

Ellen Brager gathers with children attending the Traveling Notes program.



Helping Hands

VOLUNTEERS HONORED FOR CHARITABLE WORK **BY ED WARNER**

One volunteer organized a 10-day music festival for children in the Dominican Republic. Another established a program that provides lunch five days a week for refugees in Turkey.

These volunteers were among the six members of the Department of State family who in December received the Secretary of State's Award for outstanding volunteerism abroad. Chosen from 27 nominees, the

SOSA winners each represent a geographic region covered by a Department bureau. Over the 18 years since the SOSA awards were established, 375 volunteer efforts worldwide have been nominated, said the Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide, which picks the winners.

One of the 2008 winners, Bridget Guerrero, a family member stationed in Ankara, Turkey, said training she received from a

group of nuns while in Romania helped her in her effort to aid refugees. The nuns, she said, told her that small efforts can change the lives of many and that one shouldn't see the short time posted in a particular nation as hindering the ability to make a difference.

"Life is a matter of perspective," she said. "A person can try to do as much as he or she can in a short period of time at a post



Clockwise from above: Burmese families walk over a bamboo bridge, carrying food donated by a relief effort in which Amy Robinson was involved; Sherilynn Tounger works with children served by the preschool she helped establish; like all of the award winners, Susan Mattes took a few minutes to tell attendees about the activity for which she was honored.

or decide not to act, thinking they don't have enough time to make a difference.

"The award recipients are all people who choose to act."

Feeding Refugees

The Ankara Refugee Support Group she formed provides food and clothing to refugees and asylum seekers, mainly women and children from Iraq, Iran and Somalia.

The volunteer honored for creating the Traveling Notes music festival in Santo Domingo, family member Ellen Brager, said she sees music as a bridge across cultures. The festival, which also traveled to Peru, brings American classical musicians together with local young people for lessons and concerts. Brager gained scholarships for the children, organized performances in hospitals and orphanages, and said that, in doing so, she "discovered a new passion of my own."

In the developing nation of Burkina Faso, family member Sherilynn Tounger identified a poor village's need for a preschool. Tounger, a former educator, then

did the design and fundraising, and created the Chasing Lions organization to keep the \$60,000 project on track. The group is on the Web at <http://web.mac.com/alekosher/iWeb/Chasing%20Lions>.

The project, she said, made her aware of the kindness and gentle nature of Burkina Faso's people.

Another family member who volunteered in a developing nation, Amy Robinson, organized a relief effort for seven Burmese villages devastated by Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. AAFSW said she risked her safety to transport food, clothing and building supplies to the victims. Her grass-roots fundraising will help establish a school to educate 145 children, AAFSW said.

Better Posts

Two other SOSA winners undertook efforts to make life at post more bearable. Calvin McQueen, a Foreign Service officer in Karachi, Pakistan, revived the consulate's employee association by, among other actions, getting the cooks trained by a local hotelier and creating opportunities for the

post's staff to purchase local crafts.

"We got our people to come back" to the association, he said.

At the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, Susan Mattes, a "Section 3161 employee," was honored for taking the nascent employee association quarters and making it a place where employees could hang out and relax. This American Club now has 20 volunteers and will soon move into the new embassy. Section 3161 employees are full-time, U.S. direct-hire staff in Washington, D.C., and Iraq on one-year, renewable, noncareer appointments.

Mattes, who has served in Baghdad for a year and a half, "is a good example of the ways in which our 3161 employees contribute to the success and well-being of our embassy community, just as our Foreign Service and Civil Service colleagues have always done while abroad," said embassy Human Resources Officer Darian Arky. ■

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