

helping HANDS

By Ivanna C. Sukkar

Each month, Helping Hands features a mortgage professional or group that has volunteered to lend a hand to others in need.

Name Jay Michalowski, president, First IRA Mortgage Inc., and other employees

Project The Welcome to America Project (WTAP)

Site Phoenix

How Since January 2004, Michalowski has volunteered with WTAP, a 5-year-old 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that helps foreign refugees who recently have relocated to the Phoenix area. Each month, the organization helps eight to 10 families from Afghanistan, Cuba, Iraq, Iran, Vietnam and other countries furnish their new apartments.

New residents are referred to WTAP through the International Rescue Committee and other relief agencies that act on the behalf of the United Nations. The organization relies on donations from the local community, and all of its workers are volunteers.

Since Michalowski started delivering furniture, other First IRA employees have helped with deliveries, business-planning, marketing and fund-raising for the organization, he says. At least one First IRA employee volunteers every week for at least four hours, he says.

Why Michalowski says he felt a connection with WTAP founder Carolyn Manning, who started the organization to cope with her grief after her brother-in-law died in the Sept. 11 World Trade Center attack. Michalowski says he also had friends who died in the World Trade Center.



First IRA President Jay Michalowski (second from left) helps Vietnamese refugees (from left) Ler Viswe Htoo, An Htoo and Paw Moo Htoo unload dining-room-table legs during a delivery to their new home. Photo courtesy of First IRA Mortgage Inc.

He says he also was attracted to the chance to work with a charity that could help people new to the country.

"[WTAP] was doing good work that could help change the world right here in our back yard," Michalowski says.

Impact "The refugee families we've helped are always so grateful on delivery days," Michalowski says. "It's inspiring to see their hope, especially knowing the harrowing struggles they've survived."

With help from First IRA's business-development work and from individual donations, WTAP has bought its own delivery truck, doubled its deliveries, launched extensive fund-raising efforts and garnered interest from national press, Michalowski says.

First IRA employees also now are helping WTAP write grant requests and approach corporate sponsors, he says.

Try it Visit www.wtap.org; e-mail projectwelcome@yahoo.com; or call (602) 820-3224.

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