

welcome

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Children's gifts to children: \$113 and a whole lot of fun

It all started with \$113 in coins and small bills contributed by children at a small town church. The funds seeded a remarkable encounter between those children and newly resettled refugee children from Burundi and Burma.

First Christian Church is a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation in Rockwood, Tennessee, a rural community of about 5,000 situated 45 minutes' drive from downtown Knoxville. Average attendance at worship is around 100.

At last summer's Vacation Bible School, Pastor Kara Kleinschmidt talked about refugees, sparked by her own friendship with former neighbors who were refugees from Liberia. As the service component, children donated money for a national Disciples program that supplies backpacks to refugee children new to the United States.

"But the Vacation Bible School director forgot to send it!" Kleinschmidt said. "In December she came to me with a zip lock bag of cash." The pastor assured her sheepish parishioner that it wasn't a problem. "I knew that three Knoxville Disciples churches had cosponsored a Sudanese family through Bridge Refugee Services, and said, 'Let's just send it to Bridge with a note that it came from our children.'"

When Bridge's Director Marilyn Bresnan received the \$113, she was working on ways to get the Knoxville-area community involved with recently resettled Burundian refugees without church cosponsors. Their basic needs were being met, "but they needed socialization. If they



*At the December 20 skating party, four-year-old Ni Cung Lian gives an affirmative "thumbs up" to his first-ever ice skating experience. He and his family, Chin refugees from Burma, had arrived in Knoxville only three weeks before. Hank Holleman was his skating partner **Photo by Holly***

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Above: Lobes-Pierre Niyonzima, 9, begins to get more comfortable on the ice. Back cover: Erin Bernstein with Miruro Michael, 7. Photos by Holly Dagnan.

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are not cosponsored they aren't getting the interaction they need. I called Kara and said, 'Let's do something with all the kids,'" and the idea of an ice skating party was born.

Kristi Reynolds, manager of the Holiday on Ice skating rink in Knoxville's Market Square, offered an hour of private ice time for \$100 – well under half the usual price. With funds from Church World Service, Bresnan "bought tons of gloves, mittens, hats, headbands, and scarves" and rented vans to

transport the two dozen or so Burundian children, along with two Chin refugee children from Burma.

Serendipitously, both the refugee children and the 14 or so young skaters from First Christian Church were from precisely the same age range: 4 through 16. Kleinschmidt briefed her group on Burundi and Burma, and Bresnan coached them on how to help the refugee children feel comfortable with this new experience. Then the two groups met at the rink.

"When the refugee kids saw the rink, their eyes got huge. They got their skates on and shuffled onto the ice," Kleinschmidt said.

"As we walked the refugees in," Bresnan said, "Kara's kids were all waving and saying 'welcome.' There was just tremendous interaction. The adults were almost moved to tears watching the kids just play together."

Conversation was limited, as the refugees were still learning English. That didn't impede the fun and forging of personal bonds. Many of the Rockwood children commented, "The person I helped was so trusting of me. I just took them around."

Students from Knoxville Catholic High School and the University of Tennessee, gathered by Bresnan's own children, also joined the skating party. Paired with a Burundian peer, son Todd learned something about how African men express friendship, remarking, "He's a teenager like me and he's holding my hand."

Daughter Erin sang a song in Swahili with the Burundian children, and gave her skating partner her handmade scarf, "knowing how special it is to give gifts in Africa."

For their part, the refugee children were unfazed by the rink's bright lights and loud Christmas music. "What they reacted to," Bresnan said, "was the cold."

Knoxville's WBIR-TV is among sponsors of the rink, and reporter Stoney Sharp came by. The resulting story (see it at www.wbir.com – search "refugees see ice") got an enthusiastic response from viewers. Among comments posted on the WBIR Web site: "God bless Bridge for what you do," and "God bless the refugees on their journey."

Now Bresnan is planning "more fun social things" with refugee children and youths, including swimming lessons led by area high school swim teams.

For Kleinschmidt, "to see kids from different backgrounds coming together was truly one of the highlights of my year. Our kids were moved and want to do more." What's more, her report to the congregation the next Sunday "got all the members talking about ways they can support refugees." ●

Exemplary employer series

Welcome's series featuring enterprises identified by CWS affiliates as exemplary employers of refugees will continue in future issues of this newsletter.

Mevlani, Ilic help refugees get a “chance to have dreams”

Welcome continues its series on heads of Church World Service local refugee resettlement affiliates who came to the United States as refugees themselves. The series began in the January/February issue and will conclude in April.

Ferdinant Mevlani, Executive Director Ecumenical Refugee Services (ERS) Denver, Colorado

Nationality: Albanian.

Education: Two-year university program in restaurant management; bachelor's in business administration.

Refugee story: Fled one of the world's most repressive dictatorships with the unwitting assistance of the Albanian army. Conscripted for military service, he was assigned to the Albanian-Yugoslavian border, facilitating his escape to Yugoslavia.

Arrived in United States: December 22, 1985, to Boise, Idaho. “Religion was repressed totally in Albania. I came at Christmastime and didn't even know what Christmas was.”

Sponsor: “Unfortunately I've lost this information.”

Congregational cosponsor: “None per se, but volunteers gave me furniture for my apartment and taught me how to grocery shop. They were extremely helpful. It would have been much more difficult for me if they were not involved with my resettlement.”

First big surprise: “That you could go to a grocery store and actually buy any kind of food you wanted and eat anytime you wanted.”

Most challenging: “The language. There were no Albanian translators in Boise at that time, and there was so much I didn't understand, and I had no one to explain things to me. I had to learn English very fast.” Also challenging: missing family.

What you still laugh about: “I thought everyone in America was nice and no one would ever steal from you. With my first paycheck, I bought a bike. I was so excited I rode it home and ran in to show my friends my new bike. When I came out a few minutes later, it was gone. I couldn't believe someone would take my brand-new



Ferdinant Mevlani. Photo by Carol Fouke-Mpoyo.

bike. I laugh at how naive I was.”

First U.S. jobs: In a factory, making computer chips (1985-87, Boise). Moved to Denver in 1987 and worked in dinner theater and family and fine-dining restaurants in positions from waiter to manager.

Jobs with ERS: Kosovar caseworker (hired 1999), asylee case manager and employment specialist, Match Grant coordinator and employment supervisor, current position.

Languages: Albanian, Serbia-Croatian, Italian, Russian, English.

Countries visited: Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, France.

Country most want to visit next: Norway, “one of the world's most beautiful countries.”

Family information: He and his wife have two children, ages 12 and 16. Father and a sister are in Albania, a brother in Greece, and a sister in Italy.

Hero: “My mother.”

Favorite books: The Harry Potter books.

Favorite movie: *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation.*

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Favorite music: “My kids have really gotten me into hip hop.”

Interests outside of work: Public education, youth sports. “Our children play all kinds of sports, and I feel it has helped shape them. Sports participation is very structuring and teaches them teamwork. I would love to start a program for refugee kids.”

Why should the United States welcome refugees?

“I believe the United States is such a great country because it welcomes refugees. It was made by people from around the world believing in one dream and one country where everyone can live in peace and not be persecuted for who they are or what they believe. My children are U.S.-born: they could become President! They have grown up believing they can do anything. America gives refugees the chance to have dreams.”

How is it different for refugees resettling in the U.S. now than it was for you?

“Agencies have improved so much over the years. Through education, refugees learn how to adapt to their new country. Also, networking with other agencies has improved greatly.”

Why do you help other refugees?

“My wife and I have volunteered at ERS since 1990, and we have cosponsored many refugees. The feeling we get from helping them has only enhanced our lives. When the opportunity came to work with them, I didn’t hesitate. It’s the most rewarding job I could have ever wanted.”

What is your first counsel to a newly arrived refugee?

“Learn English as quickly as possible. Work hard – your dreams are within your reach. Teach your children their culture while living in another country. Never forget where you came from.” ●



Vanja Ilic
Site Office Coordinator
Lutheran Refugee Services (LRS)
Lincoln, Nebraska

Nationality: Herzegovinan.

Education: “When the war began, I was an agriculture student at the University of Sarajevo,” preparing to go into the family winemaking business.

Refugee story: After trying to wait out the war in Mostar and on the coast, Ilic went to Germany to stay with an uncle. “My parents were still in Mostar, and for eight months, I didn’t hear from them.” She first volunteered, then worked full time for the Red Cross in Hamburg. “That’s how I got started with refugees.”

Arrived in the United States: April 15, 1999, to Lincoln, Nebraska, with her

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Vanja Ilic, with a painting of the Old Bridge in Mostar she did as a teen, and with Bosnian lace her mother made. Lincoln Arts Council photo.

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husband and three-year-old daughter.

Sponsor: Church World Service, through Heartland Refugee Resettlement (now LRS).

Congregational cosponsor: “None, unfortunately. When I see what the churches are doing, it’s just amazing. It’s good for refugees to have a church sponsor. I call it a little triangle: the resettlement agency, refugee family, and a church.”

First big surprise: “None, really. We had excellent orientation. What we were told scared us so much – for example, ‘You’ll apply for 20 or 30 jobs and no one will call you’ – and it was true.”

Most challenging: “I wasn’t patient at all. This was my fourth or fifth country and language in 10 years. I’d been patient for 10 years.” Also: learning the culture.

What you still laugh about: “People staring at us simply because we were walking with an umbrella in the rain. Because people don’t walk here, they drive. We walked everywhere.”

First U.S. jobs: Custodial cleaning at a university (1999), English as a Second Language para-educator and interpreter for Lincoln Public Schools (2000).

Jobs with Lutheran Refugee Services: Volunteer and then paid interpreter, sponsorship developer and Match Grant coordinator (2001), current position.

Languages: Serbo-Croatian, German, Russian, English.

Countries visited: Canada,

Mexico, England, France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Greece, Hungary, Russia, Denmark, Turkey, Poland, Czech Republic, and Switzerland.

Country you most want to visit next: Ethiopia, other African countries, “after my daughter is grown, to do some humanitarian work for a few months.”

Heroes: “My mom, the second Mother Teresa in the world. And my father. He works with refugees and returnees. All their lives they have been helping others.”

Favorite books: *Angels & Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown.

Favorite movies: *Gone with the Wind*, *Doctor Zhivago*.

Favorite music: Classical and instrumental.

Interests outside of work: Art, especially painting; interior design; music; dogs – “We are members of the Pug Club; we have five.”

Why should the United States welcome refugees? “It brings diversity. And it increases our children’s knowledge about new cultures, and about what it means to be poor and hungry.”

Why do you help other refugees? “I’ve been in those shoes. Also, my family always helped others. And, nothing is better than seeing a family smile.”

What is your first counsel to a newly arrived refugee? “Please listen to me, and trust me, and be patient.” ●

CWS grants support immigration legal services

More than half of Church World Service’s 35 local affiliates provide not only refugee resettlement but also immigration legal services, helping refugees and immigrants petition for family members to join them, get work permits and travel documents, apply for citizenship, and more. To encourage and support them in this work, CWS has awarded grants to 10 of its affiliates that are recognized by the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) or are applying for BIA recognition. The grants are funded from a distribution of assets following dissolution of the Welfare Photo Studios, Inc., which for 50 years had provided CWS and other voluntary agencies with low-cost fingerprinting and photos of the refugees they were helping resettle to the United States.

Recipients are: Lutheran Family Services, Greensboro and Raleigh, N.C.; Lutheran Social Services, Phoenix, Ariz.; Refugee Services of Texas, Austin; Ecumenical Refugee Services, Denver, Colo.; Community Refugee and Immigration Services, Columbus, Ohio; SOAR, Portland, Ore.; Catholic Family Center, Rochester, N.Y.; Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, New Haven, Conn.; Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Louisville; and Virginia Council of Churches, Harrisonburg. Ten more grants are to be awarded this spring. For more information, contact nsullivan@churchworldservice.org.

Browsing anti-immigrant Web sites: some reflections

By Joseph Roberson

Every week, I browse a few anti-immigrant websites in an attempt to understand the motivation of those who are troubled by today's newcomers to this country. One common claim is that the newcomers are not assimilating but rather trying to force us to accept their cultures, their ways, and their languages.

I must admit, I find it hard to understand how "our" culture is being threatened and what part of my culture I am being asked to give up.

Some speak as if the earlier periods of immigration were times when people instantly assimilated, learned English very quickly, and forgot the traditions of the "old country." In reality, those traditions were brought over and added to this rich society of the United States.

Hymns, prayers, and potlucks

We see it in our food, music, stories, drama, vocabulary, and even our churches.

For example, many of America's mainline denominations still reflect their early European and African immigrant roots in their liturgies and hymns (*Stille Nacht – Silent Night* – was written neither in English nor in America, yet many American congregations still sing it in German at Christmas) not to mention in what's served at the potluck after worship. And hymns

and prayers penned by Asian, Latin American, Caribbean, and Middle Eastern Christians are enriching worship in more and more congregations every week.

Immigration a recurring issue

A review of America's history reminds us that immigration has been a recurring source of tension, even tragic irony, within our country. The Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 lost many of their number to hunger and bitter cold before Squanto, a Patuxet Indian, came to their aid. Without him, they would not have survived.

At the same time, the United States' founding story is stained with the colonizers' ultimate conquest of the people who had settled the continent thousands of years before – truly an incidence of immigrants' attempt to obliterate the native people's cultures, ways, and languages. If only the European settlers had found a way to add their cultures to America's already rich cultural mix instead!

Also shameful: the new nation's enslavement of African peoples, whose descendants continue to struggle to understand and overcome that terrible legacy even as they enrich America with their talents, cultures, and ideas.

Throughout the past 200-plus years, many new groups of immigrants – whether Irish, Italian, German, or Asian, to name a few – have been met with prejudice and discrimination by people who had preceded them.

When movements to "close the door" have risen up and temporarily succeeded, they have later been seen as wrong and shortsighted – such as the exclusion of Chinese immigrants in the 1800s and the limits on admission of Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.

The internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese, German, and Italian origin during World War II was later recognized for what it was: deserving of a formal apology and reparations.

I, too, was indifferent, until ...

I didn't grow up knowing this history or appreciating the contributions of immigrants. Until I became pastor in a local congregation, I had never cared or even thought about working with people from another country.

In fact, when I first received a call from my denomination's headquarters concerning refugee resettlement, my answer was that I did not think anyone in the church would be interested.

Yet, God kept knocking at my door and made possible my first experience being closely connected with newcomers to this country – three young men who entered the United States as refugees. I began to see through this resettlement ministry the renewing power of God's love.

In assisting with the resettlement,

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Joseph Roberson at his computer. Photo by Carol Fouke-Mpoyo.

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our group of volunteers learned of the struggles of those who deal with oppression and violence due to their political beliefs. It became very real that the freedoms we each took for granted were not a part of the society from which these men came.

They viewed America as almost an idyllic place – even as they struggled with learning the language, securing employment, and working long hours so they could have their families join them in this country.

A life-changing experience

It was very rewarding to witness the sheer determination each employed as they began their lives anew and built for a better future in which they shared the gifts and talents they had brought from their country, which helped in our understanding of the richness of God's blessings.

Also impressive was the way members of our church reached out and welcomed them to the community – a community with few experiences with refugees or immigrants. One church offered a house they owned to be the refugees' first home. Another provided an abundance of furniture, and volunteers abounded for transportation.

Funds were provided to help purchase vehicles and pay for driving lessons. Whatever the need, it was met with relative ease. Truly, I was astonished with the generosity of the participating congregations. All was freely given without undue concern over the costs involved, because each felt they were a part of a life-changing experience.

Resettlement "a two-way street"

Resettlement was a two-way street with adjustments on the part of the volunteers and adjustments for the newly arrived refugees. It was never an endeavor where we sought to assist them magically to become "Americans" but to simply provide an opportunity for a new start, a new life, and a place to build for the future.

All of these experiences would not have been possible unless I had said yes to an appeal for help. None of these experiences would have touched me personally unless I had agreed to become involved in the resettlement of these newcomers to America.

Throughout our history, one of the things Americans can be proud of is a heritage of accepting people who are fleeing oppression and seeking freedom – beginning with the example set by America's first peoples who welcomed persecuted Europeans to these shores.

I know from my experiences through the years that providing hospitality to newcomers is worth my time and definitely worth the costs as we strengthen the mosaic that is the United States – a place where newcomers, with the help of others, are welcomed in the struggle to start anew and add to the building blocks of this great country. ●

Joseph Roberson, Director of the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program, is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). He marked his 10th anniversary with CWS/IRP in February.



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*On the cover –
Small donation seeds
remarkable encounter*

welcome

Volunteer celebrates “local global mission” stint with CWS

Katherine (Katie) O’Donnell of Royersford, Pennsylvania, was six months into a two-year term teaching English in Brazil when visa difficulties forced her return to the United States to sort things out. She was disheartened – but then a volunteer position opened up with Church World Service Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services in Lancaster. O’Donnell worked there full time for three months.

“Some of the wonderful experiences I have had include teaching English to a Liberian, taking Burmese families to appointments, grocery shopping with a Somali family, picking up Cubans from the airport, participating in a Karen New Year’s celebration, and cooking Eid dinner with Ka Ti Zar and Witt Mhone,” she said before heading back to Brazil February 12. “With the help of the Global Missions Partnership of the Church of the Brethren, hosts Pat and Dick Shreckhise, and my parents, I could fulfill a local global mission blessed by beautiful cultures, expressive languages, and new friends.” ●



Katie O’Donnell, with Za Ba Be and Ra Ma Tu La from Burma, in Lancaster. Photo by Ka Ti Zar.

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