

When walking down the halls of Drake Middle School, it was easy to ignore others, their experiences, their lives, and their hopes and dreams. Meanwhile, the total foreign-born or immigrant population (legal and illegal) in the U.S. was 49.5 million in October 2023, a record high at the time according to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS). In Colorado there were 545,500 immigrants, 10 percent of the state's total population. But at Drake it was easy not to know that the kid who sat beside you, struggling to understand the teacher, was from another country and battling to adjust to a new culture and language while you were busy with schoolwork and friend drama.

Everyday, people leave their home countries to escape war, seek new opportunities, or even to learn in a way not possible before. At Drake, immigrant students experienced all of these circumstances and more. They'd left their homes, traveled thousands of miles, and had to adjust to a whole new country, which came with a new culture, language, and social norms.

Olha Zhemelko (6) came to the US after leaving Ukraine due to the Russian invasion. "Coming here was hard. I didn't know English at all," Zhemelko said. At school I only understood math because I already knew it, but in Ukraine it was hard to learn since there were no teachers because of the war. Here it's easier, and I like school here better than in Ukraine because of the better teachers."

By February 2024, the U.S. had admitted 271,000 Ukrainian refugees into the country since the Russian invasion began in February of 2022. A few of Drake's students, including Zhemelko, came here due to the war. However, on a much larger scale there were 3.7 million internally displaced Ukrainians and 6.5 million Ukrainian refugees across the globe. Children like Zhemelko lost teachers and access to education as only 25 percent of schools in Ukraine remained open. 1.7 million children – or 42% – had limited access to in-person teaching, leaving about one million students to rely on remote learning during the war, according to Ukraine's Ministry

of Education. However, school in the US presented plenty of difficulties as well.

"School is really different here. In Ukraine you had homework, like real homework. You would have something in class, and when you go home it's going to be different work to do. We also had the same schedule for every day and you couldn't choose any electives. We have PE and art and nothing else," Zhemelko said.

Cristian Parpalov (8) who came from Moldova, felt school was very different for him as well. "It's interesting because it's a different lifestyle. They have more liberty here. For example, in school in Moldova you need to sit in your chair and not move. Here you have the liberty to sit how you want or to move around," he said.

Coming to school without being fluent in the language in which everyone else communicated was also a common struggle for many immigrant students. There were 24 Drake students who were still in different levels of learning English and many more who were no longer in the English program, but still learning.

Duda Sabino (7) came to the U.S. from Brazil, not because of war, but for the opportunity to learn English. "Learning English was always something that I really wanted to do," she said.

The cultural differences were hard to adjust to at first. "It was pretty difficult, especially because of the different culture," Sabino said. "It's like a new start here. I really like it to be honest." The different culture was at times a challenge though. "In Brazil we have something that is like cheese with bread. An American came to our house and put rice on the bread and that's not normal. I almost cried!" she said, laughing.

As students and teachers at Drake strove for understanding and learning each day, it was just as important to understand the experiences of those around them, those who had persevered, progressed, and adjusted to immense challenges. Instead of walking the halls blindly, if they actually stopped to ask and listen to the stories of these new students around them, then staff and students could truly understand the lives and experiences of those so different from their own.



COL-LAB-ORATION. In order to complete a food chain lab for science, sixth graders Max Chernok, Olha Zhemelko, Olivia Dragoo and JP Ho work together to finish the assignment. "We were doing a science experiment about how energy passes through different animals," Zhemelko said. By putting water in a cup with a hole in it the sixth graders were able to visualize how energy is lost in an ecosystem.



DONO-HUE WANT TO KNOW? In order to finish a science worksheet, Timofi Salomatin (8) asks Mr. Adam Donohue a question. "I like science. In Ukraine we learned different sciences. In the one lesson we learned geography and biology and other sciences," Salomatin said.

CARNIVAL PRINCESSES. In preparation for the Brazilian Carnival, young Duda Sabino (7) and friends don their costumes. "It is like a party, like Halloween, but it's called Carnival. We can wear costumes, but we also have Carnival costumes," Sabino said. The Brazilian Carnival is a staple in Brazilian culture that starts before Lent and consists of parades, music, dancing and elaborate costumes.



SAFETY FIRST. Eighth graders, Cristian Parpalov and Gavin Farmer finish a safety test for shop class in order to use the equipment properly.

Q&A

Jackson Rogers (7) talks about the conflict in Yemen and why it concerns him.

Q: Can you tell me about the conflict in Yemen and the surrounding areas?

A: "In Yemen the Huthi rebels have taken over the country, and they are attacking a bunch of commercial shipping. The US, China and Britain all have warships there. They are attempting to solve the conflict, but as the Huthi's fire more anti-ship missiles, it's dissolving into having to deploy airstrikes throughout Yemen to cripple their resistance, which then causes a ton of problems because the Huthi's are likely a proxy group of the Iranian government, which then pulls Iran into the conflict, which then makes it into a massive regional conflict."

Q: Why does the Yemen conflict concern you so much?

A: "Even with over a hundred and fifty airstrikes being launched and millions of dollars going into this, the Huthi's still haven't stopped."



this issue is EVERYTHING

Students talk about global issues that concern them most.



HOMELESSNESS + DRUG ABUSE

"I think that it's really bad for homeless people to do drugs. It ruins their lives, and it's really hard to get unaddicted to them."
-Caleb Keener (7)



BULLYING

"I've just seen a lot of people saying rude things about others, and I can see how much it's been affecting people this year."
-Jaylynn Robinson (6)



POVERTY

"In parts of the world they don't have good ways to dispose of trash, and it's creating a lot of sickness and unhealthy environments."
-Nora Organ (7)



BANNING BOOKS

"In Florida they're banning books with different and disagreeing points of view, and that's how the Nazi's started, which is worrying."
-Andrew Votaw (7)



UKRAINE FUNDING

"People who celebrate the same traditions as me might actually get destroyed by a huge country with an awful president."
-Lola Dobransky (7)

Story by Corrine Stratton

COMING AMERICA

Immigrating students discuss what it's like to adjust to a new country, language and norms.