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LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Resettling refugees in Missouri

By Jessica Vaughn, MCC communications director

A Burmese farmer returned to his field to retrieve his few personal possessions, which he had buried in haste years earlier when he fled from rebels to a refugee camp with his wife. Carrying their belongings would have only hindered their pace, putting their lives in even greater danger. But before he could reach his possessions, a land mine exploded under him, tearing his leg from his body. Thousands of miles away, another man had also lost his leg, but he did so by choice. His captor told him he had two options: an arm or a leg. He could decide which he wanted to keep.

These are just snippets from the lives of refugee clients that have since been resettled in Missouri. Their stories are often so tragic that they seem more like the plot of a big-screen drama than a real life experience. That's what makes it so vital that we hear them—they are not the plots of bestsellers, but instead the harsh realities of millions of today's refugees.

Many Americans are afraid of what might happen if Syrian resettlement is allowed in the United States. But the scarier truth is what will happen if it's not.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is one of nine nonprofit organizations nationwide that contracts with the federal government to resettle refugees that have been vetted and given security clearance. The Catholic Resettlement network includes over 100 diocesan offices across the country and in Guam and Puerto Rico. Refugee and Immigration Services (RIS) for Catholic Charities of Central and Northern Missouri (CCCNMO) is a part of that network. Their goal is to help the refugees become self sufficient, meaning employable and able to live without assistance, within 90 days.

Organizations like these are tasked with an incredible duty; that is to take the burden refugees have carried for thousands of miles and lift it gently off their shoulders. The CCCNMO office works toward this goal by providing a number of services, including offering refugees initial housing; providing furniture, clothing, household goods and food; orientation and initial needs assessment; education and placement of children in the appropriate school; introduction to government and community service providers; and extensive case management services.

CCCNMO resettled 170 refugees in 2014, and 200 are expected to be resettled this year. Clients are resettled using federal funds provided by Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. State Department. Refugees accepted in recent years come from Bosnia, Burma, the Congo, Iraq, Somalia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. No Syrian refugees have been placed by CCCNMO yet.



Volunteers educate refugees on the public transportation system in Columbia

The UN refugee agency defines a refugee as someone who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

It is important to note the distinction between a refugee and an immigrant. An immigrant elects to leave his or her home country; a refugee is forced to do so under fear of persecution.

Their journey to safety is neither brisk nor pleasant. It begins with an identity crisis: the realization that his or her home country cannot be their home any longer. Then comes the quest to find a new, safe home. The migration is stick-pinned with numerous obstacles, interviews, paperwork, lengthy stays in refugee camps, and an unending feeling of uncertainty.

The UN Refugee Agency has strict rules and regulations regarding refugee resettlement, and the process to attain refugee status can take several years. (See infographic) According to their website, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refers only about 1 percent of all refugees for resettlement in a third country.

“Only when all efforts to either help refugees return home or settle permanently in the country of asylum have failed does third country resettlement become the option of last resort,” the website says.

Though refugee camps provide a safer place to stay while awaiting resettlement, they are places where growth is stagnant. Refugees are not able to work, go to school or leave the boundaries of the camp.

Without refugee resettlement organizations, refugees and immigrants would have to face their new world alone, and without the cultural knowledge to do so successfully. Their importance is undeniable; their services are irreplaceable.

MEET THE TEAM

Refugee and Immigration Services (RIS) in Columbia, Mo. has a great team of employees and volunteers who make their incredible work possible. Read the stories of these RIS employees, some of whom were once refugees themselves.



SENAD MUSIC
RIS OFFICE MANAGER
BOSNIAN REFUGEE

Senad Music fled his home in Bosnia in 1992 and lived in a refugee camp for the next four years. Those years were long, and at times very brutal.

“They call it a refugee camp, but it’s not a refugee camp when they can beat you everyday.”

He applied for refugee status in 1996, and that same year he became the first Bosnian refugee to be resettled in Columbia, Mo. Though he spoke two languages, Bosnian and Russian, he struggled to communicate in his new home.

“Life was really tough and hard, my English was zero,” Music says. “It was culturally very hard.”

He recalled the difficulty that came when he took his drivers test. Though his English vocabulary was growing, he couldn’t read the driver’s manual, or articulate the word “passenger”. Finally, after his second failed test, the instructor offered him a Russian version of the manual, which he could read with ease. He passed with flying colors.

Today, Refugee and Immigration Services (RIS) provides transportation and English assistance to refugees, but at that time there wasn’t an office in Columbia—only in Jefferson City—and interactions were few.

Music says it took almost a year to settle in.

Not long after he arrived, Music received a note from his fiancé, who he hadn’t heard from since he left Bosnia. They were engaged to be married on May 14, 1992, but on May 8, 1992 the war began and they were separated.

“I lost contact with her in 1992,” he says. “The first contact I heard from her was in March 1996. So for almost four years I thought she was dead.”

The note was only 25 words long, but that was enough to restore hope for their future together. When she arrived in Columbia they were finally

married, and now have a son.

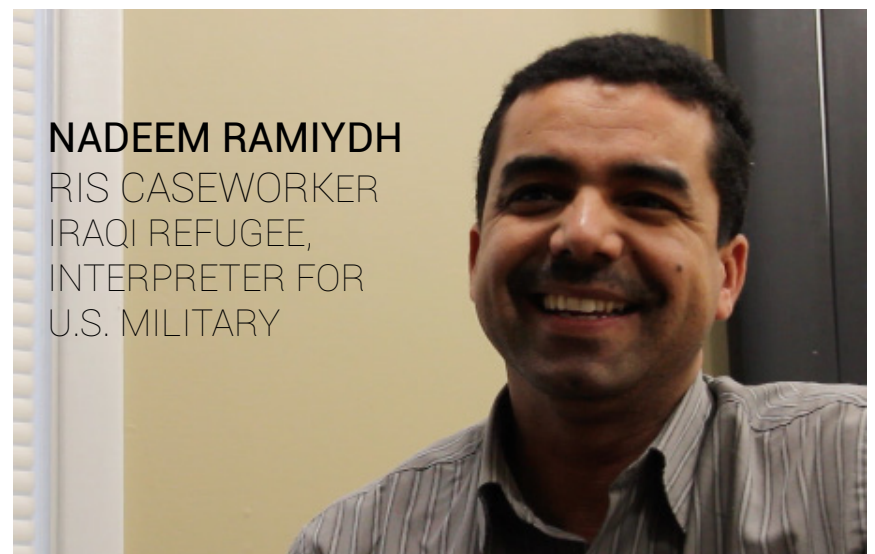
“Even now when I’m talking about it, I get goosebumps,” Music says. “It’s like when you hear you are dying, and then they find something to keep you alive.”

Her arrival, though positive on many levels, did not solve all of their problems. Like many other refugees, Senad struggled to pay bills, and his wife began to experience symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But after both of their families were finally resettled in the U.S., their fears began to subside.

“After five or six years we started feeling stable, started feeling at home,” he says.

Music stayed in close contact with RIS after his services ended, and began working for them in 1998. He helped establish the Columbia office, and almost 20 years later he is still helping refugees find success in their new home.

“I know all of my clients, not by number, but by name—no matter how long they’ve lived here,” he says.



NADEEM RAMIYDH
RIS CASEWORKER
IRAQI REFUGEE,
INTERPRETER FOR
U.S. MILITARY

Nadeem Ramiydh feels that working with RIS is a way to give back for all they have done for him and his family.

As an interpreter for the U.S. military in Iraq, he received a special visa that fast-tracked his placement as a refugee in the U.S.

He described the danger of working with the U.S. military in Iraq. He had to take several precautions in order to keep his position a secret from terrorist groups or others that would out him, including wearing dirty clothes and lying about where he worked.

He made the choice to leave immediately after he ended his term as an interpreter. Had he stayed, his and his family’s safety would have been in question.

“I might be dead,” he says.

Ramiydh arrived in Columbia with his wife and son in 2009. He spoke English, but like most refugees who step off the plane at the Columbia Regional Airport, his wife was not able to understand the RIS employees who greeted them.

He says the language barrier is one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome. After almost seven years in the states, his wife feels more at home. She speaks English with relative ease, and enjoys her job as a cake decorator in a local grocery store.



YUSUF MOHAMMAD
RIS CASEWORKER
SOMALI REFUGEE



ALISSA JETT & PATRICK COVERT
JOB DEVELOPER & ANALYST, COMMUNITY
OUTREACH COORDINATOR

Caseworker Yusuf Mohammad fled from his home in Somalia after hearing word that his father was killed. He spent several years in a refugee camp in Ethiopia before he was told that he would be resettled in Columbia, Missouri.

When Mohammad was asked how his life would have differed had he not come to the United States, his response was a chilling glimpse into the reality of refugees.

“Somalia is not a place to live,” he says. “It is a place to die.”

Mohammad says that for refugees, coming to America is a promise for opportunity, which is more than they would receive whilst living in a refugee camp or in a dangerous war zone.

“Here, they can work, they can study; that’s freedom,” he says.

His mother and brothers are still living in Somalia, and his sister and her family are awaiting resettlement in a refugee camp in Ethiopia.

Covert and Jett are two of the newest employees at RIS. They both began as interns, and made the decision to stay with the agency after they saw the positive impact they could make on the lives of refugees.

Jett’s role as job developer and analyst for RIS is vital to fulfilling the goal of refugee self-sufficiency within 90 days. She fills out job applications and matches clients with employment opportunities they are best suited for. Her experiences so far have been very humbling, and showed her what it means to truly follow in the footsteps of the Lord in respect to refugees, she says.

“You don’t get to choose when you love your neighbor,” she says. “If you perceive it as being risky, that doesn’t give you a free pass not to love your neighbor.”

Covert is the community outreach coordinator for RIS. He was drawn to the agency by his desire to help those who are less fortunate, and to give back the kindness and generosity he has experienced in his life. His client interactions have already made a lasting impression.

“Hearing their voices ringing in my mind, hearing their stories, knowing their names, having their faces as a kind of filter for seeing world, began to really change how I thought about the world, and a lot of things,” he says. “Those are the things that have really left lasting impressions.”

HOW DOES THE SCREENING PROCESS WORK?

Many people have questions and concerns about the process refugees go through to be resettled in the U.S. We have broken down the steps here. *Information is courtesy of whitehouse.gov*

1. Many refugee applicants identify themselves to the U.N. Refugee Agency, UNHCR. UNHCR, then:

- Collects identifying documents
- Performs initial assessment
 - Collects biodata: name, address, birthday, place of birth, etc.
 - Collects biometrics: iris scans (for Syrians, and other refugee populations in the Middle East)
- Interviews applicants to confirm refugee status and the need for resettlement
 - Initial information checked again
- Only applicants who are strong candidates for resettlement move forward (less than 1% of global refugee population).

2. Applicants are received by a federally-funded Resettlement Support Center (RSC):

- Collects identifying documents
- Creates an applicant file
- Compiles information to conduct biographic security checks

3. Biographic security checks start with enhanced interagency security checks:

•U.S. security agencies screen the candidate, including:

- National Counterterrorism Center/Intelligence Community
- FBI
- Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
- State Department

•The screening looks for indicators, like:

- Information that the individual is a security risk
- Connections to known bad actors
- Outstanding warrants/immigration or criminal violations

•DHS conducts an enhanced review of Syrian cases, which may be referred to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate for review. Research that is used by the interviewing officer informs lines of question related to the applicant's eligibility and credibility.

4. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)/USCIS interview:

•Interviews are conducted by USCIS Officers specially trained for interviews
•Fingerprints are collected and submitted (biometric check)

•Re-interviews can be conducted if fingerprint results or new information raises questions. If new biographic information is identified by USCIS at an interview, additional security checks on the information are conducted. USCIS may place a case on hold to do additional research or investigation. Otherwise, the process continues.

5. Biometric security checks:

•Applicant's fingerprints are taken by U.S. government employees

- Fingerprints are screened against the FBI's biometric database.
- Fingerprints are screened against the DHS biometric database, containing watch-list information and previous immigration encounters in the U.S. and overseas.
- Fingerprints are screened against the U.S. Department of Defense biometric database, which includes fingerprint records captured in Iraq and other locations.

• If not already halted, this is the end point for cases with security concerns. Otherwise, the process continues.

6. Medical check:

•The need for medical screening is determined

- This is the end point for cases denied due to medical reasons. Refugees may be provided medical treatment for communicable diseases such as tuberculosis.

7. Cultural orientation and assignment to domestic

•Applicants complete cultural orientation classes.

•An assessment is made by a U.S.-based non-governmental organization to determine the best resettlement location for the candidate(s). Considerations include:

- Family; candidates with family in a certain area may be placed in that area.
- Health; a candidate with asthma may be matched to certain regions.

•A location is chosen.

8. Travel:

•International Organization for Migration books travel

•Prior to entry in the United States, applicants are subject to:

- Screening from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's National Targeting Center-Passenger
- The Transportation Security Administration's Secure Flight Program

•This is the end point for some applicants. Applicants who have no flags continue the process.

9. U.S. Arrival:

•All refugees are required to apply for a green card within a year of their arrival to the United States, which triggers:

- Another set of security procedures with the U.S. government.

Refugees are woven into the rich fabric of American society!

Look forward to more refugee stories from the MCC in 2016!

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