
SUPPORTING REFUGEE YOUTH THROUGH COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

I recently finished my Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Winnipeg in Politics and International Development Studies, which included a practicum placement with CCPA. Throughout most of my degree, I volunteered with the university's Local Committee of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC). WUSC is a national development organization that engages Canadian youth in its objectives of increasing international access to education and raising social consciousness.

I was involved in the settlement and integration of refugee students who are sponsored through WUSC's Student Refugee Program (SRP) as permanent residents. Prior to their arrival in Canada, these Asian and African students had experienced conflicts in their own countries and sought asylum in refugee camps. The role of local committees at Canadian post-secondary campuses is to oversee all initial living and educational arrangements and

orient the students to their new environments. Financial, social and emotional support is provided on a regular basis until the students become self-reliant. My experiences with the SRP inspired me to look to the wider refugee community of Winnipeg in search of ways to strengthen this program.

It is important to differentiate between refugees and other immigrants. Refugees do not necessarily choose to leave their homeland; they do so to escape persecution. But it is also important to recognize that refugees have skills and experiences that can enrich our communities.

While each of their stories is unique, many refugees experience a similar but complex set of emotions as they settle in their new-found homes. They arrive with expectations that are not always met — including finding greater safety, stability, prosperity and improved access to social services. They

often feel vulnerable, lonely, isolated, confused, frustrated and stressed. These emotions can be caused by challenges with government bureaucracies and other barriers to integration as well as the pressure to support families in their home countries.

As young people who have left family and friends behind, WUSC-sponsored students experience these challenges and more. Although the students often develop close relationships with other sponsored students and WUSC volunteers, they struggle as they try to adapt to a very individualistic society. Most grew up in more communal societies, spent varying lengths of time in crowded refugee camps and become somewhat dependent on others upon resettlement. Consequently, refugee youth tend to be conflicted between two cultures as they strive to adapt to the Canadian lifestyle while maintaining core aspects of their cultures and identities. WUSC volunteers often help the



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students find ways to bridge their pasts and futures.

Resettlement can also be a positive experience; many refugees feel empowered and liberated as a result of escaping cycles of conflict, poverty and dependency. Many find a sense of purpose by contributing to their new communities. They derive self worth and dignity from celebrating diversity, helping community members and educating people about the experiences of refugees. For example, young refugees who participate in the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM) *Ambassadors* program, tell their stories at community events and schools across Winnipeg and the surrounding areas. The main benefit of this program is that it can improve the capacity of communities to accommodate refugees by raising awareness about refugee issues. Additionally, participating in IRCOM Ambassadors provides youth who have experienced immense trauma and upheaval with an outlet to express themselves, thereby building confidence and leadership skills. This helps refugee youth deal with challenges that may arise in their new homes and improve performance in school and other areas. Although local WUSC committees often lack the capacity or mandate to establish similar programs, members can make themselves and the SRP students aware of these

opportunities in the community.

Like other refugees, SRP students face barriers in the areas of language and literacy, education and employment, housing and sponsorship of relatives. Additionally, many refugees struggle to find a sense of belonging, which is complicated by culture shock and trauma. According to several youth who work with refugee organizations, there are not enough counseling programs that are specifically designed for refugee youth. Some refugee youth do not understand how counseling can help them and instead, they try to forget about past struggles in order to move on. Since refugees initially have limited networks and access to supports, WUSC volunteers can help to connect them with resources that they may find helpful. Involvement in religious institutions and socio-cultural groups, participation in recreational activities and volunteering can also contribute greatly to the social integration of the SRP students, thereby generating a sense of community.

My experiences with WUSC provided me with great insight into the lives of refugee youth and the research I conducted through CCPA has enabled me to develop this knowledge further. I can now apply this knowledge by helping the University of Winnipeg WUSC committee improve its support for refugee youth by establishing

relationships with community organizations and learning more about services that will complement its work. These community connections will be particularly useful once the SRP students are settled and wish to be independent from WUSC. By reaching out to the general community, WUSC students can help to ensure that sponsored students will continue to have sources of support long after their sponsorship ends.

WUSC is an important program for refugee youth as it provides them with opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach. It is equally important for student volunteers as it enables Canadian youth to play an instrumental role in the sponsorship, settlement, orientation and integration of refugees. The Student Refugee Program also raises consciousness in the general community about the complicated lives of refugees as well as the challenges of the sponsorship process. These lessons learned through WUSC can be shared with others and used to generate dialogue about the most effective and meaningful practices for refugee settlement and integration.

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