

Found in translation

Congregation Etz Hayim in Arlington is donating enough Arabic-English dictionaries for 200 Syrian refugee families

By Daniel Schere
Political Reporter

For two years, members of Congregation Etz Hayim have been discussing how to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis.

And members like Nathan Ainspan talked about ways to help the refugees trickling into the Washington area.

"I wanted to do something to help them," said Ainspan, "I also wanted to make a statement that what the immigrants may be seeing on TV isn't the true story, that there are a bunch of people who are welcoming them and want them to succeed."

In June, the Arlington congregation heard about an event Temple Rodef Shalom in McLean held for Syrian refugees, and Ainspan went to work.

He contacted Mozaic, a nonprofit organization that supports refugees, to find out what refugees needed the most.

"They said the only thing the refugees wanted was English-Arabic dictionaries for the children, so they can quickly learn the language and integrate into the culture," Ainspan said.

About 200 Syrian refugee families live in the Washington area, with another 20 expected to arrive by the end of the year, according to Raghda Bushnaq, Mozaic's executive manager. The United Nations estimates that 13.5 million Syrians have been displaced in the civil war, now in its fifth year. In 2016, the United States accepted 10,000 Syrian refugees.

Mozaic handles some of the larger aspects of resettlement. But small items like dictionaries are helpful donations, Bushnaq said.

"For every refugee prior to arrival we furnish their houses, we provide food, we



Volunteers at Congregation Etz Hayim in Arlington place stickers inside English-Arabic dictionaries that they plan to donate to the nongovernmental organization Mozaic.

provide toiletries and we provide educational materials," she said. "We want them to blend into society quickly, so the key is language."

Ainspan put the word out through the synagogue newsletter and raised \$1,200

sticker duty, a sixth-grade class engaged in a passionate, but civil, discussion about current immigration, drawing on their study of Jewish immigration in the early 1900s.

Ellie, 11, whose great-grandparents

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—Hannah, 11, student at Congregation Etz Hayim

to buy more than 400 dictionaries — enough for each family to have one for the adults and another for the children.

On Dec. 4, congregants formed an assembly line at the synagogue to put stickers marked "Friends of Etz Hayim" in each dictionary. While the adults were on

emigrated from Germany, said she is happy her synagogue is sending books to the refugees, but she has a hard time believing the action will do much good.

"I get that it's going to help educate people, but is it really helping make a huge impact? A huge impact would be to

put them up in houses," she said. "It'll take them a few years to master the language, but even if we send them one book, it won't be enough to supply them until they can afford getting food for themselves and feeding everyone."

But her classmate William, 11, pointed out that learning English is an important first step in settling in a new country.

"If they get educated they can get a job, and then they can work," he said.

The students expressed frustration at not being able to effect change because as children they not in positions of authority. (Students are identified by first names only, at the school's request.)

"Maybe when we get older we can do something like that, but right now it's hard," said Hannah, 11. She said she

Photo by Daniel Schere

could sympathize with the struggles many refugees face.

"I feel bad because some people don't trust [the immigrants] and it would be really bad trying to get a job coming from another country," she said. "The thing is, a lot of people in Europe want to come to the United States because they don't want to grow up in an environment that they can't be safe in, and I don't want that for any child."

Ellie said she thinks it is unfair that immigrants are deported before they have enough time to find a job and settle down. She thinks Americans should have a more open mind when it comes to welcoming strangers into the country.

"I feel bad because they're trying to get to a safe place so they don't die and people are, like, shooting them off." ■

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