



Young and alone, refugees find open door at Catholic home

By Elizabeth Fisher

The 10 young men living at Catholic Social Services-run Bridgewater Group Home in Bensalem are typical teens. They're avid soccer fans, they leave home every day to attend school, they like music and good food.

One wants to be a disc jockey, another loves motorcycles and plans a future as a mechanic. Others are focused on their studies. They do not all share the same faith but they do pray together several times a day.

There's a darker side to the similarities that brought these youths, ages 15-18, together. They are unaccompanied minor refugees who struggle with English, and whose faces remain blank when asked if they'd ever heard of Disney.

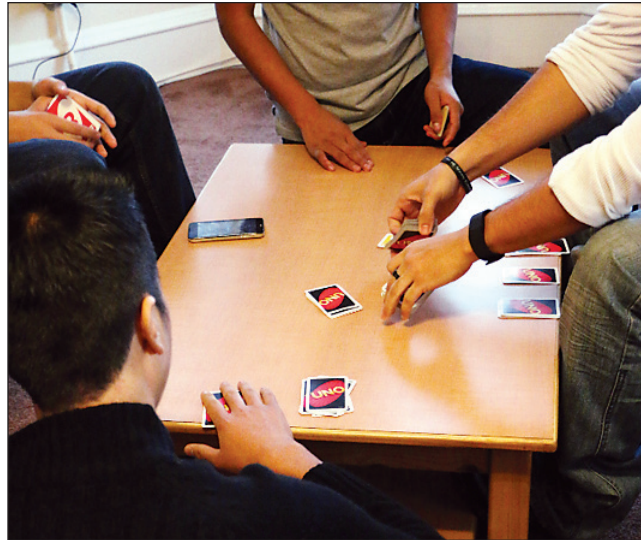
They miss their families. Their memories are not of happy times but of war, violence, poverty, murdered family members. Their dreams are typical of their ages. But the nightmarish experiences of their young lives — and the fact that they can't use their real names or have their pictures taken — are not.

But for a time on Thursday night, Jan. 7, these young guests who found their way to the United States from Central America and other countries including Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan gathered in Bridgewater's dining room to hear words of encouragement and to enjoy a specially cooked dinner.

The event was hosted by Catholic Social Services to help mark National Migration Week (Jan. 3-9), meant to raise awareness of the hardships faced by migrants, including children, refugees and victims of human trafficking.

The theme of the week, "A Stranger and You Welcomed Me," seemed a fitting one for the sometimes jovial, occasionally uncertain residents of Bridgewater.

A group home of Catholic Social Services' St. Francis-St. Vincent Homes for Children, Bridgewater opened its doors in September and serves as one example of how the church demonstrates its support for migrants and refugees. Homes like Bridgewater have the support of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said James Amato, secretary for Catholic Human Services of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.



Some of the young men staying at Bridgewater Group Home play a card game. (Photo by Mark Cordero)

As residents, the boys are expected to learn such household chores as cooking and cleaning. They attend Bensalem High School, which has an exceptional ability to adapt to different language needs. There's also time for recreational activities, especially the boys' favorite, soccer, Amato said.

"We try to provide as much of family life as possible," he said.

It takes time for many of the kids to feel at home. Many don't talk to anyone when they first arrive.

"The kids are in culture shock in the beginning," said Omar Alegria, the residential manager

of Bridgewater. "In a matter of days or weeks, a transformation takes place and they will begin to talk to the staff."

Once the ice is broken, the kids begin to understand that the staff is aware of their experiences and are willing to listen. Outpatient counseling is provided to help the new arrivals cope with such horrors as witnessing the murder of their parents, persecution, or human trafficking, Alegria said.

The guest speaker for the program Thursday night was Oscar Budejen, a Philadelphia business leader, a member of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in South Philadelphia, and once himself a refugee.

Budejen held his audience spellbound as he recounted his own family's ordeal, forced to leave Cuba with nothing but the clothes on their backs. But his hard work, determination and a passion to reach his goals brought him to success.

He outlined his five-point formula that his listeners could use as a guide to realize their dreams of creating new lives for themselves: character, charisma, confidence, courage and communication.

All the refugees are in the process of seeking legal residency in the U.S. and Budejen stressed the need for the youths to study, assimilate and take their place in American society. But he called on them to embrace their new lives with honesty, excellence in their endeavors and belief in themselves.

"You have more in common with each other — and with the

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people who live here — than you have differences. Learn, and help and support each other. And ask questions. Everything is possible,” Budejen said.

Msgr. Edward Deliman, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Bensalem, also attended the event. He called the presence of the refugees in the community a blessing.

The Bridgewater residents attend Mass and social activities at Our Lady of Fatima Center, the former Bensalem parish which became part of St. Charles and remains a spiritual home for many Latinos in the lower Bucks County area.

“It enriches your community when you welcome people who come from different places,” Msgr. Deliman said.

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Parishes' push for vocations in archdiocese deemed a success

Last November the archdiocesan vocations office asked ordinary Catholics in the parishes to submit names of young men who they believe would be worthy candidates for the priesthood.

So how did the Called by Name initiative go?

“I would say it was a success,” said Father Stephen DeLacy, the director of the Vocation Office for the Diocesan Priesthood. “I thought if we got 300 names it would be a success and we have more than 300 with names still being processed at the parishes.”

The final tally could be as high as 400, Father DeLacy estimated. So far, of the names received, the largest group are ages 16-18, in upper high school years; the next largest group is men 19-22, in their college years and a smaller group of older men, according to Father DeLacy.

After the names were submitted, the pastors wrote to each potential seminarian to tell them others think they would be a good priest. The vocations office has also sent letters inviting them to consider discerning a vocation to the priesthood. Seminarians might also contact the potential candidates.

Even without Called by Name, new seminary enrollment numbers are already higher than they have been in years. This September 20 young men entered St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, a marked increase from the recent past.

Of that number four have since discerned this was not their vocation, which leaves 16.

At this point Father DeLacy counts 20 men already in the process of discerning, and he expects the number could well hit 30. At this point last year there were fewer than 10 in process, he noted.

He considers 30 an important annual target number because it suggests there will be sufficient new priests to replace those who retire.

Just as important as Called by Name is the annual Quo Vadis program, which brings together high school boys and recent graduates for a four-day retreat centered on fun and spirituality, and on a possible religious vocation.

Father DeLacy is especially grateful to the Serra Clubs of Philadelphia for their financial support for the Quo Vadis program.

As part of this the Serra Clubs are sponsoring a benefit concert featuring singer Tony Melendez and a Mardi Gras Benefit for Vocations at St. Charles Seminary on

Jan. 30. For more information see the vocations office website, HeedTheCall.org, or call 484-854-2029.

Wallingford parish wins top honor for disabilities ministry

St. John Chrysostom Parish in Wallingford has won the Opening Doors Parish Award from Loyola Press, in partnership with the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD).

The award's judges examined parishes that demonstrate a deep commitment to parishioners with disabilities, providing access for full participation in all aspects of parish life: sacramental, catechetical, social, ministerial and community service.

“We are grateful for this recognition from NCPD as we seek to provide all worshippers at St. John's with a genuine feeling of belonging at the Lord's table,” said St. John's pastor, Father Edward J. Hallinan. “This honor reflects not only the efforts of our ministry leaders, but the true love shown by all of our parishioners, day in and day out, for those who worship with us.”

The parish celebrates a monthly Mass with modifications for worshippers with disabilities. Parish social events designed for families with disabled members help build relationships outside of church.

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