

REFUGEEWORKS

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

NEWSLETTER 26 SOCIAL NETWORKING/ PEER MENTORING

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POSITIVE CHANGE THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS

By Daniel Sturm, RefugeeWorks

Think about the last time you applied for a job or placed a client with a new employer. Did you tap into an existing network of friends and colleagues to do so?

As I prepare this theme issue, it strikes me how fundamentally important social networking and peer mentoring is to career development. As a professional

journalist from Germany, I know I would never have been able to transition into a U.S. media career had a veteran United Press International reporter not taken me under his wing.

And for Jennifer Gueddiche, a program director for the ECDC African Community Center in Denver, social networking has been important enough to reorganize her agency's entire resettlement program around it.

It was a change born of necessity. "Our agency expanded rapidly," she said. And services were suffering as a result. At around this time, Gueddiche accepted an invitation from the Denver-based Piton Foundation to tour two community organizations that had implemented social networking practices. She was impressed with how simple changes at Lawrence Community Works (in Lawrence, Mass.) and Beyond Welfare (in Ames, Iowa) had made such a big difference.

"If social networking matters so much, why isn't this reflected in how resettlement services are organized?" she wondered. "Typically, we tell our clients what's

successful and what's not. Our job is to get them employment and send

CONTACT INFORMATION:

ECDC African Community Center, Denver, Colo.
URL: <http://www.africancommunitycenter.net>

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The famous American poet, Ruth Whitman, once wrote, "In every art, beginners must start with models of those who have practiced the same art before them. And it is not only a matter of

looking at the compositions that have been and are being created; it is a matter of being drawn into the individual work of art, of realizing that it has been made by a real human being, and trying to discover the secret of its creation." Each one of us has had someone we've tried to emulate. We've all had someone speak on our behalf or open a door that has led to a new

opportunity. As job development becomes more challenging, these relationships become increasingly important. That's why this issue of our newsletter is devoted to mentoring programs from around the U.S. that bridge refugees and asylees to career paths. As employment specialists, we do not need to recreate the wheel. We need to engage those who have flourished in their careers to become peer mentors to our clients, and inspire them to do the same.

Jonathan Lucas

Senior Consultant and National Coordinator

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AND REFUGEE SERVICE

TALKING POINT



PEER MENTORING FOR PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

By Daniel Sturm

In Homer's epic novel, Ulysses entrusts his son's education to his good friend, Mentor. The concept of mentorship has come a long way since these ancient times. Today, it's less often a one-way street than a peer relationship. A case in point is the City of Toronto's Mentoring Partnership, a collaboration between community organizations and corporate partners that brings skilled immigrants together with established professionals, in job-specific mentoring relationships. Since its inception in 2004, more than 3,200 matches have been made. Eighty percent of the mentees have been able to find employment after the four-month mentoring period. The program is offered through The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC). RefugeeWorks spoke with Dr. Peter Paul, a project leader with the Toronto-based Maytree Foundation, which provides the program with management support and housing.

REFUGEEWORKS: What's the significance of mentoring?

PAUL: Finding a mentor provides a level of comfort in an environment where everything is new to you.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

The Mentoring Partnership of the Toronto Region
Immigrant Employment Council
URL: <http://www.maytree.com>
URL: <http://www.thementoringpartnership.com>

Being able to connect with professional networks helps immigrants to more than double their job opportunities.

REFUGEEWORKS: How successful are your mentors at helping your clients reclaim their careers?

PAUL: The mentor's job is not to find the mentee employment, but to provide advise on accreditation, licensing and upgrading technical

skills. As a result of this intense peer support, 83 percent of the mentees find employment in their line of work within a four-month period. More than 1,900 mentees currently participate in this free program.

REFUGEEWORKS: Many associate the notion of "mentorship" with top-down hierarchies.

PAUL: This is not a top-down program. Our 12 partner agencies employ 25 coaches to work with mentees and mentors. Our coaches contact mentors with profiles of proposed mentees, based on work and career compatibility, such as shared educational background, similar work experience and common career goals. After an orientation session, mentors and mentees meet in person to negotiate objectives and sign a partnership agreement.

REFUGEEWORKS: How do you go about recruiting mentors?

PAUL: Usually through our more than 52 corporate partners. We explain the benefits of joining the program. It brings new skilled talent right to their doorsteps. For our corporate partners it's also a great way to diversify the workforce and expose leadership to cross-cultural training.

REFUGEEWORKS: What feedback have you received on the program?

PAUL: There's been a tremendous interest. We're taking this concept across the country. This fall, the city of Edmondson will role out a new mentoring partnership. Vancouver and Montreal are also working on similar program

REFUGEES ARE SEEING “I-TO-I”

By Daniel Sturm

Does mentoring matter? A recent study published in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* underscores research findings that it does. Mentoring is positively related to self-image, emotional adjustment and career success. Furthermore, this latest study indicates that employment mentoring is even more effective than youth mentoring.

For Alejandra Holway-Behrends, the employment services



coordinator at Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS) in New Haven, Conn., there's little doubt that peer mentoring is essential to socio-economic adjustment. “Refugees pay so much more attention to other refugees. If they must choose between two sources for advice, they usually follow their fellow countrymen.”

Holway-Behrends recalls the case of an Iraqi woman who rejected a job offer as a room attendant, despite the fact that it paid well and offered good benefits. “She thought that working in a hotel was not dignified, so she chose a factory instead.” It was only after the agency put her in touch with another Iraqi client that she changed her mind. “She spoke little English,” Holway-Behrends explained. “And even though we have Arabic speakers on staff, it’s often beneficial to identify a peer mentor who can relay the information more convincingly.”

Recently, the IRIS obtained a \$25,000 grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to institutionalize a peer mentorship program. The program’s name is “Immigrant-to-Immigrant Mentorship to Enhance Family Economic Success,” or “I-to-I.” In the past, IRIS had tried to connect newly-arrived refugees with established professionals. With I-to-I, this relationship is now being formalized.

In weekly three-hour sessions over the course of two months, mentors share employment-related advice with mentees, face-to-face. The pairs meet outside of private homes and office



spaces, in casual settings such as parks, coffee shops or diners. “We follow the advise of Literacy Volunteers of America,” Holway-Behrends said. “Meeting in public places helps to set boundaries. We don’t want to burn out the mentors.” In addition to matching clients with qualified mentors, the program places a great emphasis on picking the right kind of people. Holway-Behrends, who came to the U.S. as an immigrant from Argentina, said agency staff were aware that not every immigrant business owner makes a good peer mentor. “For example, if they are advising refugees not to bother obtaining a driver’s license, and to drive without a permit – that’s the wrong piece of advice.”



IRIS is currently recruiting 20 mentors from all professions across the board. In addition to mentoring, many will conduct workshop sessions at potluck dinners, on topics such as financial education, workplace ethics, employee rights and job retention. Mentors include three college-educated “Lost Boys of Sudan,” a deli owner from Afghanistan and an immigration attorney from Belarus.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

IRIS – Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services
URL: <http://www.interfaithrefugee.org/>

ETHNIC PEER MENTORING IN TEXAS

By Daniel Sturm

When Lee Thao arrived with his family in Fort Worth, Texas, he felt homesick, hungry and lost. He'd just flown in from Thailand and didn't know any Lao Hmong in this part of the U.S. He spoke little English, and in desperation, had begun to consider moving to Minnesota where he had relatives. To help the family integrate, the local resettlement agency referred them to the Hmong American Planning and Development Center INC. (MAPDC), a Mutual Assistance Association in Grand Prairie, just outside of Fort Worth.

Thao Phia, who heads the 23-year-old nonprofit, recalls asking the Lao Hmong American community members to help with the case. Two hours after receiving the news five families showed up at the Thao family's apartment with traditional Hmong food – rice, chicken soup with greens and lemon grass, pork sautéed with ginger and snow peas, and yellow pumpkin soup. Before night fell, the Thao family had received several 25-pound bags of rice, fresh whole chickens and numerous kitchen utensils (a set of steam rice cookers, soup and sauté pans, a meat cutting board and Hmong traditional knives).

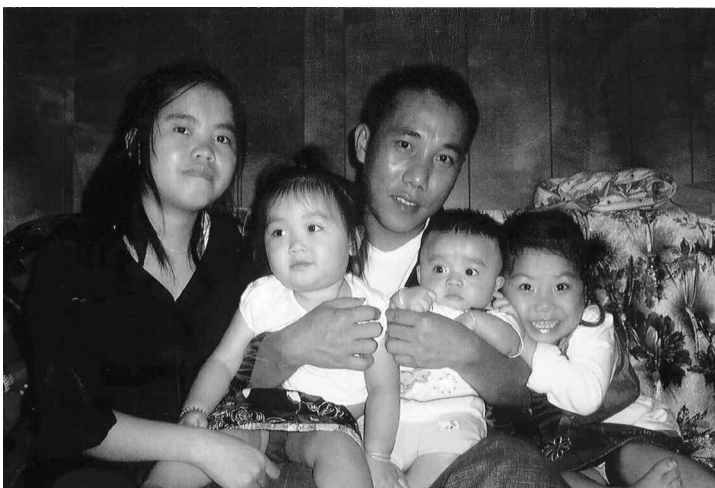
That day Lee Thao realized he and his family weren't alone. An estimated 25,000 Lao Hmong Americans resided in the Fort Worth-Dallas area.

The Hmong American community took turns providing interpretation and transportation for the family during their first eight months in Texas. They introduced them to American work culture, new language skills and financial education, and coached Lee during his job search. And his local resettlement agency helped Lee find a hotel laundry room job for an hourly wage of \$6. The hotel's healthcare plan was too expensive for him to enroll in.

After a year on the job, Lee confided to his mentor, Thao Phia, at the Hmong American Planning and Development Center.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Hmong American Planning and Development Center INC.
2307 Oak Lane, Ste. 207, Grand Prairie, TX 75051
E-Mail: Mapdc1@dhc.net



He enjoyed his job, but said the salary was so low that he worried about being able to support his family. When his client started talking about relocating to Minnesota again, Phia knew that Lee needed more help from the community.

So Phia introduced Lee to Xa Yang, a Lao Hmong American who'd worked more than 20 years for a machinery company. Yang's company was hiring for a helper position. MAPDC staff assisted Thao in applying, and after he was hired, Yang offered him on-the-job training. Lee climbed the career ladder quickly and soon stopped talking about Minnesota.

He started as a helper at \$11 per hour, and assisted with cleaning the machines and preparing to drill the metallic pipes (used for exploratory underwater gas drilling). Six months later, Lee was promoted to Machinist 1, with an hourly wage of \$12.35 plus benefits. Three months after that, he was making \$18.

Thao Phia recalls how members of the Lao Hmong community began teasing Lee. "We've been here for a long time," they'd say. "But we don't make nearly as much money as you do."

In a recent phone interview with RefugeeWorks, Lee said he was very happy with his new job. "I love working with machines,"

he said. "The company offers a friendly and professional environment, experienced supervisors and trainers and good coworkers, company benefits, and much room for growth." In May 2008, his team received a one-month training session in computer assisted design, taught by a group of trainers from England. After completing this training, Lee is excited by the prospect of a promotion to Machinist 4, which would enable him to be a supervisor.

Faith Nibbs, an anthropology research assistant at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, notes that Lee's story is typical of ethnic peer mentoring. "It utilizes the established ethnic network to train a refugee into a higher paying skill before traditional barriers of language and cultural knowledge are overcome," Nibbs confirmed. "This echoes recent research on integration that suggests immigrant populations are carving out creative ways to integrate themselves." Nibbs, who serves on MAPDC's community advisory board, helped the Thao family to improve their English conversational skills. When asked about his plans to reunite the extended family, Lee Thao said he will visit his relatives in Minnesota soon, and will promote the idea of them moving to the Fort Worth-Dallas area. Based on his experiences, job opportunities and community networks are both very strong in his new hometown.

PEER MENTORING RESOURCE GUIDE

Potential Program Funding Sources

Ameriprise Financial, Inc.

Corporate Giving Program
108 Ameriprise Financial Ctr.
Minneapolis, MN 55474-9900
(866) 625-1697
E-mail: ameriprise.financial.community.relations@ampf.com
URL: <http://www.ameriprise.com/amp/global/about-ameriprise/community-relations.asp>

Mitsubishi Motors USA Foundation

c/o Dir., Diversity Relations
6400 Katella Ave.
Cypress, CA 90630-5208
URL: <http://www.mitsubishicars.com/MMNA/jsp/company/responsibility.do>

Western Union Foundation

12500 Belford Ave. M.S. M11
Englewood, CO 80112-5939
(720) 332-6606
Contact: Luella Chavez D'Angelo, Pres.
E-mail: luella.dangelo@westernunion.com
URL: <http://foundation.westernunion.com>

Further Reading

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- Fritzberg, G. J., Alemayehu, A. (2004). "Mutual Mentoring: Co-Narrating an Educative Friendship Between an Education Professor and an Urban Youth." *The Urban Review* 36/3.
- Peer Mentoring Toolkit (2008). Published by the Peer Mentoring Project at Refugee Action (UK)
URL: <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/ourwork/projects/peermentoringtoolkit.aspx>
- Peer Resources. A directory of mentor programs with descriptions of how they work and who to contact.
URL: <http://www.mentors.ca>

POSITIVE CHANGE THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS << 1

them on their way. But we're ignoring the fact that in many of our clients' countries of origin, it's more important who you know than what you earn."

Refugees and asylees become trapped in low-wage jobs more often due to social isolation than lack of vocational skills. "How many friends will a Somali Bantu refugee make working at Walmart?" Gueddiche asked. "And how much English will she learn? After work she'll go back to her Somali apartment complex, where her real social network is."

Putting theory into practice, Gueddiche re-organized the agency's case management so that every client was assigned to a team of two caseworkers, an employment counselor and a community volunteer. "The advantage of this model is that all four team members know about the client before he or she arrives," Gueddiche said. "So when a client shows up there will always be someone who knows about the case." The teams are put together aiming for language diversity, with Arabic or Farsi speakers on each one.



Initially, the networking concept didn't seem revolutionary. But after working for two different resettlement agencies in the last decade, Gueddiche realized that it counteracted an otherwise often sterile work environment.

She has also replaced the term "client" with "community member." And to create a lasting bond between newcomers, caseworkers, volunteers and established immigrants, the community gathers for a weekly potluck dinner. The idea is to create a network of supporters, including former clients who might come back to donate their time as volunteers. At the beginning of every dinner, participants are asked to share something that's "new and good" in their lives – an activity Gueddiche said has had a miraculously equalizing influence, empowering new community members to speak up during events.

The feedback on the agency's program changes has been positive. Currently, they attract 50 new volunteers each month, and the team-based case management has led to improved employment services. "In the past, case workers were often frustrated when clients didn't show up for their appointments. But now the atmosphere in the office is much more relaxed."

FEATURED EMPLOYER: YOUR DEKALB FARMER'S MARKET

By Rebecca Armstrong, Staff Consultant

Touted by USA Today as one of the top ten markets nationwide, Your Dekalb Farmer's Market (YDFM) is a favorite Atlanta food destination for locals and tourists alike. Fresh produce, brought in directly from the growers several times a week, is the centerpiece of the 140,000 square-foot market. Each week, an average of 100,000 shoppers find



imported cheeses, high-quality meats and seafood, fresh roasted coffee and nuts, pastries and breads made daily in-house, and aisles of food products from around the world. Since the market began 31 years ago, people from refugee and other immigrant backgrounds have found familiar foods and friendly faces at YDFM. Shoppers quickly turned into employees, as the farmer's market became a stable employment destination for new arrivals to Atlanta. Barbara Blazer, the market owner's wife, points out the strong network that YDFM has in the immigrant and refugee communities. "Employees tell us that the market is well-known even in Ethiopia." It has a workforce of 560 employees, representing 38 countries and more than 56 different languages. "I'm willing to work with people with limited English skills," owner Robert Blazer says, "because I see a strong work ethic and good values about family and responsibility in those applicants." Diane Talley of the Arts and Education Department notes, "I am one of only seven American-born employees here – when you add the owners that makes nine of us."

Like all entry-level retail service positions, there's a high turnover in many YDFM departments. Yet almost all of the market's core management come from immigrant backgrounds and have advanced those entry-level positions to oversee entire departments within the market. A case in point is Reti Canaj, originally from Albania, who started as a cashier and within nine months was promoted to human resources director.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Your Dekalb Farmer's Market

URL: <http://www.dekalbfarmersmarket.com>.

There's also Anteneh Yizengaw, who came to YDFM for his first job and has stayed on for four years, working most recently as an international products manager. And there's Ayele Gebra, the facilities manager, who was a trade union representative in his home country of Ethiopia. "We prove everyday that people can work and live together in peace and harmony," Ayele said.

Robert and Barbara Blazer share a few tips on how to create a positive work environment:

- Help facilitate a sense of community – when workers feel connected they are rooted both to the workplace and the greater community.
- Provide a gateway for employees to learn English – English is critical for the company's success and the newcomers' personal success in America.
- Offer as much training as you can – trained workers stay longer and are more valuable to the company.
- Partner employees with opposite natural abilities – when one person's strengths are another's weaknesses, a pair balances each other and is able to effectively work while simultaneously learning.

Employees wear nametags that also include their countries of origin and the languages they speak other than English. "Working with people from all over the world is a real privilege and makes the world seem smaller because I see how we are all connected," says Robert Blazer.

Prize-Winning Photographer Has Ethiopian Roots

The winner of the "Refugees in the Workforce" photo contest is someone with a talent for photography as well as a personal understanding of what it means to integrate into a new community.

Zelalem Midekssa, 28, first came to the U.S. from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2005. His employment at Your Dekalb Farmer's Market began in May 2005, when he began making sausage in the food production department. After eight months, he accepted a position in the market's art department and has been working there ever since. Some of Zelalem's work can be seen in the thoughtful photographs of staff and the vibrant arrangement of food prints throughout the market. Zelalem studied art, graphic design, photography and videography in Addis Ababa prior to working for an advertising agency there. He plans to continue his education in the United States. Check out the winning photos at www.refugeeworks.org.

**Winner: Brian Bollinger
World Relief, Atlanta, Ga.**

Congratulations to **Brian Bollinger** of Atlanta's World Relief! He won first prize in the "Refugees in the Workplace" photo contest for a picture taken at Your Dekalb Farmer's Market in Decatur, Ga. The winning photo will be the centerpiece for a poster celebrating refugee workers. Stay tuned for a chance to order prints for your agency and partners. In addition, Brian will receive a scholarship to attend a **RefugeeWorks Employment Training Institute (ETI)** of his choice. "I knew that winning the scholarships was THE way we could make a case to cover the costs for a trip to the Manchester ETI," Brian said. "I am so happy that we can bring this positive attention to refugee employment and one of the main refugee employers in our area."

1



Refugees in the Workforce

PHOTO CONTEST WINNERS 2008



2

**Runner-Up: Eric Bestrom
Hmong American Partnership
St. Paul, Minn.**

The runner-up scholarship award goes to **Eric Bestrom**, an employer liaison at the Hmong American Partnership in St. Paul, Minn. His photo shows a highly-skilled glass blower at Goldenflow Studios in St. Paul. "I'm honored to have won this award," Bestrom said. "Thanks to my client, for learning this interesting trade; to Goldenflow Studios, for hiring and training him despite no previous U.S. employment; and thanks to RefugeeWorks for publicizing the great contributions refugees are making in the American workforce." Check out the winning photos at www.refugeeworks.org

Honorable Mention



Erika Humke, Austin Area Interreligious Ministries, Austin, Texas



Ana Chow, International Rescue Committee, Oakland, California

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“Being able to connect with professional networks helps immigrants to more than double their job opportunities.”

*Dr. Peter Paul, The Maytree Foundation.
See, RefugeeWorks' "Talking Point," p. 2*



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