

**City of Refuge Hosts International Fair at Local Elementary**

On April 25, John P. Thomas Elementary School students were issued passports, learned about cultures and animals living on the seven continents, and left with a suitcase filled with candy…all before lunchtime. For the last several years, members of City of Refuge Church, which meets in the Belmont Baptist building just down the street from the elementary, have been growing relationships with the faculty, staff, students, and their families. Pastor JayWill Wilson said it wasn’t hard to talk his church members into the idea of introducing the children to international cultures through a unique immersive experience.

“The real heart behind the idea was thinking about how we could raise up the next generation of missionaries, and at the elementary level. We want to introduce these children to the nations,” Wilson said.

Jessica Sluss serves as City of Refuge’s missionary in residence and headed up much of the planning that went into the fair, from designing the table-top “continents” to preparing the 400 paper “suitcases” given to each child. Sluss welcomed each child into the school’s cafeteria with a printed booklet and “passport” for the children to stamp at each stop on their journey. She’s also active in the church’s ongoing partnership with the school which is building intentional relationships with students and teachers.

“My prayer is that the students today feel seen, heard, loved, and inspired,” Sluss said of the event. “Some could be the next generation of international explorers or even missionaries. Who knows what the Lord will do through this.”

As the classes gathered around decorated lunch tables, a City of Refuge member introduced them to that continent and engaged them with questions and details about the cultures living there. The students saw beaded items and a tray with Egyptian depictions at the Africa table and touched shaving cream “snow” and sugar cubed “ice” in Antarctica. At the Asia table the students looked at tea pots and decorative chopsticks, which prompted one student to remark that she “loved that kind of food.”

According to Sluss, personal connections like this one were exactly what she hoped would happen through the event. “We wanted the children to understand that there is a world out there that is much bigger than Columbia,” she said.

For her part, Principal Selina Latimore said City of Refuge has been a “God send” as a community partner for the last several years. She praised the church’s consistent willingness to be present and to meet needs, and she values the meaningful relationships being formed as a result. She was excited about the international fair’s impact on her student body as well.

“The fair introduced them to different cultures, and to appreciate and learn from them,” Latimore said of the opportunity.

The night before the international fair, Wilson and City of Refuge members sponsored a cookout for a literacy event being held at the school. Latimore reports more than 200 parents and students were served and stayed late because they were having such a good time. She adds it’s “important for schools to have a ‘village’ of support, and often someone’s time has even more of an impact than just giving money.”

“We have a constant presence at John P. Thomas Elementary School. Our goal is to create a place of refuge where staff and students are seen, loved, cared for, and experience the presence of God,” Wilson said.