

## Community News

# Learning How to Transition from Refugee to Free Citizen

By Karen Brodsky

What is it like to be free? God performs miracles at the Red Sea ending generations of slavery and suffering. Their Egyptian captors have drowned. They trust in God and Moses. The children of Israel are thrilled, even enchanted, with their exit from Egypt. They sing a beautiful song to God for their freedom. Now what?

Totally unprepared for freedom, the Israelites were told to take their unleavened bread without baking it; pack up their children and livestock and leave quickly. They did not know what to expect or even where they were going. What will happen next? What will it be like? They have to be taught.

After years of repression, fear, persecution, physical danger, and life in refugee camps, without guidance and support, many of the refugees whom HIAS NC has settled in Charlotte have no idea what to expect. They have to be taught.

Refugees coming to the U.S. arrive speaking more languages and dialects than ever before, which makes resettlement in the U.S. a challenge. Rising to that challenge is the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington DC. CAL works with the U.S. government, international organizations, refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S., and their representatives overseas to be the resource for much of the information available for and about refugee populations.

CAL provides the curricula for cultural orientation classes throughout the world to prepare refugees for resettlement in the U.S. It also publishes refugee backgrounders about new refugee groups for U.S. resettlement work-

ers. Once HIAS NC caseworkers learn that they will be resettling a new group, such as the Bhutanese who have lived in refugee camps in Nepal for years, they learned from CAL about the history and the cultural background of this group.

Funded by the Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), overseas cultural orientation programs are provided in more than 40 countries by international or U.S. based organizations contracted by PRM. Cultural orientation classes can last somewhere between 16 and 24 hours—never enough time. In some places, class time is much shorter. Refugees are presented with various less obvious subjects: hygiene, repayment of loans, weather, skills, and attitude.

CAL gives the booklet, "Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees," available in 16 languages, to all refugees overseas who have been approved for resettlement to the U.S. The Guidebook covers fundamentals, including community services, housing, transportation, employment, education, health, managing your money, rights and responsibilities, and cultural adjustment.

There is no funding for domestic orientation, and HIAS NC case managers, case aids and ESL teachers do their best to provide as much information as possible but there is so much for the refugees to learn in order to succeed at life in the U.S.

In the case of the Somali Bantu, whom HIAS resettled between 2004 and 2006, cultural orientation was particularly challenging.

According to CAL, the Bantu, a tribal minority in Somalia, were so marginalized as a group; they lacked true representation in politics and access to government services, educational opportunities, and employment. The Bantus' lineage to slavery relegated them to second-class status—or worse—in pre-war Somalia, where they experienced discrimination from other Somali groups.

Once in the U.S., this tribal people had to learn many things we take for granted. For example, they had never seen a door knob and had to be taught to turn it and push either in or out to open doors. Mastering the use of keys required an even higher level of expertise. They faced many similar challenges, including use of the stove, the refrigerator, the bathroom and other commonplace tasks.

So this is what it is like to be free. Refugees in Charlotte learn that with freedom comes tremendous responsibility. For them, unfortunately, manna does not fall from the skies. With help from HIAS NC and the Charlotte community, the majority become contributing members of American society.

"We are now resettling other groups," said Ellen Dubin, director of HIAS NC, "most of our current clients come from Asia, both Near East and Southeast Asia. They do know how to use keys and door knobs, but are faced with many other challenges."

HIAS NC enlists the aid of many volunteers, who help with cultural orientation, drive clients to appointments and help them learn to ride the bus and use money. It is a particularly rewarding volunteer activity as many

develop extended friendships with clients, who are grateful for the aid they receive.

To volunteer for HIAS NC,

donate furniture and house wares (always needed), or make a cash donation, call 704-535-8803, or e-mail Ellen.Dubin@hias.org. ☆



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## If an Abused Person Needs a "Friend," Will You Help?

"Friends" are needed for one-on-one relationships with people and their children who are trying to survive abusive situations. Volunteers will be given basic training to help them understand the dynamics of domestic abuse, its effect on families, how to navigate support services, and active listening techniques.

To be heard, to be acknowledged and validated — these are sometimes the greatest gifts one can offer. Confidentiality, reliability, a loving and supportive nature and an open heart are the requirements for volunteers. "Friends" is a service for the Greater Charlotte



Jewish community supported by (name of agency) under the aegis of Shalom Bayit-NC. Training will begin in early spring. For more information contact info@shalombayit-nc.org or call Carol at 704-609-3120 or Marsha at 704-756-9209. ☆

## JCC Tributes

### August Family Teen Program Endowment Fund

Mazel Tov to Shellie Barer on the anniversary of her bat mitzvah from Judy and Stan August

### Mindy Ellen Levine Day Camp Endowment Fund

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