Brings Refugee Camp to Life
By Kate Camara
“You have three minutes. Gather your family and leave.” Imagine hearing these words and being forced to leave your home for life in a refugee camp. You have no food, no supplies. Will you be safe? What will you eat? How will you find water? Where will you sleep? These are just a few of the questions that might race through your mind.
Refugee in the City Exhibit

To give people an idea of what life is like inside a refugee camp, Médecins Sans Frontières, an international humanitarian organization, put together a travelling exhibit that first toured France in 1995. The exhibit, called A Refugee Camp in the Heart of the City, toured Canada in 2001, receiving over 30 000 visitors.

Visitors get details on everything from cold storage of vaccines to inadequate latrines—sometimes one bathroom to a thousand people.
Back in 1971, a small group of French doctors started an organization called Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). MSF is made up of volunteer doctors, nurses, and professionals from Canada and other countries. MSF volunteers feed the hungry, heal the sick, and set up temporary refugee camps for people who have been forced to leave their homes because of war, violence, or natural disasters.
It travelled across Western Canada again in the fall of 2008. The exhibit is an outdoor reconstructed refugee camp made up of materials used by MSF workers in camps around the world.

As visitors enter the camp, they are given a Temporary Card—the food-and-supply ration card given to every refugee. Actual MSF doctors, nurses, and relief workers guide the tour, asking visitors to imagine they are among the millions of people escaping violence and natural disasters.

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Aid workers share stories from refugee camps—helping visitors understand how refugees live with very few comforts. Visitors hear about the dangers, hardships, and mental health problems faced by refugees.

Adrienne Wai, 13, of Hamilton, Ontario reflected on the exhibit. “I didn’t expect it to be like this. It really opened my eyes.”

The tour includes visits to several tents, reconstructed to show the different areas within a refugee camp. Tents include emergency refugee housing, a food area, water pump, health clinic, vaccination tent, feeding centre, and a cholera treatment centre. MSF guides explain how vaccinations prevent diseases that can break out when many people are living in cramped conditions.

“People are very moved by what they’re seeing,” Clea Kahn, Communications Officer for the refugee camp exhibit, told the Hamilton Spectator. “… It’s a good learning tool for education. More than anything, what people take away from this is a measure of reality, not some dim idea of what refugees are, but that these are real human beings.”

Of course, the exhibit can’t replicate daily life in a real camp, but it gives visitors a small taste of a refugee’s life.
Housing

A typical refugee’s living quarters are sometimes only a small shack made out of sheets of plastic pulled over wood. As many as eight or nine people live in these tents, and visitors are invited to test out the sleeping mats. They can also taste emergency food used to combat starvation, carry the heavy water jugs that refugees spend up to a day waiting in line for, and learn how basic cleanliness is needed for survival.

A refugee shelter can be made of canvas, plastic sheeting, or aluminum, with mats of straw or reeds. The shelter floors may be covered with a variety of dishes, rugs, and children’s toys made from tin cans and other scraps.
Refugees have to think about what to do for food and medical needs. If they have children, they have to think about malnutrition and the spread of disease. Imagine being given 19 L of water to wash and cook with. How would you get through your day with this much water? (Canadians use an average of 329 L of water per day.) “It’s so unfair,” 10-year-old Rachel Westwood of Ottawa said after going through the reconstructed camp when the exhibit toured her city. “Look what we have.”

Near the end of the exhibit, you travel past photos of refugees around the world and have a chance to read their stories. Children’s artwork reminds visitors that young people make up many of the refugees worldwide.

After visiting the exhibit, Vanessa Katchanoski, a Grade 11 student, said she wanted to get involved.

“… I think people should be exposed and become more knowledgeable about issues around the world, and maybe that’s our first step toward change.”
History of MSF

The group of French doctors who started MSF felt that a new relief organization was needed—one that believed in speaking out publicly against human rights crimes.

From the beginning, MSF made it clear that they would not allow political leaders or religious issues to come between their doctors and the safety and health of victims.

MSF is now the world’s largest independent international medical relief agency, with offices in over 20 countries. They continue their mission helping thousands of people in over 80 countries across the globe. (In the United States, the name Doctors Without Borders is often used instead of MSF.)

In Afgooye, Somalia, refugees gather to collect clean drinking water. They have fled from the violence in Mogadishu.
MSF in Canada

Canadian doctors, nurses, and other disaster-relief experts have been a part of MSF since 1991. MSF Canada has offices in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. Canadian volunteers have helped people in over 80 countries and have gone on thousands of relief missions.

Dr. Wei Cheng is one of the Canadian “heroes” who has seen what life is like for refugees first hand. Dr. Cheng is a pediatric surgeon, and in 2003, he left home on a three-week emergency mission to Liberia. Read on to hear about his experiences in e-mails written to his wife.
From: Cheng, Wei
Sent: September 7, 2003
To: Karin
Subject: I've arrived

Here in Liberia we landed. No problem. The welcome committee at the airport consisted of 16 trucks of soldiers (about 500 of them) with AK47s. That did not worry me except I don’t like the sight of the weapons...

A sign points the way to the MSF Clinic in Monrovia, Liberia.

From: Cheng, Wei
Sent: September 14, 2003
To: Karin
Subject: Settling in

I have already been here for more than a week, and the workload is quite overwhelming. Today is really the first opportunity I have had to sit down and write something, which is important as I fear I am rapidly becoming desensitized to life around me...

The hospital was looted but it is still functioning, even though the local hospital staff has not been paid for two years. The local medical school has been closed for more than a year; however, there is a 3rd year medical student called Fallah. Day in, day out, he came to the operating room, offering to carry the patients and scrub [in] for the operations. [He] does everything from cleaning the floor to suture the wounds. He then goes home and reads up about everything he has seen. It is so easy to let go and feel despair in these circumstances, and yet, he refuses to give up. To me, this is truly inspirational!