

Immigrant youths find home on basketball court

by Tara Ballenger, The Oregonian

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Doug Beghtel / The Oregonian

Girls practice a dribbling exercise at Hosford Middle School in Portland and will play in a rec league in January.

Hosford Middle School Principal Kevin Bacon stands on the gym's centerline on an August afternoon. Today, he's not a principal. He's a coach.

He looks at the players sitting cross-legged in a circle around him. They don't look like typical seventh-grade girls: Their heads are covered with colorful scarves. Only the Nikes peeking from under their vibrant floor-length skirts hint at their athletic ambitions.

"Who knows where the free throw line is?" he says.

The girls, all originally from Kenya or Somalia, are almost as new to basketball as they are to the United States.

With help from a \$4,599 grant from the city's Vision into Action Coalition, Bacon and Zsuzsa Nemeth, an English as a Second Language teacher, hope to funnel the girls' interest in basketball into a team that will help them feel more at home at their Southeast Portland school -- and with one another.

"Integration is a long process," says Nemeth, who came up with the idea for the team when she saw the girls, many of whom arrived two or three years ago, shooting hoops every morning before school.

"Many of these girls were starving, persecuted and had tremendous suffering before they arrived here," she says. "One day they are getting off the plane; the next day, they are in school in a new city."

The grant will help pay for uniforms specially made to cover the girls in accordance with their religion, Islam. It also will help pay for an assistant coach to help Bacon, a volunteer, once the season takes off.



The girls are practicing to play in a recreation league through the Bureau of Parks & Recreation starting in January.

"They're eager to play, and they have an obvious love for basketball," Bacon says. They radiated joy in July, he says, when he and Nemeth took them to the Nike Factory Outlet store for court shoes.

"But it isn't easy," he says. "There is a language barrier, and they've never really participated in a team sport." Though 12 girls are on the team, for example, only half show up for practice on this August afternoon.

Bacon coached middle- and high-school basketball for years but took on this team to get to know a set of students he didn't necessarily understand. The team has a few naturals, he says, and all the girls try hard. "They are getting better every day," he says.

For the girls, a big challenge besides learning English is learning to get along with one another. "Fighting in basketball is not fun because you have to do the best thing for the team," says Habiba Mohamed, 12, who came from Somalia to Portland in 2004 and is starting seventh grade.

She says she hopes being part of a team smoothes relationships among Somali classmates -- and helps them get to know American students.

"Some of them don't want to be your friend," she says. "Some of them are mean a little bit."

Bacon and Nemeth say parents are allowing their daughters to participate, but their support is hard to gauge. "We're Muslim, and some parents don't want us to wear shorts, but I think we should," says Maryan Hassan, 12, a tall girl from Kenya who's been in the United States since she was 8. "Coach is teaching us really good," she says. "We may win in January."

At the practice, the girls learn about the geography of the court, do drills, then play three-on-three. At first, the girls are awkward with the rules, the ball and one another.

Bacon keeps blowing the whistle to call the girls on traveling and has Nemeth mark penalty points on a dry-erase board. But 20 minutes later, the girls are making shots, dodging defense and scoring rebounds. They are smiling and laughing.

Bacon and Nemeth hope the girls grow enough in their language and social skills to warrant renewal of the city grant.

Habiba Mohamed is just looking forward to games. "We can be there and play together, and have fun together," she says, "and just play."