

Taking Refuge in Education

OSU student organization dedicated to empowering teen refugees through higher education support

story priyanka jain **design** nithika badam

When refugees are forced to flee their home country because of persecution, war, or violence, they move to a brand new country with barely any knowledge of the new place just to survive. If they didn't fear their safety, many refugees would rather live in their home country where they grew up.

Nevertheless, these unjust situations ultimately force refugees to move past their traumatic experiences and overcome language barriers, financial insecurity, and cultural gaps just to stabilize their families.

Therefore, Refuge, an online refugee mentorship program, was founded two years ago to mitigate the challenges faced by refugees and specifically empower high school refugee students to make higher level education an attainable reality.

Abdul Bah, president of Refuge, explains why they have pinpointed adolescents. "When people come here as immigrants and refugees," explains Bah, "the younger [child] population [has time] to integrate into society and then the older [adult] population goes

into the workforce and has resettlement agencies that help them with English and finding a job, but the adolescent population is lacking in services."

"On an emotional level," explains Noor Alhashim, the Operations Chair of Refuge, "that middle generation has the expectations to perform as well as adults while they are just as unsure and helpless as the younger generation."

To match the needs of adolescent refugees, Refuge has created a program completely tailored to them. In contrast to traditional mentoring, all lessons are covered through text and video chat to increase accessibility limited through transportation issues. Using a modular curriculum designed for each grade, mentors cover topics on college preparation and career development such as resume writing and personal statements as well as activities to ease cultural acclimation. Because refugees often miss these seemingly simple topics that most learn in high school, the personalized curriculum is crucial when trying to provide a missing service that bridges personal and professional gaps.

Although mentors and mentees meet

virtually, the organization recognizes the power of face to face contact, so to allow the online mentorship to come full circle, Refuge held an Immersion Experience in April. During this two-day event, the refugee mentees experienced what it is like to be a student at Ohio State. They ate at a dining hall, had private tours of campus catered to their interests, talked one-on-one with a diverse group of professors, learned about marketing their bilingualism, participated in an engineering case competition and even gave their own TED talks about their experiences in a collaboration with TEDxOhioStateUniversity. There was also a reception-styled symposium open to the general public that was dedicated to highlighting other refugee organizations, speakers with refugee experiences, and immigrant performers to show the community the skills and passions of an undervalued community.

In addition to their community outreach at the Immersion Experience Reception, Refuge partners with US Together and Central Ohio Solidarity with Refugees and Immigrants to put on a Refugee Advocacy Training every year. The event is dedicated to breaking down prejudice against refugee communities is through community education and engaging dialogue on refugee resettlement and the benefit of refugees to the community and local economy.

In comparison to last year, they have definitely noticed a decreased concern for refugee issues due to a change in news topics and political landscape.

"Last year there was a lot more interest in refugee advocacy and mentorship itself, whereas this year it is no longer the trend," says Alhashim. "Even though it is still affecting our mentees and the refugee population is just the same way. So the fact that it is no longer the big news in the media affected how our local community responded to our educational programs."

Last year's travel ban specifically instilled a lot of fear into the immigrant



First interactions with the refugees happen on Ohio State's campus! It helps the mentee and their mentor get to know one another better.



population, giving the program a rocky start and making the refugee population even more unstable. As a result, this impacted the size of their program and the reliability of the mentees. For example, when funding for resettlement agencies decreased last year, a few families had to decide between having cell phones or power and thus had to opt out of the program.

Due to the nature of the refugee population and the political climate, Bah believes that Refuge's greatest challenge is holding their mentees accountable and consistently engaged in the program. The Mentee Development and Recruitment Chair of Refuge, Yusef Saeed explains that they need to identify how to effectively support the mentees in the program and help them get the most out of the mentorship experience. One solution is to learn more about the geographical landscape of Columbus and locate the refugees that truly need the program. It is especially difficult to gain insight and tap into more recent refugee populations such as the Bhutanese because those students are not at Ohio State.

What distinguishes Refuge from mentorship programs that deal with underprivileged students in inner cities is that mentors must not only be relatable to someone with a completely different background but also culturally competent.

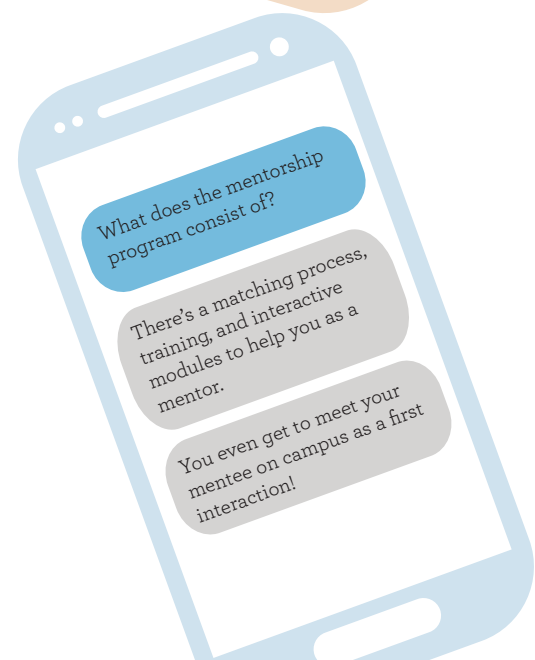
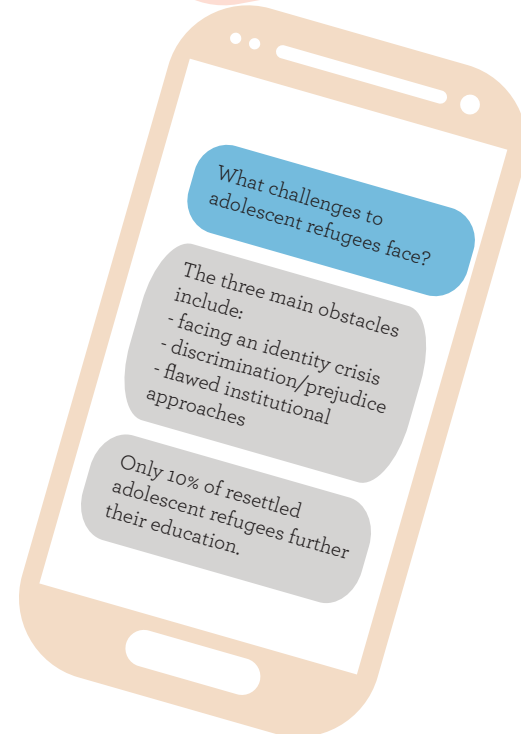
Saeed says Refuge "goes deeper than

poverty tourism," and as a mentor, "you are forced to really understand these communities. You can't just come in and assume you know. You have to do your research and understand what happened to these people in these countries."

Therefore, cultural competence is a very important element that adds to the challenges of being a mentor, especially because the cultural gaps and differences change for each person. In addition to cultural differences, each person's transition varies based on age, experiences, finances, and family, and every mentor understands that the students in their program were put in terribly unjust situations.

Ultimately, Refuge creates a family of activists, so when their mentors "learn about these people, they don't just end it there. [They] stand up for them, and [they] use what [they] have to help them," exclaims Saeed. With a culture of mutual concern and love for each other, Refuge gives motivated leaders a platform to succeed and come together to inspire others.

"When you empower somebody within a population or community that is struggling or facing a lot of difficulties," says Bah, "those are the best people to come back and create change within that population," so hopefully Refuge can create a cycle where one day mentees will return to Refuge as mentors, and all refugees will have the ability to take refuge in their education.



“When you empower somebody within a population or community, those are the best people to come back and create change within that population”
