

My Experience with Refugee Transitions
By Langan Courtney, Refugee & Asylee Student Specialist at the
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I started volunteering with Refugee Transitions as a Literacy Tutor in the spring of 2007. Since that time, my understanding of "literacy" and "tutor" has changed and grown immensely-as has my relationship with the family with whom I was matched. I work with a family of five from Liberia: Tita (mom), Joseph (age 9), James (age 6), Marie Flore and Marie Flora (twins, age 4). Tita and her family arrived in the United States in 2005, after fleeing from Liberia and living as refugees in Cote d'Ivoire for a number of years. Tita did not have the opportunity to go to school in Liberia or Cote d'Ivoire and when she was resettled in the United States she was completely illiterate. Although she could speak English, she could not spell or write her name, her children's names, or her phone number, let alone fill out a job application, write a letter to her children's school, or read the ump-teen bills and notices that arrived each day.

Each week, Tita and I go through mail, renew Medical and Foodstamp applications when necessary, read the many crumpled notices from school that arrive home in Joseph's backpack, fill out job applications, and review her assignments from Adult School. In addition, I spend a great deal of time with the kids, hanging out on the rug in the living room, having my hair "braided" (read: knotted) by the twins, and doing homework, art and card tricks with Joseph and James. On occasion, Tita and I find a few quiet minutes to do actual literacy work.

Tita's reading and writing skills have improved since we began working together. More drastic, however, are the gains she had made in understanding systems and opportunities in the United States. With each job application we have completed, each bill we have paid, each pile of mail we have sorted through, and each school letter we read and signed, Tita has not only learned how to read and write additional words, she has also increased her understanding of the complex components of life here in the United States, and in turn, her self-sufficiency. As a home-based literacy tutor, I am able to support her literacy gains as well as many other aspects of her family's transition to living in the United States.

My full-time job is with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD)-I oversee programming and support for refugee students and families throughout the school district. I work closely with all newly resettled refugee families and I am always excited and relieved when I learn that a student or family has been matched with a Refugee Transitions tutor. The United States has so many opportunities for new refugees, but too often they are only available to those who can navigate the system and advocate for themselves. Based on my volunteer work with Refugee Transitions and my position supporting refugees in the Oakland School District, it is clear that the support and assistance of RT Literacy Tutors helps families do just that.

