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Surprised by Mercy: Hamilton, New Zealand

As the plight of refugees attracts worldwide concern, students from New Zealand's Rimbrook Study Centre do their bit to welcome them.

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Over the past 5 years volunteer students from Rimbrook Study Centre have been working, in conjunction with Hamilton's Refugee Orientation Centre (ROC) Trust, to

help refugee children make their home in New Zealand.

Three times each year, young volunteers from all over New Zealand donate their own time and resources to a five-day Refugee Holiday Program which welcomes children from countries such as Columbia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Congo, Somalia, and Burma. The program is not only an introduction to life in New Zealand, but an expression of what Pope Francis has called “the force that... instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope.” It invites volunteers and children alike to dream ‘big’ about the future, encountering mercy in “God’s surprises”.

“The program was definitely more than I bargained for,” university student, Parima Sadindum explains. “I have lived in Hamilton my whole life. I attended school with young

people who were from refugee backgrounds. But helping on this program has been an eye-opener. It was like discovering a new world.”

“I was thinking of not coming this time,” Ana Garcia, a high school student, reveals. “I’m glad I did. As soon as I arrived, I was reminded right away why this program is so good. The kids teach us more than we teach them. They’ve lived in places with no fresh water, some of them don’t even know when their birthday is. But they’re still kids. And we can help them to be happy. Being with them, really changes your outlook on life.”

The children are encouraged to be themselves, to respect each other, and to support one another, regardless of where they might come from. This respect is modelled by the unity of the volunteers on the project.

Parima, who is not a Christian, says that, “One of the best things was meeting and getting to know the other volunteers. I was surprised to be working alongside girls whom I had only known in passing, and suddenly we were sharing a common purpose.”

By allowing themselves to be surprised by each other, both volunteers and children discover the reality of St. Josemaria's message, that our calling to mercy gives “our life, the present, past and future, ...a new dimension, a depth we did not perceive before. All happenings and events now fall within their true perspective: we understand where God is leading us, and we feel ourselves borne along by this task entrusted to us.”

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