WHO ARE REFUGEES?

- A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence and has a well-founded fear of being persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.
- Most refugees spend an average of 7 years in a refugee camp before beginning the extensive interview process.
- Each year, less than 1% of refugees are admitted into a third host country.
- Davidson county takes on over half of Tennessee's incoming refugees.

BACKGROUND

I've always had an interest in learning about other cultures, but I wanted a residency project that would really push me out of my comfort zone and give me a greater understanding of the world. The more I learned about World Relief Nashville (WRN), a refugee resettlement agency, the more I wanted to get involved. I met with Lynsey Auman, who ended up becoming my expeditor for my residency. She developed the Journey Youth Services at WRN after realizing that refugee high school students are an age group that does not receive any additional assistance upon arriving in Nashville.

- Adolescents already have many stressors in their lives - school, family, friends, college, relationships, extra curricular activities, etc. Immigrants face challenges such as language barriers, acculturation difficulties, cultural conflicts, and the loss of their home network.
- The combination of these stressors and challenges explain why adolescent refugees are a particularly vulnerable group in the United States. Many have witnessed war-related acts of violence and are experiencing PTSD and anxiety.
- The Journey Program aims to alleviate some of these risk factors for adolescent refugees in Nashville and Smyrna, TN. Through my research, I have found extensive evidence that connectedness to social organizations such as mentors, adults from school, church or community groups serves as an important protective factor for maladaptive behavior and mental health issues in refugee adolescents.

When I began the planning process with World Relief Nashville, the Journey program did not yet exist in Smyrna, TN. My original plan was to develop this program, but the need became too great over time, and the program began in the fall of 2014. Therefore, the staff asked me to gather information from the students about how they could better meet their needs at the Smyrna location. I served as a liaison between staff, students, and teachers to communicate the needs of each party in order to provide the most effective assistance to the organization.


EXPANDING THE AFTER-SCHOOL JOURNEY PROGRAM FOR REFUGEE ADOLESCENTS IN SMYRNA, TN

Laura Webreck, OTD/S
With Expert Mentor: Lynsey Auman
Belmont University, School of Occupational Therapy

VOLUNTEERING / BUILDING TRUST

- On Mondays and Wednesdays I volunteered at the Smyrna Journey Program
  - Students in the Smyrna Journey program represent Iraq, Ethiopia, Iran, Mexico, and Guatemala
  - The students all attend Smyrna High School
  - The program is held at LifePoint church, approximately 1 mile from the school
  - This Journey program began only 1 year ago
  - In order to get to know the Smyrna students and gain trust I did the following:
    - Helped students with their homework
    - Played icebreaker games every day
    - Attended the 16th birthday party of an Iraqi girl at her home
    - Led a mentor introduction with an Iraqi Journey student
    - Had multiple traditional Iraqi dinners, cooked by a student’s mother in her home
    - Helped a student from Ethiopia apply to college
    - Took a group of students to the park on their Spring Break
    - Engaged the students in personal/social development conversations often

- On Tuesdays and Thursdays I volunteered at the Overton Journey program.
  - The 59 enrolled students in the Overton Journey program represent Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal, and Rwanda
  - The students all attend Overton High School
  - The program is held at Overton High School in an ESL classroom
  - In order to get to know the students at the Overton program, I did the following:
    - Helped students with their homework
    - Played icebreaker games every day
    - Helped lead a spring break day camp
    - Assisted with a wood-working fundraising project
    - Attended two movie nights held at churches for the students
    - Got a traditional Henna tattoo from a Nepali student
    - Helped students with their senior capstone project

THOUGHTS FROM SMYRNA JOURNEY STUDENTS

- "Before Journey, I was that person sitting in the corner at school and crying myself to sleep at night. Now I approach friends and teachers. Other students even approach me for help with schoolwork now."
- "[Journey] helped me with English and meeting American people. Talking to them and getting more comfortable with American people and homework."
- "When I used to go home, I used to sit down by myself, get bored, and couldn’t do my homework. My friend told me about Journey, so when I came here they helped me with homework. I made friends and had fun. They just made my day!"
- "Before Journey, I thought Americans didn’t like refugees but now I know they do. Before America, I thought all Americans were racist to Muslims but now I know that’s not common."
- "[I attended the Journey program] because I have friends here and I don’t have friends in school."
- "[Journey] taught me how to talk to another culture and to introduce myself to another culture. I met people from other countries like Burma and I learned how to talk to them."
- "Journey has helped me like America more because I speak English here. I practice my English in Journey and this has helped me communicate with people and that’s why I love America."

TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

- In order to expand the Journey program in Smyrna, the issue of transportation was the first issue that needed to be resolved.
- Currently, volunteers pick up students in their own vehicles and often have to make multiple trips to accommodate everyone.
- In order to address this need:
  - I met with World Relief’s church mobilizer to attain a list of churches that have expressed interest in helping WRN in any way
  - I composed a donation letter and had it reviewed by 3 WRN employees
  - I emailed the letter to 44 churches in hopes of acquiring a donated passenger van
  - LifePoint church in Smyrna agreed to adopt the Smyrna Journey program as their local outreach program, and will collect a separate donation for the acquisition of a van. They expect to raise $5,000.

BRIDGING THE GAP

- The Journey team expressed that it would be beneficial to have a WRN staff member present in Smyrna High School in order to bridge the gap between what the students are learning in school vs. what they are working on in Journey.
- I observed English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for the months of February and March and was able to:
  - Form partnerships with the ESL teachers and the availability to explain what Journey is and how it could benefit their students
  - Advocate for my students in the classroom
  - Attend and inform groups of two potential students that ESL teachers identified as at-risk students
  - Create a promotional flyer with information specific to the Smyrna Journey program and hand flyers out to ESL teachers

FUTURE DIRECTION

I analyzed the data from the interviews and provided a summary of the findings to the Journey Program. According to the interviews:

- 12 out of 13 (92%) students expressed interest in the Journey Program meeting 4 days per week instead of 2 days.
- 4 out of 7 (57%) of the 4th grade students expressed interest in having extra ACT prep resources and study help
- The students’ highest ranked interest was music (singing, playing instruments, writing songs, and dancing)

Even though World Relief does not have the resources to incorporate all of the results into the program at this time, they expressed excitement over the students’ interest to attend the program 4 days per year. Once the transportation van is acquired, they plan to use this information to expand the program.

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