

SUCCESS STORY

Speaking for Adults—A Child’s Voice Is Nearly Lost

Family Service Association of Bucks County | Pennsylvania

When Demetrius K arrived in the United States seven years ago, he was thrust into a role common to immigrant children: interpreter. As his parents struggled with English, Demetrius quickly picked it up and they asked him to act as the family translator. Before he could understand the meaning of the words he was asked to interpret, Demetrius found himself speaking for his parents. And, at the age of eight, Demetrius found himself trying to explain concepts, documents and government requirements that baffle most grown-ups.



In 2002 Demetrius’ family was thrilled to learn their request to immigrate to the United States from Turkey was granted. His parents longed for the chance to give their children a good education and, after years of waiting, they sold their business and moved to Levittown, Pennsylvania. The profit from the sale of their business bought them a home in Levittown’s Turkish community and Mr. K found a job in construction. Their dream of a life in America was at hand.

Many of the people the K family befriended were helpful, kind and honest. With little Demetrius at his parent’s side, they began to navigate their new life. Everything changed one day, however, when a con man took advantage of Mr. K’s lack of English-speaking skills. While Demetrius was at school, his father was tricked into signing papers that he was unable to read. The family learned, too late, that Mr. K had signed over the deed to their home. They were forced to move into an apartment just as the economy took a turn for the worse and Mr. K lost his job in construction.

Because Mr. K couldn’t speak English, he had trouble finding a new job. The family was faced with the loss of their home, income and health care, and even the ability to feed and clothe themselves. In this time of stress, Demetrius’ parents pulled him out of school frequently to interpret for them. Thrust into adult situations and pressured to accurately represent both his parents and those who needed him to explain the requirements for receiving legal, medical and social help, Demetrius became depressed and angry. He felt there was no time to be a kid, no way to say “no” to his parents and no possibility for change.

Demetrius’ school counselors noticed his absences and that he appeared depressed. They called the Bucks County School Outreach Program, a partner in the *Caring Across Communities* initiative funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The School Outreach Program hired a Turkish woman with years of experience serving as an interpreter and as a case manager. She was able to take Demetrius’ place as translator and to assess other family needs.



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The School Outreach Program (SOP) case manager met the K family not long after they lost their home. She linked them with assistance programs in the areas of their greatest need—housing, health care, food, clothing, and the search for a job. It was also clear that Mr. and Mrs. K needed to learn English, so the SOP case manager helped them enroll in the “Welcome Stranger” ESL program. Eager to build their language skills, Mr. and Mrs. K are studying hard and learning fast. Mr. K even wants to further his education and has his eye on a career in health care.

But Demetrius, now 14, was still facing his own problems. Falling behind in school, frustrated with the expectations of his parents, and resentful at having given up so much of his childhood, he began to fight with his parents. With the help of his SOP case manager, Demetrius has begun meeting with a counselor to work through his disappointment and frustrations.

For the first time since they arrived in America, Demetrius is now being given the time and freedom to act his age. He is making friends and finding time to spend with them. His grades have begun to improve and he is enjoying the chance to speak for only himself. Demetrius plans to continue to receive individual counseling and is looking forward to the day when his parents are fully self-sufficient, employed and able to return to the role they most love: caregivers to their children.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting *Caring Across Communities* and its partners, such as the Bucks County School Outreach Program, to address this need by increasing and improving mental health services for all America’s children. Learn more about how programs like *Caring Across Communities* create innovative solutions for children like Demetrius at www.healthinschools.org.

To learn how *Caring Across Communities* is helping immigrant and refugee students succeed, please visit www.rwjf.org/newsroom/product.jsp?id=60828.

For more information about the Family Service Association of Bucks County, contact Audrey Tucker at ajtucker@fsbc.org.

About the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) is a nonpartisan resource center at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. CHHCS links educators and health professionals to the information essential to building effective school health programs; testing new school-connected strategies to achieve better health outcomes for children; and promoting awareness of successful new directions in school health programming.

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