

A new fresh start

Straddling two cultures and vulnerable to gangs, immigrant youths are tapping into a new program with Africa House to keep them above street influences

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When Jacques moved to Portland four years ago from a refugee camp in Burundi, job prospects for his mother were bleak, it was nearing the end of the school year, and neither he nor his six brothers and sisters knew a word of English. "I couldn't understand anything," Jacques remembers. "They might be saying something, but I don't know what they're saying. I'd just say, 'OK, OK.'"

New to the country and with heavy accents, he and his older siblings became targets of bullying at their new schools and in their neighborhoods.

"I have been called names. I've been pushed," says Jacques (whose name has been changed for this story). "I remember my freshman year at Franklin I got into a fight because someone was being racist, saying something really bad about my mom. I got really angry."

What Jacques didn't realize right away, however, was that he and his siblings were perfect targets for gangs. Like many immigrant youths, they sought a community, a sense of belonging, and they were looking to help supplement their household's income, making them attractive to the promises of illicit groups.

However, four years later, Jacques' older siblings are working their ways through college. And Jacques, now a high-school senior, is preparing to join them with the help of his mentor provided through the new African Gang Intervention/Prevention project at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization's Africa House.

Africa House's onsite staff of about 20 people supports African immigrants and refugees living in Portland with everything from rent and energy assistance and translation services to tutoring, mentoring and leadership development. Each year nearly 3,000 people pass through its doors, a tenth of the Portland metro area's total African population.

With dozens of service offerings already

under its roof, last year Africa House implemented a new program to address a problem community leaders and parents have been aware of for years: youth gang violence.

With a \$100,000 grant from the Youth Development Council of the Oregon Department of Education, Africa House started a pilot program called the African Gang Prevention/Intervention project, in which youths identified by school and community leaders as being at-risk for gang involvement are assigned a mentor who attempts to bridge the gap between a mentee's school and home life, and between the mentee's home culture and the American one they currently find themselves in. The mentors make themselves available to their mentees day and night whether it be for help on schoolwork, outings to events and activities, or just plain everyday advice.

Jacques was assigned a gang-prevention specific mentor a few months ago at the start of his senior year at David Douglas High School. "If I need help in the week really bad, I call him and we meet up and he helps me," says Jacques. "The past couple months I've been meeting up with him a lot to apply to colleges, so he's been helping me out with those things."

Today Jacques is working to join his older siblings in college where he hopes to major in architecture and play soccer. The distractions from his goals are many, but with the pro-social opportunities provided by Africa House, such as after-school programming, special educational talks, trips on weekends and his personal mentor, Jacques has the room to stay focused. "I like to go to school, do my work, and come home," he says. "Because I want to go to college, and they say you have to have good grades."



Students from Africa House.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AFRICA HOUSE

In addition to acting as role models, the mentors, who are also African, are liaisons between home and school where language barriers can keep students and parents from being able to fully engage in the educational system. "There have been many cases where the kids have to leave school or not go because their parents need them to translate for any appointment," explains Yetu Dumbia, who along with fellow Africa House staff member Shani Osman are the only mentors the program currently has on staff. "Having more of a communication between the parents and the teachers and having the parents get more involved in their children's education is key."

The African Gang Prevention/Intervention project also has a criminal justice expert on hand to educate families on the American criminal justice system and provide reentry support for those who have been arrested and imprisoned. Africa House staff hope that, with mentors and increased understanding of U.S. educational and justice systems, Portland's young African immigrants and refugees stay on the path to higher education and avoid the violence that threatens their futures in this country and, most importantly, their lives.

The key to Africa House's program is its cultural specificity. The African Gang Prevention/Intervention project was one of four culturally specific gang programs awarded a grant by the YDC. Because while Portland youth gang violence is not a new phenomenon, the particular vulnerability of immigrant and refugee youths to gang influence has only recently been explored by the city.

It wasn't until October 2013, when Abukar Madey, a Somali-American Franklin

High School student, was gunned down that people outside of the African and justice communities began to take notice. That same year, the Coalition of Communities of Color in partnership with Portland State University, released "The African Immigrant and Refugee Community in Multnomah County: An Unsettling Profile," a report that shed a the first light on what African families face in Portland. According to the report, the majority of African Portlanders who arrived in the U.S. within the last 10 years did so under refugee status. The majority of Africans in Portland are Somali, and some are struggling with untreated stress and anxiety disorders, such as PTSD.

Poverty plagues Portland's African community too. According to the 2014 Poverty in Multnomah County report by the Multnomah County Department of Human Services, many American employers don't recognize foreign credentials, so while a quarter of Africans living in Multnomah County have advanced degrees and job experience, African households still bring in only half the incomes that white ones do. As a result, some young African refugees turn to selling drugs with a gang to help support their families, according to the report.

"(Youths) at the poverty level are going to be living in areas that aren't as enhanced with prosocial opportunities," says Tom Peavey, policy manager at the Youth Violence Prevention Office. "And when you don't have the opportunities that can give you success then you're going to have fewer people successful from that environment."

For all kids, regardless of national origin or ethnicity, the need for belonging is the main push to join a gang.

"Gang members form a family," says Antoinette Edwards, director at the Youth