



Thought Leadership Corner

By Thien Nguyen

Project RISE Youth Enrichment AmeriCorps Member at New AP

“For me, the smiles and the trust I build in these children is worth ten times the paycheck.”

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My Life's Purpose

My first day of service in the afterschool program: I walked into myriad curious eyes as my supervisor introduced me to the afterschool students at [a local elementary school]. I introduced myself after she had done so and said that my name was Thien, I was from Vietnam, and that I can help them with their homework.

As soon as I was done talking, and even before my supervisor called for questions, the questions flooded in. “Can you speak Burmese?” “Where you from?” “Why you here?” “What your name?” etc. I just smiled and answered the questions that were not previously disclosed information.

That day, when we moved into structured class time, I was asked to be with the younger children as they [needed] help with homework. The lead teacher, Shakir, played an ice breaker with the kids and [me]. “Tell us what is your name, your favorite color, and your favorite food” (which is always Shakir’s favorite topic). After the class had made their rounds, where we learned that most of the kids enjoyed pizza and the color blue, I said that my favorite color was “azure” and “udon” was my favorite dish. The class marveled at the explanation of Japanese noodles. They also constantly beckoned “Ms. Thien” (I am not female, by the way) to help them with their homework.



As the days passed, at snack time (our first duty at afterschool), there were less instances of the older kids (especially boys) roaming aimlessly looking for trouble. I walked into the cafeteria on that first day and my eyes could not leave that group of boys (and one girl) who were not seated and causing the most ruckus. That was, and has been, my chosen group for snack time. I sit there because I want to calm them and non-verbally tell them that snack time is not a time of milk carton flipping, extra snacks stealing, roughhousing, and overall circus displays. This has worked, to some effect, since they need constant reminders and constant attention in order to just figure out what are proper table manners and how to show mutual respect to one another, and to the teachers.

Our first semester concluded with a grand finale of a holiday party. The kids absolutely loved it. Our stations were classic holiday stations for kids: gingerbread houses, cookie decorating, holiday picture frames, and origami snowflakes (which was my station, and was a little too complex for these children — though I ended up with a few snowflakes from the students).

I will not be able to forget what joy, what utter elation we brought to these kids on that day. I am blessed to own a DSLR [Digital single-lens reflex camera], and these moments were captured and shared with our New American Pathways team. However, it was not the party that struck me as a constant reminder why I get up around 6 a.m., get home around 8 p.m. or later almost every day, coughing with the cold that was passed around in the office, always feeling like two million things are happening at once, or whether I have enough physical or mental toughness to make through the next day. It was the change I was seeing in these children.

They know when to say “stop” or just walk away when they are mistreated. They are starting to realize that they have to listen to us adults, for we set the example of right and wrong. We oversee their foursquare games, provide medical assistance, and overall just maintain order in the chaos that is refugee afterschool. This marked difference in the character and lives of these children is the reason I took a stipend [AmeriCorps] position with my two college degrees and two certifications.

For me, the smiles and the trust I build in these children is worth ten times the paycheck. This is the purpose of my life.

Thien Nguyen is a former refugee, 20-year resident of the Clarkston-Stone Mountain community, and a certified educator and mechanical engineer. He currently serves in New AP's Project RISE (Refugee and Immigrant Success through Education) AmeriCorps program as the Youth Enrichment member.