

# Students Without Borders

One local school takes a global approach to education

By Joshua H. Silavent

**T**he Russian Orthodox Jewish women mistook the female Palestinian teacher for one of their own. Her olive complexion and the eloquent manner in which she taught the young students about the menorah and other Jewish traditions convinced the women that the teacher must be of Israeli origin. When they learned her real identity, they cried tears of joy, grateful for the teacher's goodwill despite the mortal conflict raging between the Jews of Israel and their Palestinian neighbors.

In another room, David and Muhammad, named for revered figures in the lineage of their family's faith, were horse playing like all good, young friends will often do. As they skirmished, a veil covering a portrait hanging on the wall fell to the ground, revealing a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus Christ. Recognizing the figure, David quickly bowed toward the iconic depiction in reverence and worship. Muhammad, unaware of the religious faux pas, quickly followed suit, imitating his classmate like all good, young friends will often do.

These anecdotes serve as microcosms of the daily learning environment at the International Community School (ICS) in Decatur, where nearly 400 students in kindergarten through sixth grade hail from more than 40 countries, collectively speak as many languages, and represent the great spectrum of world faiths, from Christianity, Islam and Judaism to Buddhism and Hinduism. Approximately half of the students are refugees, many having escaped civil wars and government oppression. American students who live in the area make up the other half of the student body. They come from poor, middle-class and wealthy families who value diversity in the classroom.

Bringing this dynamic mix of cultures together under a unified educational curriculum presents as many challenges as it does opportunities for the teachers and administrators of ICS. But it also provides them great inspiration. "We all share a conviction that we can change the world," says Laurent Ditmann, assistant principal of ICS. "We can't change the whole thing at once, but we can change it here."

The school helps fill what remains a growing need to successfully integrate and educate the massive influx of refugee children to metro Atlanta. More than 2,000 refugees are resettled in the area each year, the

*This article is the first in a series of profiles about Atlanta's refugee community*



At the International Community School, refugee and American-born children learn together



Photos by Joseph Accol



Above: ICS 4th grade teachers, L to R: Britton Proctor, Nasiha Mujkanovic, David Bellamy, Janna Nelson, April Russ, Ann Mackenzie

Right and center: Teacher Yang Li's first grade classroom

majority in Decatur, Clarkston, Stone Mountain and other neighborhoods in DeKalb County. The job market and low cost of living make the area an ideal place for refugees who come to America with little more than the clothes on their back. World Relief, Refugee Family Services, the International Rescue Committee and other resettlement agencies provide them with housing, medical care, job prospects and other initial necessities. The adjustment can be particularly difficult for the children, who typically neither speak much English nor understand their new surroundings.

Moreover, many local public schools are inadequate in addressing the educational needs of refugee children who demand broader and more thorough instruction. "Public schools are getting stripped down to reading, writing and math," says Barbara Thompson, one of the school's founders. In contrast, ICS has instituted the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program, which is designed to nourish the social, cultural, physical, emotional and intellectual needs of young students by providing a well-rounded education in the arts, languages, sciences, mathematics and physical education. The program is more than testing and grades. It seeks to build character and cultivate respect while addressing global themes that match the collective identity of the students.

"A global perspective does not mean a flattening of all cultures," Ditmann says. "We want to preserve and express the cultural, religious, ethnic, social and economic differences of our students. There is a space to do that."

Despite the emphasis on refugee students, ICS founders never considered making the school an enclave for these unique children. On the contrary, it was always their mission to build a school based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s "beloved community," where individuals from all cultures and backgrounds could coalesce into an interdependent whole.



## The origin of values

ICS opened in the fall of 2002 to great skepticism. Many believed that a multi-ethnic, multi-faith school that blended a respect for cultural diversity with a disciplined approach to integration was nothing but a pipe dream. Many more, however, held a different belief. "We [the founders] talked about how this school could be not just a school for the kids who would attend there," Principal Bill Moon says, "but something important for Atlanta ... and why not for Georgia, the country and the world?"

With the help of theologians from the Candler School at Emory University, and local business, foundation and community leaders, Moon, Thompson and Patty Caraher tapped their experiences helping refugees and working in non-traditional schooling environments (Moon is a former principal at Atlanta International School) to form the expansive, yet inclusive, goals and ideals that are the foundation of ICS.

The values of the school have been called progressive, even counter-cultural. But these sometimes politically charged descriptions understate the commitment to social equality and cultural preservation that makes ICS truly one of a kind. "One of the things Martin Luther King talked about was a revolution of values," Caraher says. "I think we took our inspiration, locally, from him."

## The student body

Some may question why American parents would choose to send their children to this particular charter school, but for Shell Ramirez, a mother of two children attending ICS, the choice was easy. "ICS provides a better learning system to develop better skills for college," she says.

Her son Dante, who is in fourth grade, has developed an intense curiosity for different cultures. He spends hours on the Internet looking up information on Afghanistan, Burma, Somalia and other countries where his refugee friends and classmates were born. "I like that I get to meet people from a number of different countries," he says.

Many other students echo Dante's sentiments. They seem to understand how unique and exceptional their school is; they seem to understand the struggles and hardships experienced by many of their peers; and they want to help new refugees acclimate as best they can.

“He’s learning that our world is not based on skin color, or creed, or religion,” Ramirez says of her son. “He’s learning to look at a person as a person.”

### Challenges as opportunities

The difficulties associated with teaching refugee students extend beyond the fact that many speak no English and have had little structured educational experience.

“One of my refugee students doesn’t have a sense of personal space,” says Janna Nelson, a fourth-grade teacher. “That is something that is so basic that you don’t think about needing to teach someone. The hardest part is helping the children who are annoyed by him learn to recognize that this is something he is learning, that he wants to be friends. He really has been in very crowded situations, in refugee camps, living with a large family in a small space.”

Whatever impediments stand in the refugees’ way is often overcome with a sense of duty they feel to work hard. The challenges they face are often perceived as a wonderful opportunity. “A lot of refugee kids come to school being told by their parents and the people around them, ‘You need to do a good job; we have come to this country for you and for your future,’” says Ann Mackenzie, also a fourth-grade teacher.

Many teachers are refugees themselves, and are able to empathize with the children’s experiences. Nasiha Mujkanovic is one. She escaped the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia during the ‘90s, moving with her family to Germany for several years before coming to the United States. “You feel you fly; you don’t feel that you walk,” she says of the day she left her war-torn country for good. “Now this school to me is like my home.”

### The future

ICS is still in its infancy, and the future remains uncertain. Not because it is underachieving or that growth has stagnated. In fact, ICS has met the “adequate yearly progress” requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act, and has been honored as a distinguished Title I charter school. And, by all accounts, it is ready to expand and add new grade levels. But the funding, at present, is not enough to support a move out of the Avondale Pattillo United Methodist Church, where the main campus is located (a second campus for fifth- and sixth-graders is located in nearby Stone Mountain). It is hoped that over the next year ICS will be able to combine campuses at a new, and permanent, location.

As far as anyone is aware, ICS is the first and only school of its kind anywhere. But the challenge this presents is equal to the great opportunity that exists, and the success of the school is at once dependent and ensured by a simple creed: “We love what we do,” Ditmann says. ❖