

Kindness of strangers eases refugees' arrival in United States

Tim Irwin – UNHCR News Stories – March 18, 2008

The schedule for the week ahead runs to five pages, with each day broken down into near hourly tasks assigned to different volunteers. At the dining room table in a house in Princeton, New Jersey, the creator of this plan of action runs through each item with the couple at the centre of the activity.

Za Bik Thang, his wife Par Tha, and their three children arrived in Princeton in mid-2007 from Malaysia, where they had lived as refugees for several years after fleeing persecution in their native Myanmar. Tom Charles and other members of the Nassau Presbyterian Church were on hand to meet the family when they arrived in the United States and have been providing support ever since.

"We were a little scared of coming to the US," recalls Za Bik from the family's rented home, which was arranged for them by the Nassau congregation. A pending move to an apartment in an affordable housing complex closer to downtown will reduce the couple's commute to their jobs.

For now, Charles continues in his role as traffic controller, ensuring the smooth movement of the five Thang family members to and from school, work, English lessons, choir practice, dental appointments, chess club meetings and church services.

"We have around one hundred volunteers from our church working in refugee resettlement," says Charles. "A core group of between 15 and 20 are involved in the day-to-day assistance, so the errands are spread around. Morning pick ups to get Za Bik to work are done by the early risers, while getting the kids home from school is done by people who have the afternoons free."

The Thangs are the eighth family the Nassau congregation has sponsored as part of a programme that goes back nearly 25 years. Among those assisting the family are individuals who a few years ago were on the receiving end of the community's efforts. Dental care is provided by a former refugee from Bosnia; the pool of drivers includes a Sudanese refugee who arrived in Princeton several years ago.

The church is one of many religious groups in the north-eastern state of New Jersey involved in refugee resettlement. Referrals come from agencies such as Lutheran Social Ministries, based in the New Jersey capital, Trenton.

The director of its immigration and refugee programme, Rev. Stacy Martin, says voluntary groups can provide a level of attention which surpasses what agencies dealing with hundreds of cases a year can offer. "The sponsors and the refugee families can create genuine relationships that go well beyond the 12 to 18 months we would typically be in contact with a family," she says.

Resettlement in the United States is largely handled by faith-based organizations, which turn to their communities for volunteers when additional assistance is needed. According to a US Department of Labour survey published in 2007, more than one quarter of the population – around 60 million people – had volunteered for an organization in the previous 12 months.

"Volunteers offer a distinctly personal touch that builds on the support offered by local resettlement affiliates," says Ralston H. Deffenbaugh Jr., president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, a national resettlement agency.

Even with assistance, establishing new lives in a foreign country is not without challenges. Unable to speak English, the Thang children initially found the classroom a frightening and lonely place. Everyday costs such as rent, groceries and visits to the doctor can seem overwhelming. Here, too, the Nassau congregation has stepped in, helping Za Bik to land a job at a supermarket chain while Par Tha does alterations at an exclusive menswear store.

The couple have also been given financial planning advice. "When we first arrived we couldn't do anything for ourselves. Today we can live our lives, though we still rely on rides," says Za Bik, who has begun the process of getting a driver's licence.

For the Nassau congregation a commitment that began nearly 12 months ago is nearing its end, and it is apparent that not just the Thangs have benefitted. For Charles, working with resettled refugees "has been one of the great joys of my life." Former strangers are now friends, foreign cultures are understood and accepted and the often abstract concept of helping those less fortunate has taken the tangible form of an embrace.