

# North High School students relocate Afghan refugee families in Omaha

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Managing Editor

Mark Gudgel, an English teacher at Omaha North High School, has worked at North for eight years and has been teaching his humanities class the entire time. Humanities is a course that focuses on 20th century genocide, and it has covered topics like the Holocaust and genocides in Armenia, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. However, this year, Gudgel felt the need to include something new.

"When the United States pulled out of Afghanistan last year, I was more scared than anything for what I thought could happen. And when it immediately did happen, it was heartbreaking," said Gudgel. "People not only trusted us, but worked for us, and now, because of their relationship to the United States, their lives were in jeopardy."

Gudgel wanted to incorporate what was happening in Afghanistan into his Humanities and English classes, and he had the idea to invite his students to help two refugee families from Afghanistan relocate into Omaha.

"I proposed it to my Humanities students, and they said, 'great idea,'" said Gudgel.

The main goal of the group of students, as well as staff and

community members, was to furnish an apartment for the two families.

Gudgel also wanted to teach about Afghanistan in his classes.

"I thought it was really important that we get to know our Afghan neighbors who were going to come live with us and not only know them as people but know something about them," said Gudgel.

Gudgel received the approval to purchase 10 different books to use in their Afghanistan unit. He ended up spending a month of his Humanities class and a

term of his English class teaching and learning about Afghanistan.

"We tried to study the things that are beautiful about it, and I would often ask my students, 'What's beautiful in Afghanistan?' We would study Afghan art and Afghan geography," said Gudgel. "One day as an assignment, I asked students to find something beautiful in Afghanistan, create a PowerPoint with a picture, and email it to me. We just spent the second half of class looking at them."

One of Gudgel's

goals in teaching about Afghanistan is to "emphasize culture over conflict." His classes watched short documentaries, read novels, had discussions, and even celebrated the Afghan New Year in March.

However, when the time came to begin preparing the house for the families, Gudgel found that it was far below his standards.

"[The house] was appalling. There were massive holes in the floor, holes in the walls, the carpet was so disgusting that I wasn't comfortable walking on it with shoes on.

There was standing water in the basement. Just a really terrible house," said Gudgel. "I hated the message it was going to send our Afghan brothers and sisters that this is what you have now, this is what you deserve."

Gudgel told the organization they were working with that the house was unacceptable and demanded that they found a suitable space for the families to live.

"I don't think I made any friends that day, but frequently doing the right thing is not a friend-making exercise," said Gudgel.

The AirBnBs that the



While celebrating the Afghan New Year, North High students work on a welcome banner for the two families. Gudgel believes that celebrating things like the Afghan New Year helps to "emphasize culture over conflict."

PHOTO BY LAUREN CAFFERY

# AFGHAN REFUGEES: BY THE NUMBERS



3.5 MILLION INTERNALLY DISPLACED



2.6 MILLION REGISTERED REFUGEES WORLDWIDE



74 THOUSAND REFUGEES IN THE U.S.



OVER 1,200 REFUGEES IN NEBRASKA

Sources: UN Refugee Agency, KETV

GRAPHIC BY ANNE ROGERS

families are currently staying in have been extended for a month, and the families are now looking for a new permanent home.

"That has been both a triumph and a frustration. Students and staff have been amazing and totally rallied. I have a car full of supplies, we have a lot of people who have said that they'll donate beds and furniture, and we were really good to go," said Gudgel.

However, even when the families find suitable housing, many barriers still exist for refugees in Omaha.

"A good number of people genuinely struggle to live in Omaha by no fault of their own. Minimum wage is terrible, public transportation is terrible, so I think living here is a real challenge. It's incredibly expensive," said Gudgel. "We don't honor their law degrees

here, we don't honor the medical degrees here, and frequently language is a barrier."

Gudgel hopes to ultimately make Omaha "a much more accessible city to all."

"I would like to see every online publication of the city available in all of the languages spoken in our city, which is the work of a fairly cheap plug in. I would like to see our public transportation to be improved to the

point where you don't have to own a car. It's not because I want to turn Omaha into New York, it's because a car is an immense financial burden on people," said Gudgel. "I want to see this city doing big things that move us in that direction and that will serve all of our residents, not just those who have arrived most recently."

Gudgel also wants to use his Humanities class to inspire his students to feel confident and empowered in their decisions and abilities.

"I hope that they never take anything that I believe and make it their own," said Gudgel. "I hope that they are cognizant enough of their own genius to always think for themselves, to question everything, to know that they can do anything."

Another one of his goals is to inspire his students to be good to others.

"Being educated is not the same thing as being good. Despite our education, despite our intellect, we all have unlimited opportunity to be good. Acting on those opportunities is really just a practice of habit. We're trying to do some habit forming, I guess," said Gudgel. "It doesn't take away from the fact that many of them need help themselves. But I also think it's true that we don't have to have everything right with ourselves before we can be of use to others."

Gudgel's passion for doing good is particularly applicable to his work with Afghan refugees.

"There is room in

our hearts and in our minds and in our hands that we use to help other people, more than just our immediate family. We just have to remember that we have the ability to be helpful and good," said Gudgel.

Gudgel is incredibly proud of what his students have accomplished. Many students and staff members have donated furniture for the apartment, and others have offered to donate money.

This strong community is not new. Gudgel has witnessed the positive environment of North High since his first days here.

"As I interviewed here, Mr. Haynes made me feel extremely welcome. I went and sat down in the Viking Center and with some students who would later become my students in humanities," said Gudgel. "I just really felt welcomed, and it felt right, it felt great."

Throughout the years, North has worked hard to not only act as a welcoming environment to all, but also to give back to the community through volunteerism and donations. The goal to furnish an apartment for Afghan refugees in Omaha is yet another way that North is striving to assist its community.

"North is a really special place," said Gudgel. "We have such an incredibly beautiful, diverse, heterogeneous population. I think it's maybe the greatest strength of the school. It has made teaching here for eight years really wonderful."