

Volunteering with RT by Valerie Gold

I am excited to share my experiences about mentoring & teaching ESL to my single mom and her 4 year-old daughter, who arrived in the US as political asylees only last March.

In the past I visited several countries with my brother who runs his own international humanitarian organization (100 Friends), dispersing funds to the direst in need. However, since I don't have the time or money to travel the world with him, I wanted to regain "that wonderful feeling"-you know, the feeling you get when being the giver totally out-weighs what those on the receiving end are feeling. So I researched what was available in the states. I work in the social services field, but I didn't want "a client". I wanted to really connect, to become close to a family and an extended community.

I started with the IRC (International Rescue Committee) as a family mentor. My task was to help them assimilate to life in the US after living in a refugee camp their whole lives. I came to really love them. We have been on many outings around the bay, learning to use BART, learning new words and about American foods and customs. Likewise, I was also learning about their culture.

Then I heard about Refugees in Transitions. I was very interested in teaching ESL and decided to join as an RT tutor. I continued meeting with my family, teaching ESL, using the workbook, expanding their horizons & mine using this practical learning tool. Since we already enjoyed an established relationship, the ESL time is really fun. We study and laugh.

In all the time we've spent together, neither of us has spoken the other's language. We forged a great friendship nonetheless. My tutee is smart and understands a lot, and the little girl with whom I work thinks of me as her "American grandmother"! But now that the language is coming to the forefront, it is even more enjoyable to spend time together.

This year, I spent Christmas Eve and January 3rd with them. It was the most moving holiday time I have ever spent. My son, who was visiting me for the holidays, came with me to meet my new community. New Years is a big holiday for the Karen people. We attended a celebration in Daly City at a large auditorium. There were traditional folk dances (a fabulous bamboo dance) colorful costumes, vocal performances, great food, and soccer trophies were handed out from different localities. It was wonderful to share this part of my life with my son. He loved everyone and they loved him (especially his red hair!!).

Hearing their stories (in broken English) has helped me understand where they have been in the context of where they are now. One older woman endured 3 years in the jungle before arriving to safety. Another older woman was in 3 refugee camps in her lifetime. In one, the soldiers came over the border and she had to flee their shooting. I am impressed at how generous and gracious the people in the community are. Someone always offers to do some small thing for me; I always try to honor their desire to also give, and to be not only on the receiving end. It takes so little effort to make a big impact on other's lives and *it is so much fun!*

