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Lives of Refugee Children Revealed in Traveling Exhibit

By Ekaterina Strekalova

Aug. 19 -- About 1 in every 100 US citizens was once a refugee or is the child of a refugee, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Washington resettlement unit, yet many of today's American youth know little about the lives of refugee children.

An exhibition created in partnership with the UN is looking to bridge that cultural divide one city at a time.



"Torn From Home: My Life as a Refugee," provides a first-hand look at the plight of refugees, particularly children, from countries that are rife with rights abuses, economic and social problems far more severe than those typically experienced by their counterparts in the United States.

The goal is to have visitors learn who refugees are -- "That they haven't just arrived to the country by choice, they have been invited to the US as refugees to survive," said Tim Irwin, a senior media officer for the UN refugee agency.

Children play in front of a repatriation shelter provided by UNHCR in Takar, Afghanistan. The children were born and raised in the Jalozai refugee camp in Pakistan. © UNHCR/ M. Maguire

Since 1975, UN data indicate that the US has accepted an estimated 2.68

million people, and California and Florida have each taken in more refugees than any one country in the world.

The US resettled 48,793 refugees from 61 countries in 2008, the highest total of any nation, according to

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the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees. The majority of last year's refugees came to America from Iraq, Myanmar and Bhutan.

The "Torn From Home" exhibition, which is traveling to several American cities, is on display at the InfoZone News Museum in Pueblo, Colo., through Sept. 6. It originated with the Lied Discovery Children's Museum in Las Vegas, where the show opened in June 2008.

The Lied museum worked with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on the project, which is primarily meant to educate US children ages 8 to 12 years old about the hardships faced by refugees, 80 percent of whom are children, women and the elderly. The exhibit pays special attention to the emotional toll involved with being displaced from one's home.

"We knew going into it that this would be a one-of-a-kind exhibit and a very unique undertaking for a children's museum," said Linda Quinn, executive director of the Lied Discovery Children's Museum. "We were trying to create an exhibit that children could relate to while avoiding the influence of politics and violence on this issue."

The UN refugee agency served as an informational resource for the exhibition, providing items from refugee camps, channeling personal stories of refugee children to enrich the displays, arranging refugee camp visits for the museum's curators and mediating their communication with refugee camp staff and refugees in the conflict zones.

"We wanted to bring authenticity and credibility to the project, and it was the absolute best resource we could use to add to the content of the exhibit," Quinn said.

The show's concept began with Elaine Bole, who is a curator of "Torn From Home," and Pam Omidyar, the founder and chairwoman of Humanity United. Bole worked as a former US spokeswoman for the refugee agency and has been involved with refugees since 1993. The exhibition also received collaborative support from the International Rescue Committee, World Food Program, Save the Children and Doctors Without Borders.

As the numbers of refugees settling in the US has risen, schools with refugees enrolled in them are adapting to the newcomers. Dr. James Hoot, president of the Association for Childhood Education International, a nonprofit that advocates for children's rights, and a specialist on refugee children education, said that the exhibition is useful for teachers as well.

"Most teachers are white and monolingual, and even though they may take a course on diversity, one course on diversity doesn't substitute for really knowing somebody from another culture," said Dr. Hoot.

"Knowing refugees gives them an opportunity they have never had, a very good opportunity to learn something real and important about people from other cultures," he added. "It develops disposition in teachers and children to be interested in people who are not like you."

The seven display areas of "Torn From Home" take visitors through the refugee child experience, from pre-refugee life through repatriation or resettlement: Home, Losing Home, Camp Registration, Refugee Camp, Medical Clinic, School and Going Home.

Interactive multimedia kiosks, photographs and personal stories of young asylum seekers, provided by the UN refugee agency, aim to educate young visitors about human rights. Children can not only touch objects from an actual refugee camp, but they can also observe everyday activities there and hear voices of their peers from zones of man-made and natural disasters.

Children can also pick up a jar of water and imagine carrying it home for miles every day, so their family can have drinking water.

"Our hope is that children and other visitors will take away from the exhibition a sense of empathy and insight into the lives of refugee children around the world," Quinn of the Lied museum said.

Dr. Hoot added: "All of a sudden, you forget about politics and you forget about all these negative things we've heard all our lives when you get to know somebody as a friend. I think that's the beginning of the peaceful world."

For information about the requirements for cities interested in hosting the exhibition, go to http://www.tornfromhome.com/travelingexhibit_info.html.

To learn more about the exhibition itself, visit <http://www.tornfromhome.com/>.

To return to the World Bulletin, visit www.unausa.org/worldbulletin.

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