Listening with the Ears of Our Hearts

By Michelle Eberhard
Director, Refugee Arrival Services

Thank you for your support over the past year as we have sought to carry out Jesus’ command to welcome the stranger, even as we live in the midst of leadership worldwide that would have us do otherwise. While the last fifteen months have been challenging for all of us here at Arrive Ministries, we are encouraged by your support of our work and the love you constantly show our refugee families.

When I stepped back recently and reflected on all that has changed in refugee resettlement, it was immediately clear that one perspective has been largely missing from the discourse: that is, the voice of the very individual we seek to welcome home. In an effort to account for this, my staff and I have spent the last few months reaching out to families and individuals resettled by Arrive Ministries and asking if they would be willing to share parts of their stories with us. Almost every person we contacted immediately agreed and was excited to have the opportunity to talk. The pages that follow detail the experiences, both humorous and heartbreaking, that undo the silence and give life to the numbers and statistics we hear in the news. They tell the story of what it truly means to be displaced, how it feels to start over somewhere new, and what you do to make our families feel home again.

Unless otherwise noted, stories are written by staff, based on interviews with the client. Several names have also been changed in order to protect the privacy of our families. Special thanks to Annie Bunio and Evan Nelson for their help in gathering stories and putting them together in a way that honors the integrity of those we are privileged to journey alongside.

Above all else, we are full of immense gratitude to those who were willing to share their hearts with all of us in such an honest and vulnerable way. May you always feel loved and welcome here.
By Dalia

I am ten years old, but almost eleven. I came to America in 2016 to join my parents and brother, who came here as refugees several years ago. When I found out I was going, I didn’t know it was to Minnesota, because I thought America was one place. On my last day in my country, my aunts, uncles, cousins, and I went to a fair in Erbil, Iraq and went on different rides. I wasn’t tall enough for all of them.

When I got on the airplane, I was excited and nervous. A lady traveled with me to Amman, and then another lady from Amman to New York. Both of them were nice, but I got sick on the plane. I was also worried the planes would crash, because my cousin told me they would. My mom was waiting for me in New York, but I was confused and asked where my “other” mom was (that’s actually my aunt, but I was living with her for a very long time in my country, so she was like my mom too). I made my real mom promise that my aunt and all of my family could also come to America someday.

At first I was nervous about going to school because I didn’t know the language. I was shy, but not anymore, because I thought if I’m shy, nobody will talk to me or get to know me. I play the viola and sing in the choir. My favorite sports are basketball, soccer, swimming, and gymnastics. When I feel lonely, I always draw. I like to listen to a song when I draw sometimes. My favorite song is “Lost Boy” by Ruth B. It’s my favorite song because it is kind of like me (but I’m a girl) – because sometimes I felt alone without my brother and parents.

I like math and reading, and one day I want to be an engineer that makes houses. It is also my dream to go to Paris. I think it will be my favorite place.

“I was shy, but not anymore, because I thought if I’m shy, nobody will talk to me or get to know me.”

My New Country
Written by: Ariam

“My name is Ariam. I am 22 years old. I was born in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. When I was [in] Eritrea, my big dream was to live in America. I came to the USA in October of last year. Before I came to USA, I was afraid that it would be difficult for me. I like the USA very much, but I don’t like the cold weather in winter too much. The people are so nice and welcoming and the beauty of the diversity is so lovely. Living in America is one of the best things that happened to me. Especially in Minnesota. I will move on to the next goal in my life. I love the USA. I love freedom. I like the US policies.”

Editor’s Note: Ariam, an Eritrean refugee, was separated from family for nearly a decade due to war and violence, before finally being reunited with her mother in 2017.

Arrive Ministries is an affiliate of Transform Minnesota, an evangelical network of churches from across the state. For information about Arrive Ministries and the important work we do in Minnesota, visit arriveministries.org or contact us: info@arriveministries.org, 612.798.4332.
Kazi Kubwa, Kazi ya Mungu: Big Work, God's Work

By Abule and Merina
Translated from Swahili to English

“I came from Africa to America the summer of 2016,” Abule, a 57 year old from the Democratic Republic of Congo explains. Abule shares with me his experience moving to the United States with his wife and three children. “Before arriving, I felt lost. We got in the plane to Minnesota on our own. IOM [the International Organization of Migration] left us alone. They only accompanied us to Chicago. I asked them, ‘What will we do? We will be lost if you leave us.’ They answered, ‘No, you won’t be lost.’” I ask Abule whether he believed the staff of IOM. “Hapana! [No!]” I didn’t believe it. It felt like we were being sent to die – me, my wife and children, with no one.”

“When I arrived in Minnesota and had someone right off the runway waiting for us, I was shocked. The first person we met was our case manager, Jessica. She was right in the gate off the airplane. She knew my wife’s name and we were surprised. We were both happy and still afraid. We walked with Jessica down to get our bags and saw many people there to greet us.” He stops and points at the wall in the dining room where a framed photo of his family and the Refugee Life Ministries team who welcomed his family at the airport hangs. He smiles and then continues his story. “I looked at Jessica and she was so happy. Everyone was so happy. They helped us with the luggage and smiled a lot.” Have you ever been welcomed like that before, I want to know? Abule scoffs at me and says, “Wapi? [Where?]”

“How did it feel?” I ask him then. Before he can answer, his wife Merina interjects, “We were so happy.” Abule chimes in, “I was so happy. I was SO happy. When I got in the car, although I didn’t know anyone, I knew everyone was doing good work. These people from the church, they came to visit many times, they were the first friends we had in America. They still come and visit us. It’s big work to welcome people you don’t know, you don’t understand. It’s big work to welcome these people. It’s big work, God’s work, a blessing.”

A Renewed Sense of Freedom

By Alexander and Anna

“Every morning when I wake up, I thank God. Thank you for this country and bless these people,” Alexander said, after explaining how he, his wife and two children made the decision to flee their country and apply to be resettled as refugees in the United States. “We were living in Crimea when Russia invaded. We were citizens of Ukraine and we were told we had to change all of our documents because it was now occupied by Russia, but our home was there.” His wife Anna further explained how her father’s pastor in Ukraine was forced to close his church, because it was a Ukrainian church. “Ukrainian people cannot pray in the church because they are using the Ukrainian language. If I even have a small Ukrainian flag in my purse someone can hate me, or worse, put me in jail. If I speak Ukrainian it’s a problem. This is not freedom. I don’t want to take on Russian passport or citizenship. I came to the U.S. I am a refugee, my family is a refugee.”

Here in the U.S., Alexander explained how he appreciates having a safe life: “We don’t have to worry about ourselves, our kids, or for our health. We have a lot of great joy. I was just telling Anna, when we first came we had a few pieces of luggage. Now we have an apartment filled with belongings, and a car.”
"Everything is a challenge for an immigrant," Rahima tells me one morning as we sit at a local Starbucks, sipping coffee and reminiscing about her first year in Minnesota. “But,” she quickly adds, “I focus on the big picture, and that big picture is, you will get there if you keep working hard.”

Rahima came to America alone, an eager young woman full of dreams for her future. Of particular interest to Rahima was her education, because she had been defying the odds to pursue it all her life. Where Rahima was born in Afghanistan, people do physical labor each day – they don’t go to school. As she puts it, there’s also “no reason for girls to go to school.” Despite this, Rahima made sure she got an education – first because her father helped her enroll in classes as a young girl, and later, by paying her way through an English-learning institute by selling her embroidery and cross-stitching. “I went to school to save my life,” she says, because that was the only way she could see a better future for herself.

While waiting to be considered for resettlement, Rahima got a job as a customer service representative for a solar panel company in Pakistan and could make up to 1,200 calls per shift to potential customers in America. Though she spoke English well, she says different accents and words were hard. “One time,” she remembers, “I spoke with someone and he told me that his electric bill cost ‘a couple dollars.’ I didn’t understand what ‘a couple’ was, so I asked, ‘What exactly do you mean?’ When he explained that it was around $200, I said, ‘Okay – why can’t you just say that?’”

After over a year of being in Pakistan, Rahima found out she would be coming to Minnesota. “My only thought was going to university,” she smiles. “I didn’t know how much money it would cost, and at the time, I thought my passion would be enough.” When it was apparent that it wouldn’t be, Rahima quickly found a job a couple weeks after arrival, set her focus, and now balances two part-time jobs while attending classes at Normandale Community College.

Though she is on the road to achieving her ultimate goal of obtaining a Bachelor’s degree, Rahima acknowledges that the journey is long. There is always something new she doesn’t understand, like the first time someone asked her, “How’s it going?” “I thought, did she mean ‘where am I going?’” And getting mail – “there’s always some new surprise for me,” she laughs.

The hardest thing, though, is the loneliness that often surfaces. “Sometimes, I feel myself a stranger, like I don’t exist here,” Rahima quietly shares. Fortunately, she says, there are people in her life who remind her that she does. Kristin and Janis, two Arrive Ministries volunteers who have befriended Rahima, are her go-to supports. “Kristin tells me, ‘you are a person who belongs here,’ and she always encourages me – she motivates me in a way that makes me get up and do it. Janis helps me live in reality, and not like a fantasy life. She encourages me to work towards a better life.” Rahima has even reached out to people who weren’t supportive of refugees coming into the country, and has listened as they apologize through tears after hearing her story and understanding what it really means to be a refugee.

“When you see someone outside, it’s different than when you see someone inside.”
The Handyman

By Abu Ahmad

I came to Minnesota a year and a half after I was approved to enter the United States as a refugee. My wife and I had been living in Turkey for 26 months, where we went after fleeing the war in Iraq. It was hard to stay in communication with our friends, even those who also went to Turkey, because there are only specific neighborhoods where refugees are allowed to be, and people I knew ended up in different areas than the one we were sent to. If I wanted to visit them, I needed special papers to leave my neighborhood – and those weren’t always provided.

Moving to Minnesota felt a lot like moving to Turkey. Both times, I felt very homesick. Both times, I left behind many things that were very important to me. You see, in Iraq, I earned a two-year degree in car mechanics and was very successful. Even after my injury, which left me paralyzed from the waist down, I continued to work. One time, I changed an entire transmission system by laying down on a mattress and having someone push me under the hoisted vehicle so that I could work on it. I also taught myself how to modify vehicles so I could control the gas and brakes by hand, and did this free of charge for my friends in Iraq who were also paralyzed.

When I found out my flight to Minnesota had been scheduled, I knew I could only bring the most important things with me. I wanted to bring my tools so I could keep working on cars, but they told me the tools were too heavy and that I could buy new ones here, so I left everything behind.

If I had been able to stay in Iraq, I would have become an even better mechanic. But since I had to leave, first for Turkey and then for Minnesota, I could not continue. Now, when I get picked up by Metro Mobility for my doctor appointments, I pay attention to the sounds the vehicles make, and I tell the driver exactly what’s wrong with them. I can tell just by listening.

Sometimes people ask me how I can still be kind given all I have experienced, but it is in my blood to help others and be generous. This has been my experience in Minnesota, too, because unlike other countries, people in America help without being asked. The government, the community, and everyone you meet will offer to do that. My self-esteem is higher here because I feel like I belong.

A Beautiful Future

By Gidhan

Gidhan is a 46 year old Bhutanese refugee from Nepal who came to Minnesota in the spring of 2015 along with his wife and three daughters. The family recalled how after living in the refugee camp for many years they started the process to come and join their family here. There were many steps to the process including multiple medical checks and interviews. After each step, the family would wait several months to see if they had cleared it, and would then wait several more months to see what the next step in the process was.

As Gidhan recalled, “Sometimes we felt anxious, sometimes we think we’re not going to get to America. After two and half years they gave me a sheet of a paper which had a date on it to report to the capitol, Kathmandu, and then a date to travel to the United States. It made me very, very happy! I got a fever at this time, my blood pressure went up, my heart rate, everything raised up because I was so happy. I was so happy at that time thinking our future would be bright, and we would get to see our family. We had a one week notice of when to report to Kathmandu to travel to America.” I was shocked at this – only one week? I asked if he had lots to get in order. He and his family laughed at my question: “Oh no, we didn’t have many things, I think I had one gas cylinder which I gave to my friend, but that’s really all.”

Gidhan went on to explain that in Nepal they lived in a very small bamboo house. “Everything was bamboo,” he exclaimed, “but now here we have a nice big house of our own that we bought, [and] we are very happy. I already spent half of my life in a refugee camp, now America is an opportunity country for us and for our family.”
By The Ali Family

I arrived at the Ali home early in the evening in the middle of January, and like most Minnesotans, we began our conversation by talking about the weather. When a person is born here, s/he learns at an early age all the tricks for dealing with deep snow, ice, and frigid temperatures. But the Ali family is originally from East Africa, so when they arrived, everything about the cold was new to them. Mother Ali shared that one time, the porch leading up to the family’s home had a small patch of ice on it that was causing her and some of her children to slip. She decided that she needed to melt the ice, so she put a large pot of water on the stove, brought it to a boil, and proceeded to pour it on the patch of ice. It initially melted the small patch, but within a few minutes, her entire porch was covered in a thick layer of ice.

Some of the Ali boys then shared about their first day of school in the United States. One of the boys said that he only knew three words: yes, you, and no. One of the other boys said that he only knew the word ‘yes,’ and would use it to respond to everything that was asked of him: “Do you need to go to the bathroom?” Yes. “Time for lunch.” Yes. “Please sit.” Yes. Now, just two years later, both boys are fluent in English and doing very well in school. They say they receive a lot of homework, but enjoy learning and know all their hard work will pay off.

As we continued to talk, one of the Ali boys also said to me, “The sun is switched.” At first I did not understand what he meant, but he then explained that when the family first arrived and wanted to pray, they could not tell which way was east because the sun seemed to be in a different place in the sky. Thankfully, someone gave the family a compass, by which they were able to resolve this problem.

We continued to talk for a couple of hours about the many adjustments and changes that the Ali family made when they first arrived in the United States. As we talked, the family always interjected that throughout it all, they had neighbors who would help them. For example, one of their neighbors showed them how to shovel the driveway and where to put their trash can for pickup. Another cold winter day, a neighbor invited them into her home when they accidently got locked out. They have yet another neighbor who shares his fruits and vegetables from his garden.

One thread ran through their entire story: the Ali family is thankful for the freedoms they have in the United States, and for the kindness shown by friends and neighbors as they have settled into their new home.

Kind neighbors make a big difference to new families in our communities.

Thank you for joining with us and for not turning your back on the millions of displaced people who are looking to us to take action on their behalf.

TO GET INVOLVED: Please visit our Arrive Ministries website at www.arriveministries.org