

From left: Fowzia, Rukia and Zainab Ibrahim are sisters. Fowzia Ibrahim, a 16-year-old immigrant from Kenya, says anti-Muslim sentiment has encouraged her to seek an education and career in law. She has applied to the Community Youth Ambassadors program.

Teens representing cultures around the world apply to become community youth ambassadors, connecting the city of Portland with its immigrant and refugee communities



Mamed Kaern (left) and Eder Mutara are community youth ambassadors. Their outgoing group will be replaced with a new group of ambassadors.

BY JARED PABEN
STAFF WRITER

The day after Donald Trump won the presidential election, 16-year-old Fowzia Ibrahim was riding a TriMet bus to school when an old woman tore the hijab off her head. The woman said, "Things are different now. You're not allowed to wear that thing in our country," Ibrahim recalled.

The sophomore at northeast Portland's Madison High School was frightened and angry, but she controlled her anger, as Islam's prophet Muhammad teaches, she said. A man on the bus bellowed, "Trump 2016" sarcastically, but nobody came to her defense. She immediately got off the bus and waited for the next one.

That episode, and Trump's anti-Muslim positions in general, have driven Ibrahim to seek an education and career in law. She wants to understand the law to ensure she isn't manipulated or taken advantage of.

"I just want to know my rights and how much power the government has over the people," she said.

Ibrahim was one of dozens of immigrants and refugees to congregate at the East Portland Community Center on Saturday, Feb. 18, to interview for one of several community youth ambassador positions. The Community Youth Ambassadors program hires teenagers into two-year jobs, paying them \$12 an hour for work outside of

school. They serve as crucial links between the Parks and Recreation Department and immigrant communities.

The ambassadors effort is part of the city's \$300,000-a-year Parks for New Portlanders program, which provides culturally relevant recreation opportunities for foreign-born residents. Since its inception in 2015, the program has organized a dozen events, including Portland World Cup Soccer in the summer and Portland Intercultural Basketball in the fall.

Ambassadors bring common languages, cultural understandings and shared experiences that can help them connect with immigrants and refugees, some of whom distrust government because of abuse they suffered in their home countries. For some, distrust and fear have been amplified by Trump's rise to power, giving the program a new urgency.

"These youth ambassadors are a kind of ambassador to re-establish the trust we lost back home," said Som Nath Subedi, coordinator of the Parks for New Portlanders Program. Subedi is, himself, a refugee from Bhutan. He lived for years in a camp in Nepal after Bhutan, with its "One Nation, One People" policy, expelled tens of thousands of his people from their homeland.

On Saturday, 125 teens speaking a combined 41 languages vied for seven

available positions. All who applied were interviewed. For some, it was the first interview they'd ever done.

One of them was 16-year-old Tway Hit, who shook hands with and then gave a slight bow to his first interviewer.

A challenging transition

Hit is Burmese but was born and spent his youth in Thailand's Mae La refugee camp, home to tens of thousands of Thais, Burmese (including the oppressed Muslim minority Rohingya) and members of Karen ethnic groups. War had driven his parents from Burma, though they have never told him details of their life there, he said.

The Mae La camp - at Thailand border's with Myanmar, formerly called Burma - is a place where children as young as 5 are forced to start working to help support the family, Hit said. His family farmed and chopped wood. For five years, Hit chopped wood around the camp, carrying it in 20- to 30-pound bundles on his head.

He and his family moved to the United States when he was 10. The transition wasn't easy, particularly learning English.

"This is my first year speaking it when I was comfortable," he said.

In Portland, he once forgot to do his homework, and when forced to tell his teacher, he recoiled from her. It was

instinctive, he said, because teachers in Thailand frequently strike students as punishment.

Hit wants to pursue studies in law as a sort of exercise in self-defense, though he insists he isn't nervous about President Trump because our system of checks and balances vests significant power in Congress.

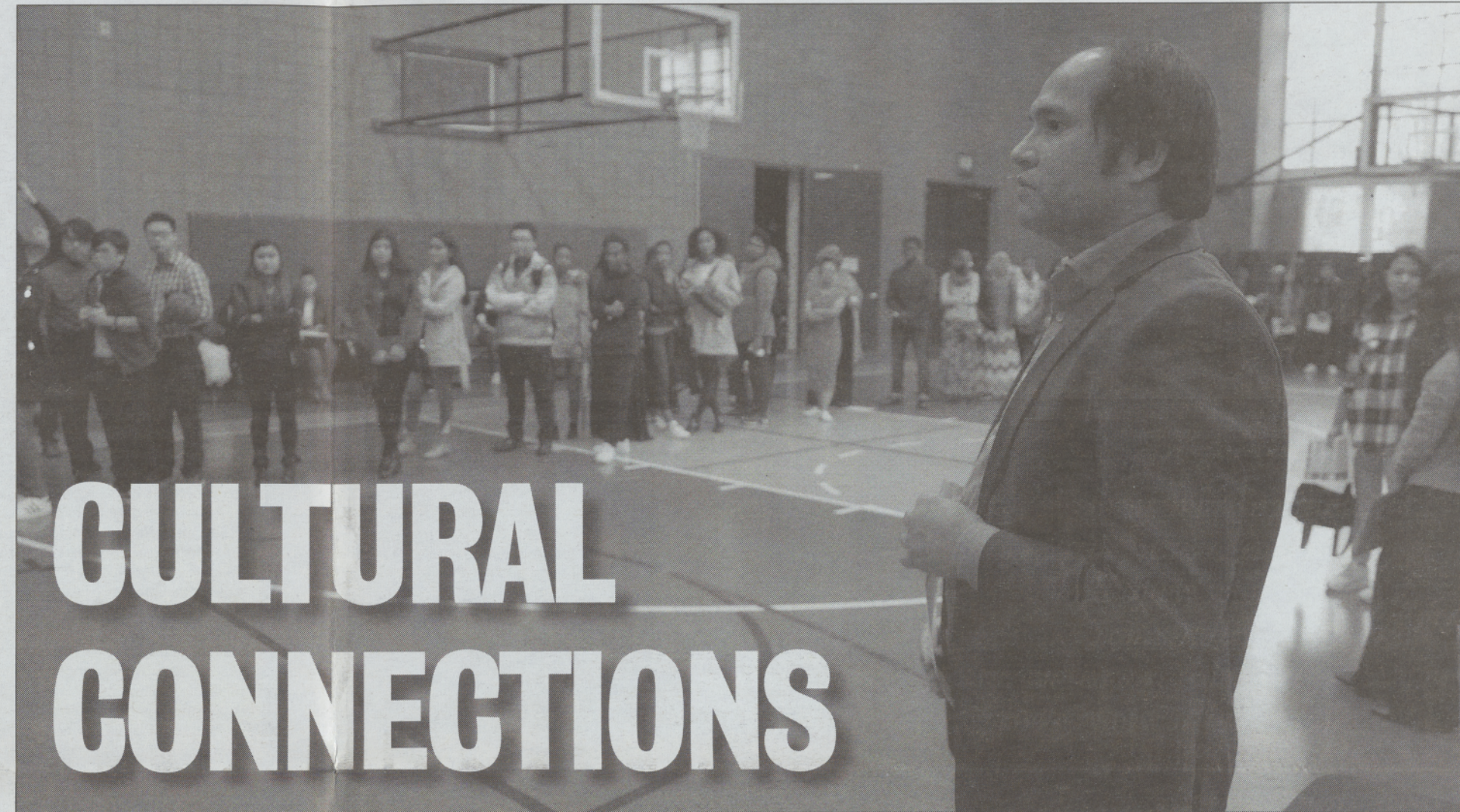
"It's good for you to know about laws so you can protect yourself. If something happens and you don't know about laws, you're going to be fooled by someone else," Hit said.

'I know what it's like'

Ibrahim, the 16-year-old at Madison High School, is the oldest of 13 children and has the most formal education of any member of her family. She left Kenya at age 3, lived in Boise, Idaho, for 11 years and arrived in Portland in 2015.

She knows little of what life is like in the village she left because her parents don't talk about it. She has picked up only bits and pieces from overhearing their conversations. That knowledge gap bothers her. After college, she wants to travel to Kenya to volunteer and meet her family members.

Ibrahim said an ambassador position would help her develop her leadership skills



Som Nath Subedi oversees a Feb. 18 event at the East Portland Community Center in which dozens of teens applied to the Community Youth Ambassadors program. Subedi, a refugee from Bhutan, is the coordinator of the Parks for New Portlanders Program, which provides recreation opportunities for foreign-born residents.

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

PHOTOS BY ANNE DOWNING

so she can become an advocate for those in need. She understands the various educational, legal and cultural barriers immigrants face, and she can use shared experiences to help connect with them, she said.

"I'm an immigrant myself, so I know what it's like to be an immigrant," she said.

Between two cultures

Muni Mohamed, a 16-year-old sophomore at David Douglas High School, emigrated from Mogadishu, Somalia, when she was 6. Environmental damage and food insecurity prompted her mom to uproot and move to the United States with the children.

Mohamed remembers snippets of life in Mogadishu: They would feed a cat that visited the apartment, their clothes were utilitarian but not fashionable, and there were rocks everywhere. Also, the aggressive dogs.

"There were violent dogs that would bite you. That's why when we came here, we were afraid of dogs," Mohamed said.

Today, she finds herself living between two cultures. "People say I'm Americanized, but I'm really not," she said. "I'm half-half, in both worlds."

She said she would be a good community youth ambassador because she is confident and outspoken and can get along with

anybody. She is considering pursuing a business degree at Portland State University, with the ultimate goal of starting a business reviewing beauty products.

'You don't have a voice in it'

Katy Moreno, 15, was born in California. Even as a U.S. citizen, she has had a sense of helplessness since Trump ascended to the White House. Her parents crossed into the U.S. from Mexico two decades ago and remain undocumented immigrants, although they are in the process of applying for visas.

"I feel like they're just scared," the Centennial High School sophomore said. "You just really want to help them even though you don't have a voice in it."

An aspiring pediatric nurse, Moreno thinks she could encourage immigrants, particularly younger ones, while working as a community youth ambassador.

"I feel like I'll be able to motivate others like others have motivated me," she said. Her inspiration has come from her parents and the Escalera program, a year-round college-preparation program for local Latino high school students.

'We're here now'

Felix Songolo is a 17-year-old who was

Portlanders Stand with Refugees and Immigrants event

WHAT: A free celebration for all Portland residents, particularly refugees and other immigrants, by Portland Parks and Recreation. It will include Bollywood, African and Middle Eastern music and dance.

WHEN: 6-9 p.m. Friday, March 17

WHERE: East Portland Community Center, 740 SE 106th Ave.

ONLINE: portlandoregon.gov/parks/article/628601?

born in the the African country of Zambia. His parents were originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo but were dislocated by civil war. They were eventually granted asylum to live in Zambia and moved into the capital, Lusaka.

Songolo came to the U.S. when he was 4, and he remembers little of life in Zambia, although he clearly recalls drinking strawberry milk from a food cart owned by his dad. His parents talk little of their earlier

lives in Africa, not uncommon among refugees.

"They're always like, 'Don't worry about that. We're here now,'" Songolo said. "That's the message they always reiterate."

An aspiring neurologist, Songolo said he wants to work as a community youth ambassador to help immigrants of various racial groups meld into American society.

"Integration to the culture, I think that's a problem a lot of people face," he said.

Appreciation for diversity

On the interviewer side of a table sat Scott Ransmeier, a Portland resident who saw a Facebook post by Subedi and contacted him seeking volunteer opportunities. Trump's stunning lack of compassion and empathy helped motivate him to get involved with Parks for New Portlanders last month, he said.

Ransmeier, an enterprise account executive for a local telecommunications company, agreed to volunteer as one of nine interviewers.

"This just feels right to me," he said, standing in a gym where a cross-section of the world's cultures lined up to check in for their interviews. "It's this diversity that really makes us rich."

His only regret: "I wish there was a position for all of them."