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Refugees for a day

Las Vegas Valley kids get to imagine being forced from their homes, taking only what they can carry, in replica camp at children's museum

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The question posed to children entering the replica refugee camp at Lied Discovery Children's Museum is tough: "If you were forced to leave your home, what would you take with you?"

Well, there's the iPod, the cell phone, the Hannah Montana bed sheets, the Xbox, the skateboard, some snacks, a blanket, maybe an action figure and definitely some batteries for your gadgets.

Not really. Not when you have miles to walk, borders to cross, land mines to avoid and shelter to seek.

Once at the camp, you're given a bracelet to prove you belong there, but also as a measuring tool to determine if you're starving. So, welcome. Pump some water into the jugs you're given and build a shelter with the tarp. The mosquito net? That's to prevent malaria, which along with cholera and violence is common in the filthy camps. But there's the medic tent should you get sick. Oh, no weapons allowed.

"Torn From Home: My Life as a Refugee," a well-crafted, well-sourced, costly exhibit opening Saturday at the children's museum, is on an entirely different emotional and intellectual plane from "Cool Moves! Artistry of Motion" and "Clifford the Big Red Dog."

In fact, parents might find it easier explaining a fictional red puppy with a growth problem than the displacement of entire families and communities.

But this \$700,000 exhibit, sponsored by philanthropist Pam Omidyar, who lives in Henderson with her husband, eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, signifies a change at the 18-year-old institution where diversity and meatier issues are being integrated with children's books, life at the supermarket and the physics of tornadoes.

"We're looking to bring messages to the community that are not part of the norm in the exhibit world," says Linda Quinn, executive director of Lied Discovery Children's Museum, who has raised more than \$2 million for the museum since arriving two years ago. "Hopefully when that child leaves, they walk out and ask Mom and Dad, 'Why is it like that?'"

The exhibit is not as grim as it might seem. The displays, designed to get children fully engaged — even wanting to be aware — are spectacular.

There are posters of land mines near the camp's check-in desk, but no formal discussion of them. This exhibit is merely to raise awareness of people displaced from their countries out of fear of persecution because of race, religion or social and political conflict. The average time in a camp is seven years. Some refugees can't go home and are settled in a third country. Many countries don't want them. Some countries can't take them.

The issue isn't completely removed from the local community. Catholic Charities of Southern Nevada reports that since January 2003, its Migration and Refugee Service has helped resettle more than 5,000 refugees in Southern Nevada. In fact, the recorded voices behind photo displays of resettled refugee children, including those from Colombia, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are those of local children who

spoke for resettled refugee children in other cities.

“This is a story that needs to be told and rarely are refugee stories told from child to child,” says exhibit curator Elaine Bole, who has worked with refugees since 1993 in the former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Uganda and Iraq. She’s also worked for the U.N. High Commission for Refugees and World Vision. “Kids are going to realize, ‘Oh, that’s what a refugee is.’ Where that leads will be manifested in different ways.”

“Torn From Home” was developed by Lied Discovery Children’s Museum and will tour nationally. It was initiated by Pam Omidyar, who had contacted Bole some time ago requesting tarps and other materials to use as a way to explain the plight of refugees to children. After presenting a small exhibit at a school, Omidyar contacted the children’s museum about presenting a larger exhibit. Working with Quinn and Omidyar, Bole created “Torn From Home” with exhibit developer Stacey Mann.

Equipment and supplies were provided by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees; the World Food Programme; Save the Children; and Doctors Without Borders, which has a similar outdoor traveling exhibit.

A most profound element of the exhibit is the collection of toys that Bole and Mann brought back to the States from a Ugandan refugee camp where children generously gave them away, knowing the toys would be “telling their story and representing their spirit,” Bole says. There are soccer balls made from garbage bags and twine. A steering wheel made from bark and other found materials attached to little wheels made from foam flip-flop sandals, and a toy car made from a plastic milk container. Dolls are also made from recycled materials. Then there are the cell phones and cameras children carved from wood blocks or made from mud after seeing the international workers carrying them around.

Bole says the exhibit aims to show that, aside from their circumstances, refugee children are no different from children here.

“These kids are incredibly resourceful,” Bole says. “They have an indelible, amazing spirit and they know how to survive. They only want what is rightfully theirs, which is to live without the fear of being killed.”

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