Refugee One
The Yale Club of Chicago

Ambassadors in Action: An AYA Case Study
The Association of Yale Alumni

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Challenge

The Yale Club of Chicago was looking to expand its service programming and saw the Yale Day of Service as a catalyst for such growth. The challenge was to find a meaningful project that would provide a wide range of opportunities for engagement with varying commitment levels going forward.

Solution

One key to the positive outcome was having a motivated and committed volunteer to take on the challenge; this component is central to almost every challenge faced by any volunteer-run organization. In this case, Robbin Schoewe ’85, became interested in getting more involved in the club’s service programming after participating in the Yale Day of Service. She offered to be a Site Coordinator for the following year and shared the club leadership’s goal of finding a Yale Day of Service project that could be continued on an ongoing basis for those who wanted a deeper involvement. Through her own investigation and personal connections, she learned about the local organization Refugee One.

Refugee One is a Chicago organization that creates opportunities for refugees fleeing war, terror and persecution to build new lives of safety, dignity and self-reliance. Services include resettlement, job readiness, English training and immigration assistance. While many religious organizations had assisted Refugee One in their efforts, the Yale Club of Chicago would become the first non-religious group to become an ongoing partner in their work.

The Refugee One Yale Day of Service site was an ideal solution to the problem of finding a project that was meaningful and provided a range of ways to be involved. The core one-day Yale Day of Service project was
furnishing an apartment for a newly arriving refugee family. Members of the Yale community could donate home furnishings and other supplies, contribute towards needed goods, or sign up for the Yale Day of Service project itself which entailed moving in the furniture and other items and setting up the apartment in advance of the family’s arrival. This project became a real team effort where the final product, a furnished, welcoming apartment created a sense of accomplishment and the knowledge that individual efforts came together to create a home for a family in distress.

However, it was the opportunities for ongoing involvement with the project that perhaps made the largest impact on those who chose to participate. Yale volunteers met the refugee family at the airport and had a meal from their home culture prepared and waiting for their arrival. Over the next months, members of the Chicago Yale community helped with English language skills, childcare, job hunting and basic things such as learning the way around a grocery store. Relationships developed as the family became more self sufficient and acclimated to their new life in America. Since April of 2012, members of the Yale Club of Chicago have assisted three refugee families in their transition to life in America. The Club is committed to helping one family per year and plan to continue to mentor each family through its first year in their new country.

**THIRD REFUGEE FAMILY CO-Sponsorship**

Our third sponsored refugee family arrived in the United States the week before Thanksgiving. They are the Gu family who were formerly living in a camp in Thailand, after fleeing many years earlier from Burma, their homeland. The family consists of the parents and two girls, ages 4 and 8. They all seem eager to learn and intelligent, lively and sweet.

A tremendous thanks to about 30 Chicago area alumni who responded to the call for service and contributed to settlement expenses for this family. We raised approximately $1500 to use towards properly furnishing and stocking the apartment and providing initial food supplies for the family upon arrival. We also took in numerous donations of used clothing and some used furnishings.

About a week and a half prior to the arrival of the Gu’s, a volunteer group of Yalies and their children worked diligently on a stormy day, the day Soldier Field was evacuated and the Bears Game was delayed, to prepare a cozy, cheerful apartment for the family. Alongside two hired moving men, the group transported furniture and household items up three flights of outdoor stairs. They also conducted a thorough cleaning of the place and arranged, decorated and stocked cupboards, closets and dressers with dishes, toiletries, coats, food and clothing.

Four alumni have formed a team to tutor the children and mentor the parents on a weekly basis for the next 6 months or more, if needed. Mentoring involves taking the family on “acclimation field trips” to public parks, libraries, grocery stores, etc. This is a great, active way to develop their English fluency and helps them develop confidence outside of their apartment and RefugeeOne offices. We will be teaching them basic life skills, like defrosting and properly storing food, riding the train, rebooting a computer, etc. Furthermore we will assume an advisory role, alongside and coordinated with RefugeeOne. Tutoring the children involves practicing English reading and writing and helping them with all subjects as their English skills develop. We will help with proper, timely communication with the schools too.