

St. Ambrose Occupational Therapy students providing a Traditional Thanksgiving meal to area refugees

Written by Mary McNeil

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(Rock Island, IL) Approximately 50 refugee families from eight countries speaking eleven different dialects will gather for a traditional Thanksgiving meal and family reading night thanks to the effort of some local college students. The Church of Peace Family Reading Night will take place on Thursday, November 21 from 6:00-7:30 pm.

The special night will consist of eating a traditional Thanksgiving dinner and then reading to refugee families. St. Ambrose University graduate students from Dr. Christine Urish and Dr. Terry Schlabach's Occupational Therapy classes have been collecting books to read and give to the refugee children.

The graduate students began collecting books when their classes began in August and have at least one book to give every child on Family Reading Night. Several of the OT students will be reading to the entire group, playing guitars and singing songs. In addition to supplying the refugees and all of their families with a full dinner, they will receive a sack filled with full size self-care supplies (shampoo, soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, deodorant).

The immigrants are attending "English as a Second Language" classes funded by the "Lights ON for Learning" program at the Church of Peace. The Rock Island County Regional Office of Education oversees the 21st Century grant that is a cooperative effort among Black Hawk College, the Regional Office of Education and the Church of Peace. The students are from many countries with the majority being from Myanmar (used to be called Burma), Iraq, and Africa (Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania).

Lisa Viaene, the Site Coordinator of the Family Literacy Program, says the partnership with St. Ambrose has been wonderful for the students and the refugees. "The professors and students have been an integral part of our English as a second language program at the Church of Peace. They have volunteered numerous hours already this semester and prepared projects to help our students with functional life skills. On Family Reading Night the refugees will be introduced to new foods, learn new songs and get to hear some children's stories before leaving with a book and a bag of personal hygiene products."

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Tammy Muerhoff, the Superintendent of the RIROE, says the program has helped so many families adjust to their new life here in the Quad Cities. "The funds provided through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants and our partnership with Black Hawk College have offered refugee families an opportunity to become familiar with English as a second language, a new community, and customs. Having local students take an interest in their well-being is heartwarming and vital for their education."