

Teen Refugees Find Friends at Hebrew High

By Karen Brodsky

Teens have a universal language: Fun and laughter. The language was apparent in Karen Majercsik's *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) classes in the Consolidated Hebrew High School on a recent Wednesday night.

Three teen guests joined both the first period ninth/tenth grade and second period eighth grade classes. They were treated to snacks, games and the easy camaraderie enjoyed by teens throughout the world. No matter that the guests come from a world away in Asia—Bhutan, Burma, and Vietnam.

HIAS NC was invited to present the refugee story to Mrs. Majercsik's classes in the beginning of the Hebrew High school year. Charged with helping to repair the world and embrace community service projects, the students collected personal care items for refugees, made baby blankets for Levine Children's Hospital, collected used cell phones for a battered women's shelter, and created Halloween costumes for children in the Alexander Youth Network.

From HIAS NC, the students learned that some refugees were born in camps and their families lived there for many years. They heard about civil wars, persecution, and the dangerous routes refugees have taken toward freedom from fear, the right to an education, and religious choice. They learned about the challenges refugees face when they come to the United States via HIAS and several agencies. They heard about the plight of some of the 14



Josh Listhaus (standing) looks on as Jason Fox (left) challenges visitor Lal Hngak to a game of chess.

million refugees, who cannot go home because they fear for their lives, have no means to earn a living, and no rights.

The students welcomed three refugee teens to their classes. Lal Ram Hngak has been in the U.S. seven years, the longest of the three. He is 16 and a sophomore student at East Mecklenburg High School. Lal has never been in the country of his parents' birth, Burma. He is fluent in his family's Chin language but was born in

lead English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher with his knowledge of English. Santosh appears in the classroom whenever Ms. Dottie is there, seeking books and extra knowledge. He could not wait to start school at East Mecklenburg High School. Santosh's family comes originally from Bhutan. Located in Southern Asia, the small country of Bhutan has produced, in proportion to its population, one of the largest groups of refugees in the world. In



(From left) Winnie Cleary and Lauren Gleiberman teach refugees Hannah Nie and Santosh Khadka an American card game.

India, where his family went because they feared the Burmese government was leading the country down a dangerous path. Lal's older brother was born in Burma. Once resettled in New Bern, NC, the family welcomed their first American son, another child born 13 years after Lal. They later moved to Charlotte, where Lal's father, Thanei Taithio is a case-worker for HIAS NC.

Hannah Nei, 18 years old, is a senior at East Mecklenburg High School. She is a petite Montagnard from the Central Highlands of Vietnam and has been in Charlotte for three years. She came to the U.S. from a refugee camp in Cambodia with her mother and two brothers. The Central Highlands are home to some of the most fertile land in Vietnam. The Montagnards fought with the Green Berets during the Vietnam War. In addition, many embraced Christianity, and have been persona non grata since with the governments of North and South Vietnam. In many cases, both Vietnams have fought a covert war against the Montagnards, poisoning their water, jailing residents to terrorize villages, and seizing land.

When 15-year-old Santosh Khadka came to the U.S. from a refugee camp in Nepal less than two months ago, he impressed even Dottie Shattuck, HIAS NC's

the early 1980s, the government of Bhutan began cracking down on the rights of ethnic minorities, especially the rights of the Lhotampas, a group originally from Nepal. After languishing in Nepali refugee camps for as many as 20 years, refugees from Bhutan began entering the U.S. in 2008. HIAS NC has settled them in Charlotte since May of 2008. Many young Bhutanese were fortunate to learn English in schools in or near the camps.

Raised a world away from the conflict and fear known by their three refugee guests, the students at the Consolidated Hebrew High School played cards and snacked with their new friends. Hannah played her first game of Yahtzee, Lal lost a chess game to one of his hosts, and Santosh taught a card game he learned in Nepal. Loaded with bags of soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes for HIAS NC, the three refugee teens bounded down the stairs of Temple Israel's school building and asked, "Are we coming back next week?"

HIAS NC is always in need of volunteers, furniture (which HIAS will pick up), housewares and donations of cash to help offset the cost of resettling refugees. HIAS resettled more refugees this year than ever before. Call 704-535-8803 or e-mail ellen.dubin@hias.org to learn how you can help. ✨



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