

Oakland Tribune, The (CA)

Refugee, asylee students find a common language at Oakland soccer camp

August 8, 2008

Section: News

Katy Murphy Oakland Tribune

By Katy Murphy

OAKLAND — On a foggy morning, a group of kids gathered on the outfield of a muddy North Oakland baseball diamond for soccer camp. Few spoke the same language, so they introduced themselves by calling out their names while executing a martial-arts kick, sliding into the splits, jumping up and down, or any number of movements that drew friendly laughter.

Some of the younger ones, moments earlier, had delighted in chasing the large, grey geese that landed behind third base. Others straggled in late, listening to hip hop and sporting flat-brimmed baseball caps.

Despite their differences in age, culture and playing ability, the group had at least two things in common: They were refugees, and they loved soccer.

"I've been playing soccer about 10 years," said Mirvaes Kamaluddin, a tall 15-year-old who left Uzbekistan 10 months ago and now goes by the nickname Mike. On Tuesday, after removing his Oakland A's hat, he drilled and scrimmaged with teens from Thailand, Liberia, Nepal and Burma.

An estimated 1,500 refugees and asylees from 30 countries attend Oakland's public schools. Many lived in refugee camps before resettling in California.

The weeklong camp held at the new Oakland International High School was organized by the volunteer organization Soccer Without Borders to help the students adjust to life in the United States. It was co-sponsored by the Oakland Unified School District's Refugee and Asylee Student Assistance Program, the International Rescue Committee and the Refugee Transitions organization.

"People describe soccer as an international language, and I've found that, in my life, to be true," said Ben Gucciardi, the founder of Soccer Without Borders. "Even if they haven't played much, they know the game and love the game."

Reach Reporter Katy Murphy at 510-208-6424 or kmurphy@bayareanewsgroup.com.
Read her Oakland schools blog and post comments at www.ibabuzz.com/education.