

Presentation of the 2010 Milch Award for Excellence of Accomplishment

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The Refugee Youth Project

Few of us can imagine the anxiety, the fear, and the grief affecting those who come to this country not in search of better economic opportunities, but to escape violence, persecution, and war. Refugees come to the United States not for prosperity, but for freedom, for peace, for sanctuary. Upon arrival, all too many encounter new kinds of obstacles and injustices. For refugee children, uprooted from their homes and protected only by parents enduring their own difficult transitions to a new land, the challenges of connecting with new friends and classmates and building a promising future for themselves can seem insurmountable.

The Refugee Youth Project (RYP), created by Baltimore City Community College, strives to support refugee youth as they embark on their new lives here in America, but more specifically in Maryland, where immigrants and refugees now comprise nearly 10 percent of the state's population. Launched seven years ago, RYP first served just 12 children, but now reaches out to more than 100 children and youth from pre-school through high school. Its goals are ambitious: to provide positive American role models, to encourage and support refugee children in setting and reaching academic goals, to provide a safe harbor for raising and working through sensitive issues such as discrimination, and to provide opportunities for parents to play an important role in their children's acclimation to the U.S. All of these, RYP's leaders claim, play a critical part in refugee children's potential for success and happiness in their new lives.

The Refugee Youth Project also looks for ways to connect American-born members of the community with their new neighbors. It invites children from areas with high concentrations of refugee youth to participate in its programs as a way of strengthening relationships and breaking down stereotypes. It also welcomes the involvement of representatives from organizations such as Loyola, which has partnered with RYP since 2006 on a number of service-learning courses. While Loyola students contribute to the partnership by serving as tutors, guides, and program coordinators, they benefit significantly as well. Their experiences bring them enormous insights into the challenges facing those who come to this country having survived unimaginable struggles in wartorn, poverty-stricken nations. Many come away from their time with RYP struck by the similarities in human condition uniting us all, and newly committed to doing their part to aid those driven to our shores by conflicts few of us fully recognize or understand.

For its inspiring commitment to supporting refugee youth as they build new lives in our nation; for its comprehensive, innovative approach to connecting refugee children and families with their new communities; and for its willingness to allow Loyola students and other members of the greater Baltimore community to learn from the experiences and insights of those it serves, Loyola University Maryland is proud to present the Refugee Youth Project with the Milch Award.