

Minutes of Mass Meeting of Refugee Working Group

5 pm, Tuesday March 15, 2016

Lylburn Downing Middle School Cafeteria

Lexington, Virginia

Jerry Nay opened the meeting by announcing that this was a celebration of the fact that our Congolese family is here in Lexington! They arrived last Friday, and the past week has been a "whirlwind" week for them. In addition to a long and tiring trip, they are experiencing "culture shock" as well. He said that the parents and older children will arrive and be introduced to the group later in the meeting.

Anne Hansen showed a picture of the family, and named each one of them. She expressed the committee's thanks to everyone for all that has been done in support of this family, and stated that there are only a few current needs remaining. These are a car seat for a young child, and possibly a DVD player. Otherwise, the family has everything that is needed at the moment. The outpouring of support by the community has been great.

Alex Brown introduced our speaker, Col. Jim Hentz, Professor of International Studies and Head of that Department at VMI. Col. Hentz's primary area of interest and expertise is Central Africa, and his talk was focused on the turmoil that has ravaged that region for the past 65 or more years, and which is the direct cause of our refugee family's plight. Col. Hentz made the following points:

- The family is originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), formerly known as Zaire, and even more formerly known as Belgium Congo. However, they have been living in a refugee camp in Tanzania for 19 years, and the children were all born in the refugee camp in Tanzania..
- As we study a map of Africa, we see distinct boundaries that define national borders, but these are, in fact, illusionary. They are "white men's concepts". The "national" capitols typically are situated on the periphery of such a "nation", and in actuality have little control or influence over the activities of vast stretches of the "national" territory. The "national" leaders are typically corrupt and care only about enriching themselves, and display little or no interest in the welfare of their citizens. Extreme poverty characterizes most of the region.
- Wars of one sort or another have torn the region since at least the 1950s, when the native tribes of Tutsi and Hutu fought each other. The Tutsi were the more "aristocratic elite" group, but represented only about 20% of the population, while the Hutu were the oppressed, "lower class" majority. Many extremist factions developed amongst the Hutus and often slaughtered less-extreme Hutu as well as Tutsi.
- The turmoil spread out from the DRC to the neighboring countries of Uganda and Rwanda in a confusing profusion of conflict. A genocide in Rwanda in 1996 resulted in an estimated 600,000 deaths, and a more recent one in a staggering 6,000,000 deaths! Col. Hentz described the situation as actually being comprised of six different wars, and defined it as Africa's First World War. His "short list" showed eight distinct "armies", or fighting groups, which are more accurately described as militia groups which control distinct bits of territories.
- The "prize" that each of these militia groups seeks is the riches in natural resources that the DRC is blessed (cursed?) with -- gold, tin, rare earths, and timber. Witnesses have reported daily plane-loads of gold being shipped out of the country, for the profit of whichever group has managed to wrest control over that particular area.
- While there were so-called "democratic elections" in the DRC in 2006, in fact nothing has really changed, and the underlying conditions remain largely the same as before.

- Religious differences play little role in these disputes. To some degree, it is more of the impact of climate change, as warmer and drier temperatures to the north of the region force groups of herders to migrate southward in search of pastureland for their herds, encroaching on the farmlands of farmers in the area, in a classic struggle between "the cowboys and the farmers".
- Children are a main casualty of the wars --- 14 year old boys are regularly impressed into the various "armies".

Col. Hentz passed around three books which he recommends for anyone wishing to learn more about the situation in this part of Africa; they are:

- 1) "The Great African War" by Filip Reyntjens
- 2) "Dancing in the Glory of Monsters" by Jason K. Stearns
- 3) "Africa's World War" by Gerard Prunier

Amanda Merrill reported on the efforts of the working group on Language, an important effort as none of our refugee family speaks English, and only the father speaks French. The rest of the family speaks Bembe or Swahili. Amanda introduced Ellen Meyock of W&L's English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program, who described how a number of French students at W&L would be working directly with the refugee family to help the father learn English, and through him the entire family. Becky Smith, who works in our schools with children who speak little or no English, will also be working with the school-age children.

At this point the father, mother and older children were introduced and warmly welcomed. The father expressed the family's appreciation, and all who understand French recognized the depth of his feelings. To the rest of us, it was evident in the "body language" of the family. The family then left in the company of the School Superintendent, Scott Jeffries, to see the school (LDMS and Waddell) that the children will be attending, starting on March 29.

The program concluded with a presentation by Isabel Richter and Harrison Branner, two Rockbridge County High School seniors, who reported on the efforts of the RCHS Interact Group. Their primary focus will be to help the refugee children in their transition to life in Lexington, especially as it pertains to fitting into the school system. They have already delivered backpacks filled with school supplies to the children and have more projects planned. It is obvious that there is much enthusiasm among the students to help our new neighbors in this regard.

↓ PLEASE READ ON ↓

Tuesday, March 15th RCHS Interact Club

Who is Interact?

Interact is a community service organization, sponsored by Rotary, that connects high school students with volunteer opportunities in the community. Every student in the high school is a member of Interact, this means we invite all students to participate in our volunteer efforts. Over the years Interact has led many international efforts so the club was excited to learn about this opportunity to help.

Harrison and Isabel are the presidents of Interact. They also lead with a council of executives who help lead projects and reach out to students to get them involved.

How has Interact helped?

Amanda Merrill organized a group of clubs made up of Interact, the National Honor Society, French Honor Society, SCA, and the International Affairs Club to take charge of providing school supplies for the children. Interact sponsored Cyprien, the soon to be 12 year old boy who will be entering 6th grade at Lylburn after spring break which ends Monday, March 28th. Interact got a school supply list from Cyprien's guidance counselor at LDMS and students brought in school supplies late last week and yesterday. The National Honor Society generously donated new backpacks for each of the children and all the clubs participating got together on Tuesday to pack the backpacks with the school supplies. The groups delivered the backpacks to the family that afternoon.

Interact's Ideas for the Future:

Focus on communication and education:

Teachers/Administration:

Educating teachers and administrators in all three schools by starting in the high school then sharing with other schools, give out pamphlets

Explain: brief history of conflict, challenges refugees face

Summary of how our community is helping

how they can help inform students

High School Students:

Pamphlets of info for english teachers to give to high school students

Explain: where congo is/ brief history

Challenges refugees face

Difference between refugees and immigrants

Why countries like U.S. resettle refugees

Things Sarah Coleman explained - how to help

A little about the family

range of ages

What schools they're going to

Offer to email the high school students interested in learning more

they email Interact who will then send them the packet of background info

on DRC refugees from the Cultural Orientation Research Center and

keep them updated with meeting minutes

Optional lunch information sessions, presentations for high schoolers

Educate elementary and middle schoolers

Little guide with pictures to show how the refugee kids are relatable and cool to be nice to and make friends with

Include appropriate questions for how to get to know them

Not "What was that like?" But "What's your favorite color/food?"

Or "What do you like about America?" "What did you like about where you lived?"

For middle schoolers include a little information about what refugees are coming from, history on the situation in DRC/ refugee camps, while still stressing the

unique and awesome things about Congolese culture- showing the optimism the refugees are bringing

Signing birthday cards for Marie Makiwa (13 on Mar 9th) and Cyprien (12 on March 29th)

Offer babysitting

Find responsible high school students who could hang out with the kids while the parents are working or taking ESL classes

Help with tutoring

Information is more recent, high schoolers may seem more relatable and fun to meet with

Talk to foreign exchange students about what it's like to come to America from another culture

Community celebration

Invite students

Spread the word to high schoolers

Send invitations to elementary and middle school parents

Incorporate other clubs

Share our email: rockbridgeinteract@gmail.com our Teacher Sponsor is Sarah Leadbetter