

Volunteer helps make refugees at home

For Dama Black, volunteering for Refugee Services is an opportunity to give time, energy and care to the newest members of her community.

Dama, who attends St Ninian's Uniting Parish in Karori, Wellington, says she helps refugees "get on their feet in their first months in a strange new country".

As a Refugee Services volunteer, Dama has worked with two Afghani families, a family from Myanmar, and is currently one of several volunteers assisting a woman recently arrived from Colombia.

The service is in demand by the 750 quota refugees who arrive in New Zealand each year, coming mainly from Iraq, Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and Myanmar (formerly Burma).

Dama says she knows what it is to move to New Zealand from a different culture although her family arrived under quite different circumstances. "My father chose to come here as a professional so we had networks of support, also I spoke fluent English."

The hands-on side of assisting refugees appeals to Dama. "Many people send money overseas but I wanted to help people myself, one-on-one."

Refugee Services volunteers work in teams of four. "We commit to one client at a time for around six months. The time we each give depends entirely on the time they need. Often you will only have to show someone once where the shops are, how to use the bus, how to get to the doctor, the bank, the post office, WINZ and Housing New Zealand. Then you may not be called to help for weeks".

A mistake that people often make with refugees new to their community, Dama says, is thinking that they are in need of charity. "They find this insulting. We help them to budget and most



Imran from Afghanistan (left) and Olwyn, a Refugee Services Volunteer

manage on a combination of a resettlement allowance, a benefit, and Housing New Zealand accommodation. I had one mother who had a new baby and a toddler and she asked me to help her find a second-hand double pram. I would never have just offered her a second-hand pram; I had to wait for her to approach me or she would have been very offended."

What refugees would like to receive, Dama says, are visitors. "Many of the refugee women are housebound with small children and would welcome visits by older women. It would also be wonderful to have a volunteer from a church youth group to take a teen refugee to soccer practice or the movies. Teens do not want to hang out with us older volunteers!"

If you would like Dama to talk to your parish, contact Molly at Refugee Services, Wellington, on (04) 805 0310. To volunteer with Refugee Services in your area, contact your local office through www.refugeeservices.org.nz/how_you_can_help/volunteering_with_rms

By Angela Singer 