

Two worlds, one roof

The languages of Somalia and Russia fill the halls of Lincoln Woods, where refugees learn to live side by side in East Portland

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

The sun is beginning to set on a recent Tuesday evening at the fields behind outer east Portland's Lincoln Elementary School, and upwards of 40 young boys are playing soccer. It's hard to count or keep track of them — they are running too fast, following a white orb of a soccer ball that moves blurrily from one side of the field to the other.

Approximately half the kids are Russian or Ukrainian; the other half are of Somali descent. Viktor Berezney is their coach. He is tall and athletically built with close cropped dark hair, and wears sports clothes and a whistle around his neck.

He occasionally joins in the game, but mostly observes and encourages the kids, shouting "nice try" and "let's go," and instructing one team to "come back" to their side of the field to play defense. When a score is made, Berezney blows the whistle and calls out the score.

For nearly two hours, they play. As the evening wears on, a group of younger Somali boys breaks off from the game and plays nearby. Soon, there is shouting.

"Hey!" Berezney shouts. "What are you doing over there? You're supposed to be playing soccer."

He jogs over to the boys. "He started it," one boy tells him.

"What did he say?" Berezney asks.

"He said something in Somali," the boy says. "We're going to fight."

"No!" Berezney says. "No fighting."

The boys return to the game, but they soon splinter off again. Berezney urges them to come back again. "No more fighting anymore," he says. "No pointing fingers. No nothing." He waves his arms through the air as he speaks, as if to swat away any notion of fighting.

Berezney has been teaching the boys to play soccer for the last month. "You should have seen them at the beginning," he says. "Now they are angels."

"The whole point of doing this," Berezney says, "is to bring them together and to create community."

Around 7 p.m., Berezney tells them it is time to go home. Soccer balls are packed, and the gaggle slowly makes its way back to their homes at Lincoln Woods, an apartment complex a few blocks away from Lincoln Elementary School, if you take the unpaved dirt road and maneuver through a broken chain link fence.

Lincoln Woods is a 74-unit apartment complex for low-income residents operated



PHOTOS BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

Above, a typically busy day at the interpreters' offices at Lincoln Woods apartments. Amal Ahmed, seated left is the Somali interpreter and Viktor Berezney, seated at right, translates for the Russian-speaking residents. Daily, the two help the immigrants with their children's school papers, applications, bills, checks, service referrals, and other documents. At right, Rafeal and Zoya Arakelyan, refugees from Russia now living in Lincoln Woods.

by the social-service agency Human Solutions. Some units are Section 8, but many are affordable for people living between 30 percent and 50 percent of the median family income.

Through the random crapshoot of apartment applications, approximately half of Lincoln Woods' residents are Somali immigrants. The other half are immigrants from Russia and Ukraine.

All of them are refugees, coming to Portland from refugee camps, war-torn regions, and other circumstances of strife and suffering. Many residents are simply grateful to finally be living in peace.

Yet they came to Portland unprepared to live independently, and remain so. "They really need help," Berezney says of the residents.

Their English, if not broken, is non-existent. The barrier of not knowing English presents problems — some serious, some mundane — for how the Russian and Somali communities live as one Lincoln Woods.

"Those two groups are totally different," Berezney says. "From the very beginning, they had a lot of issues and problems — culture issues, religious differences."

Berezney — who's official title is Russian Speaking Resident Service Specialist — and his Somali-speaking counterpart, Amal Ahmed, are the glue holding the two communities together, and serve as the resident's link to the rest of the world. Lifetimes of conflict, vastly different cultures and the language barriers have alienated and isolated these residents from each other. Ahmed and Berezney are working to bring them closer together.

Ahmed and Berezney share a small, quiet office in Lincoln Woods' administrative offices. A bookcase separates them, and they face in opposite directions. They work



in silence for the most part, until there is a knock on the door.

Faduhma Aden, 39, a Somali woman, walks in. She is wearing a brightly colored burqa. She sits next to Ahmed's desk, and gives Ahmed a small stack of papers. Ahmed examines them, and they speak together in Somali.

It is a bill from Best Buy, and Aden wants Ahmed to write the check. "I can't write the check myself," Aden says.

(Ahmed and Berezney interpreted for Street Roots for all the interviews with Lincoln Woods' residents in this story).

Writing checks is one the most common requests Ahmed gets from her Somali residents. Aden says she went to school for only six years as a child in Somalia. Her English is broken, even though she is taking English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

Illiteracy is common among Somalis, says Portland State University Senior Instructor of Social Work Sam Gioia. "There was no need for it in a farming culture," he says. "They are an oral culture."

The Somali refugees at Lincoln Woods are victims of the 1991 Somali Civil War which overthrew an authoritarian president. No central authority replaced the overthrown government, and the result was clan warfare. "The country descended into utter chaos," Gioia says.

The Somalis who became refugees as a result of the civil war fled to refugee camps,

mainly in the bordering countries of Egypt or Kenya, and lived there for as long as 10 to 15 years. "It is traumatic," Ahmed says.

"You had to run for your life," Aden remembers.

Aden fled Somalia in 2000, lived in Egypt for six years, and came to Portland in March 2006. Sulehka Abdi, 28, who will also use Ahmed's help throughout the day, fled Somalia and lived in two Kenyan refugee camps before immigrating to the United States in 2004, and to Lincoln Woods in 2007 with her husband and five children.

Many of the Somali refugees living at Lincoln Woods lived comfortably before the civil war, working as farmers, teachers, and at skilled trades. Now they are housekeepers, janitors, or taxi cab drivers. "There's a huge amount of lost potential with all of the Somalis," Gioia says.

Ahmed says some of them resent it, but others accept their new lives. "It is so much better than a refugee camp," Ahmed says.

In Somalia, Aden owned a coffee shop. Here, she worked as a housekeeper or hotel janitor, but she was laid off last November. When speaking about her new line of work, Aden says she simply has to "accept here, what it is."

"You learn to accept the worst," when living in the midst of a violent civil war and becoming a refugee, she says. "Why not accept what is OK?"

Another effect of being a refugee for