

## Strangers welcomed at Camden Thanksgiving

Christine Graf | Nov. 26, 2008



Camden, N.J. -- Thanksgiving at Catholic Charities in the Diocese of

Camden, N.J., means more than celebrating a holiday with family. The organization recalled the tradition of "welcoming the strangers," on which the American holiday is based, by inviting recent refugees and immigrants from trouble-filled regions around the world who have arrived in the last year to come and share a meal with the community.

"Thanksgiving is a holiday about strangers coming to America -- Catholic Charities is reenacting this idea all year long," Kevin Hickey, executive director of Catholic Charities in Camden, N.J., said. "Our Thanksgiving celebration shows new arrivals that they are part of America now and welcome."

More than 60 people came together Nov. 25 in the training room of Catholic Charities here to share food from around the world and to celebrate their cultures as well as their new lives in America.

Refugees included people from Eritrea, Liberia and Burma, who have all been in Camden for a year or less, as well as current staff who were former refugees from Ghana, Liberia, Burma and Russia.

"I'm very happy to be here and feel very welcomed especially today to be a part of this," said Jawda, 27, a refugee from Burma, where citizens have lived under severe political oppression for years. "In Burma, I was always running and hiding. We didn't have events like this."



John Marcantuono, director of the Catholic Charities refugee program in

Camden, explained that refugees experience major trauma and fear for their lives in their homelands. Coming to America provides safety and freedom.

"I've seen refugees arrive in the States and kiss the ground because they are so happy for freedom," Marcantuono said.

In addition to Catholic Charities, other participants included representatives from Camden Center for Law and Social Justice, a low-income law firm specializing in immigration assistance and domestic violence; Romero Ministries, a social justice education organization; and the Diocese of Camden.

"This celebration reminds the community that this idea of welcoming the strangers is a reoccurring event, that people are still coming to America for a better life," Hickey said. "Americans don't realize that people around the world are literally dying to come to America."

(Christine Graf is a student at Cabrini College in Radnor, Pa.)

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