

Refugees give back to adoptive North Dakota city by helping feed the hungry

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

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Maria Modi and her seven siblings know what it is like to be hungry. They are refugees. Refugees are people who have to leave their home country because of war or natural disasters. Modi's journey from South Sudan, in Africa, to a new life in Fargo, North Dakota, was not easy. It included a stop at a refugee camp in Cairo, Egypt.

"My mother and father work 12-hour shifts and still sometimes we don't get enough food at home to last us a week," said Modi. She's now a Fargo North High School student. Next year, she plans to study music and theater in college.

Refugee Students Hand Out Turkeys For Thanksgiving

She and a group of other students spent the Thursday before Thanksgiving handing out turkey and cranberries to the hungry residents of Fargo. Most of the students come from poor refugee families. Many come from countries in Asia and Africa. Most of the students are low-income and need free or reduced-price school lunches themselves.

Recently, they opened a food pantry. A food pantry collects food and gives it to people in need. It is part of the Legacy Children's Foundation. Legacy helps them finish school while they find out what they're good at doing.

"I come from a little, poor country," said Fargo North student Puja Chhertri. She is one of the food pantry organizers whose family came to the United States from Nepal in South Asia. "There are people on the street there who are eating from garbage."

Students Serve The Public In Many Ways

The Legacy students have done many public service projects. They made and distributed blankets to the homeless. Other times, they ran a school carnival and helped at nursing homes and day care centers. This is their first attempt at feeding those in need.

Mary Jean Dehne is one of the group's leaders. "It's about hungry kids serving hungry neighbors," she said.

The city of Fargo takes in more refugees than most American cities the same size. In the past ten years, a church-based social services program has helped around 450 refugees find a new home

each year in North Dakota. About 70 percent of them ended up in Fargo. The city is the biggest in the state.

Kindness Is Doing Service

The Legacy students have named their program K.I.D.S., for Kindness Is Doing Service. They order the food from the Great Plains Food Bank. They stock the shelves, learn to spend the program's money wisely and find others to help with the food drives.

Once a week, they hand out food from a garage in the city's Golden Ridge section, which is home to many low-income families. They also deliver food to some homes.

Peter Saintal, age 23, is the child of refugees. He went through the Legacy program. Now he's the program's president. He said he "saw what poor looks like" when he returned to Haiti with his family three years ago. He said many people in Fargo would be surprised to learn they have neighbors who are suffering.

"There's A Lot Of People Who Go Hungry"

"I mean, there are people out there who don't get meals or food," Saintal said. Some people think that it's only homeless people who need food, but that is not true. "There's a lot of people who go hungry, whether they have a house or a car or whatever the case may be."

In its first two weeks, the pantry served about 150 children and 125 adults. They gave away 1,500 pounds of groceries as well as cleanliness items and soap to clean clothes. Families that are low-income tend to eat a lot of foods that are heavy in carbohydrates. These are foods like ramen noodles or macaroni and cheese. They are cheaper than other types of food, but they are not as healthy. The group is trying to give families more protein-rich food.

"It Just Makes Your Day" When You Give Back

"The people who come here are so happy," Chhertri said. "It just makes your day when they smile and say thank you. You know you are making a little bit of difference in the community."

The group also handed out turkey and cranberries before Thanksgiving. This kindness helped the Legacy students appreciate the American holiday.

"We're doing something for people who might not have a Thanksgiving otherwise," Saintal said.

"It's something that we should be thankful for."

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