contact Muhamed at 415-989-2151 or at muhamed@reftrans.org.

It Was a Great Way to Begin the Weekend!

Refugee Transitions' volunteers, staff, and board members gathered at North Beach's Peña Pacha Mama Restaurant & World Music Club in the late afternoon on April 23. The occasion: to provide a hearty thank you to all volunteers who give their time to Refugee Transitions' clients, and especially to those volunteers who recently completed their six-month commitment. We had the entire second floor to ourselves, and with its cozy atmosphere, excellent food, and stunning view of Coit Tower, it was the place to be. There was a great turnout, with plenty of opportunity for everyone to get to know one another.

Refugee Transitions provided generous helpings of Peña Pacha Mama's gourmet organic South American appetizers. After everyone was content with food, beverage, and conversation, the accolades began. We viewed a short video that profiled two of Refugee Transitions' clients and their tutors, and the work they are doing together. Several students in the Film Department at San Francisco State University produced the video as part of a graduate school project.



Muhamed Tokmic, RT's Volunteer Coordinator (far right), giving out a certificate of achievement to Anna Corazza.



RT's Volunteers, Mike Michel and Kate Kuykendall enjoying the party.

Afterwards, 21 volunteers who have completed their six-month commitment received a certificate of achievement and public recognition for their valuable service.

And finally, a group of youth from TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More) performed original spoken word and dance. TEAM is an Oakland-based organization that educates at-risk minority youth through performing arts, international action projects, and community service learning.

Stay tuned for the next volunteer appreciation party. It's a great way to meet other exceptional people, exchange stories and ideas, and feel inspired.



Volunteers who received certificates of achievement: Eva Zeltzer and Matthew De Lucia.

Thank you to all of our volunteers who have provided at least 50 hours of tutoring in 2004: Gloria Chan, Michael Chee, Anna Corazza, Elizabeth Daly, Matthew De Lucia, Laura Downey, Sharla Draemel, Anne Dvorak, Tomasz Graczyk, Nancy Fix, Joseph Kim, William Mooney, Lori Now, Albert Ofrecio, Sean Riley, Katie Sadowski, Donna Sellers, Jennifer Veenstra, Carissa Welton, and Sara Wright.

Working Towards Citizenship



Students in RT's citizenship class (from left to right): Milka, Senija, and Vlado.

Navigating the naturalization process can be a daunting prospect for immigrants, especially those with little or no English skills. To help local immigrants on their journey toward American citizenship, Refugee Transitions launched a citizenship class in April at our community center in our Oakland office. The students are eight highly-motivated Bosnian refugees, all referred to our agency by Survivors International, a non-profit which assists survivors of torture. Muhamed Tokmic, the agency's Volunteer Coordinator, who recently completed the naturalization process himself, was instrumental in getting the class started, motivating students, and explaining to them the INS requirements. Muhamed and Amy Lombardi, ESL Instructor, now collaborate to help prepare students for the citizenship interview. Muhamed is translating the 100 questions on the test about U.S. history and government into Bosnian, and Amy teaches the group English and U.S. civics every Friday afternoon.

The class is multi-level; while some students are already quite proficient in English, others have never studied it, and some are just becoming literate. The most advanced students will be ready to pass their citizenship exams within a few months, and all of the students hope to naturalize within the next few years.

In addition to providing on-site classes, RT also provides individual assistance to clients applying for green cards and citizenship. Recently, Muhamed provided assistance to one of RT's Tibetan students to complete her application for a green card.

Announcements

Please Welcome Hiam Abbas!

Refugee Transitions is pleased to welcome Hiam Abbas as our new Youth Coordinator and ESL Instructor. We met Hiam in March, when she began volunteering for our Bridge-2-Success Youth Development program. Before moving to San Francisco and joining the RT staff, Hiam earned a Masters degree at the London School of Economics & Political Science. Hiam was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan. From a young age she tutored and mentored youth, developing their literacy skills in Urdu (Pakistan's national language). She has also worked for several years on projects that helped support non-native speakers of English develop English language skills.



Hiam Abbas, RT's new Youth Coordinator and ESL Instructor

Garage Sale to Benefit Refugee Transition

Mark your calendar and tell your friends! Come to a garage sale on July 10 from 9:00-2:00 at 1728 Laguna Street (between Bush and Sutter). All proceeds will benefit Refugee Transitions.

Donating to Refugee Transitions

Refugee Transitions welcomes financial donations. These donations help us provide our valuable programs and services to the community. We now accept donations both through the mail (870 Market Street, Suite 1219, San Francisco, CA 94102) and online at www.reftrans.org. RT is a 501(c)(3) private non-profit incorporated in the state of California. *All donations made to us are tax-deductible.*

*****Stay posted for information about our upcoming fundraiser in October!*****

Refugee Transitions' 5th Annual Fundraiser Event

Great company, tasty world cuisine, rock and eastern/western fusion in a hip space...it must be a Refugee Transitions fundraiser!

On November 5, 2003, over 60 dedicated volunteers, board members, donors, and friends came together to support the vital services that Refugee Transitions provides to immigrants and refugees in the Bay Area. In the cozy brick and wood interior of Zebulon, a downtown café and lounge, guests got to know other people from the RT community, sampled delicious food homemade by students and volunteers (including tamales and Bosnian pastries), and vied with one another for silent auction prizes such as surfing lessons and behind-the-scene zoo tours.



Musicians in the band Boyfriend (from left to right): John LeBlanc, Emily Hickey, and Sean Mahoney entertained attendees at RT's fundraiser

Highlights of the evening included a presentation by Laura Vaudreuil, RT's Executive Director, about the agency's beginnings and current programs, and live music by Boyfriend and Deep Chundy. *Thanks to Zebulon and to all the volunteers, donors, and friends who helped make this event a success!*

Refugee Transitions 5th Annual Fundraising Event Silent Auction Donors:

American Marketing Systems, Inc.
Amrita Yoga
California Canoe & Kayak
Embarcadero YMCA
Everett Ridge
Funky Door Yoga
Girls Adventure Out
Hayden Dover, Trainer
Hydrapak, Inc.
Joel Mahan, Acoustic Guitarist
Just Jewels
Lagunitas Brewing Company
Touchtone Climbing Centers - Mission Cliffs
Pathways to Fitness
Rainbow Foods
San Francisco Zoo

Refugee Transitions also wishes to thank the following institutions for their tremendous support during the year 2004:

Private Institutional

East Bay Community Foundation
The Van Loben Sels/Rembe Rock Foundation
Anonymous

State and Federal

The California State Department of Education

SmartCo (wine smarts/food smarts)
SOMA Health Center - Michelle Kuroda
Sports Basement
SYUFY Enterprises
Turi Nybo
WAGS Pet Wash and Boutique
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

There Were Strikes, Gutter Balls, and Everything in Between!



Elvis and Phanara take a breather from the game.

Bosnian and Cambodian youth participating in the Bridge-2-Success Refugee Youth Development Partnership, their tutors, and Refugee Transitions' staff had a great afternoon bowling party at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Bowling Center. On May 1, eight youth and four volunteers met at the bowling center for an afternoon of camaraderie, good times, and fun exercise. It was a great opportunity for us to get to know each other a little better through a fun activity.

For many of the youth, this was their first time bowling. "I've never bowled before" was commonly heard. In no time, however, everyone became confident that they could knock down those pins. Not even the ball that went diagonally across and two lanes over, bouncing like a rubber ball, deterred anyone. Soon we were doing high fives for each player's good throws, along with plenty of whooping and applause. This all, of course, between sipping our soda and munching on homemade cookies and brownies. Before leaving, each youth received a complimentary pass for a free game of bowling at the Yerba Buena Bowling Center.

If you couldn't make it to this youth/volunteer event, make plans to attend the next one. We will visit the San Francisco Zoo at 1:00 on July 24, and we will attend a magic show at the Legion of Honor at 1:00 on August 15. You and your youth will have a great time.

The agency has a long waitlist of youth in need of this tutoring/mentoring service, so if you'd like to volunteer, please contact Hiam at 415-989-2151 or at hiam_k_abbas@yahoo.com.



Youth, volunteers, and staff after a few lanes of bowling.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE... JOIN OUR BOARD!

REFUGEE TRANSITIONS, a small non-profit organization dedicated to the needs of Bay Area refugees and immigrants, is actively recruiting new board members. We welcome your fresh perspective and energy as we strive to achieve our mission— to assist local refugees and immigrants in becoming self-sufficient in the U.S. by providing volunteer and staff-directed program services that help them attain the English language, life, job, and academic skills necessary to succeed in their new communities.

Board Responsibilities Include:

- Ensuring that the organization is working to achieve its mission
- Hiring, supporting, and evaluating the executive director
- Developing and approving policies and long-range plans
- Helping to raise money for the organization
- Attending quarterly meetings and helping with special events

Benefits of Board Service:

- Great introduction to the non-profit field, and a way to develop a network for job contacts
- Unique opportunity to learn about the nuts & bolts of non-profit management (fundraising, fiscal management, strategic planning, governance, etc.)
- Ability to impact program decisions that affect refugees/immigrants
- Opportunity to meet a group of like-minded, fun young people

We are looking for people with enthusiasm, integrity, and an interest in refugee and immigrant issues. That said, we are in particular need of board members with financial knowledge, and would welcome candidates with an immigrant/refugee background as well.

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