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REFUGEES BUILDING NEW LIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

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Cover: The Espinosa family from Cuba sits in their New York home. Courtesy of Jay Capers

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Editor, *eJournal USA*
IIP/PUBJ
U.S. Department of State
2200 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20522-0501
USA

E-mail: eJournalUSA@state.gov

About This Issue

This *eJournal USA* not only chronicles lives of desperation and struggle, but also offers examples of friendship and hope. In this issue:

- *a boy is separated from his family and spends his childhood trying to elude the carnage of the Second Sudanese Civil War;*
- *a Cuban family of 10 faces persecution for their political beliefs in their home country;*
- *a young girl flees war and takes an uncertain journey across the Pacific;*
- *a man escapes ethnic violence in Rwanda and subsists on the street and in a refugee camp for 10 years.*

©AP Photo/Ed Ford

The United States welcomes more than half of all refugees who are resettled in a third country, more than all other resettlement countries combined. Shown here is the Statue of Liberty in New York City, a symbol of hope for many newcomers to the United States.

All these people left their homelands and came to the United States as refugees, and all were met by American sponsors who helped them build new lives in the U.S. Through interviews and first-person accounts, our journal tells the stories of refugees who are building new homes and lives in the United States — and of those Americans who guide and help them.

Diversity and plurality are among the United States' defining national characteristics. These national values inspire individual Americans to strengthen the country's social fabric by welcoming and helping integrate refugees into U.S. communities. The resettled refugees in turn enrich American culture as well as the nation's social, economic and legal framework.

The stories and articles in these pages explain the U.S. government's commitment to help refugees and illustrate how that commitment is embodied by thousands of Americans who extend a hand to aid and befriend some of the nation's newest — and bravest — residents.

— *The Editors*

A refugee is a person who:

- has been forced from his or her home;
- has crossed an international border for safety;
- has a well-founded fear of persecution in his or her native country, due to religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

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The United States' Commitment to Refugees

By Eric P. Schwartz, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration

State Department

Assistant Secretary of State Eric P. Schwartz

On March 17th, 2010, the United States celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Refugee Act of 1980, which has proved to be a cornerstone of our international architecture to protect the world's most vulnerable people — refugees. This landmark legislation is a testament to the dedication and passion of the late Senator Edward Kennedy and other members of Congress who insisted on an effective and impartial system to respond to the needs of those displaced by conflict and unable to return home.

The Refugee Act reflects the highest American values and aspirations — of compassion, generosity and leadership in serving vulnerable populations. Moreover, reliance on the support of millions of individual Americans is a fundamental component of the success that the Act has achieved. The U.S. Congress passed the legislation that created the Refugee Act, but it has ultimately been local communities that have helped to safeguard the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program by opening their hearts, homes, and communities to refugees from around the world.

Most refugees have experienced great adversity — seeing their families and communities uprooted, injured or destroyed — and living in highly vulnerable conditions for years or even decades.

The United States has resettled more than 2.5 million refugees since 1980, more than all other resettlement countries combined. Though the resettlement and integration processes are challenging, and many see friends or family members who are overwhelmed by the transition, most of those resettled in the United States ultimately adapt and thrive — an adjustment that requires enormous will, the support of solid communities, and a strong measure of endurance. Among those resettled in the United States since 1980 are Vietnamese and Lao Hmong refugees who now call California home, Iraqis who fled Baghdad and are starting new lives on the shores of Lake Michigan, and Somalis who left the arid East African landscape to restart lives in Minnesota and Maine.

Refugees have resettled in the United States for hundreds of years and have made valuable contributions to the growth and success of our local communities, regional economies, and national institutions. As a nation, we understand that our diversity is our strength. We've seen time and again that our ability to integrate disparate peoples from across the globe is a model for creating a vibrant society, thriving cultural and intellectual communities, and democratic governance based on good citizenship. As a nation, we've made it clear that one of our foreign policy priorities is to support the world's most vulnerable citizens, and we've learned that when you reach out to help another in need, you reap great benefits. ■

Refugee Resettlement in the United States

Source: Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration

©AP Photo/Aaron Favila

Vietnamese refugees in the Philippines listen to a representative from the International Migration Organization (IOM) as they prepare to board a plane for the United States. The U.S. government works with the IOM to help resettle refugees.

The United States is proud of its history of welcoming immigrants and refugees. The U.S. refugee resettlement program reflects the United States' highest values and aspirations. Since 1975, Americans have welcomed almost 3 million refugees from all over the world. Refugees have built new lives, homes and communities in towns and cities in all 50 states.

Resettlement: The Solution For Only A Few

A refugee is someone who has fled from his or her home country and cannot return because he or she has a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. The first step for most refugees is to register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the country to which s/he has fled. UNHCR has the mandate to provide international protection to refugees. UNHCR determines if an individual qualifies as a refugee and, if so, works toward the best possible durable solution for each refugee: safe return to the home country, local integration, or third-country resettlement.

According to UNHCR's latest statistics, there are approximately 10.5 million refugees in the world. The vast majority of these refugees will receive support in the country to which they fled until they can voluntarily and safely return to their home country. A small number of refugees will be allowed to become citizens in the country to which they fled, and an even smaller number — primarily those who are at the highest risk — will be resettled in a third country. While UNHCR reports that less than 1 percent of all refugees are eventually resettled in third countries, the United States welcomes more than half of these refugees, more than all other resettlement countries combined.

U.S. Refugee Admissions Program: Application and Case Processing

When UNHCR — or, rarely, a U.S. Embassy or a specially trained non-governmental organization (NGO) — refers a refugee applicant to the United States for resettlement, the case is first received and processed by an Overseas Processing Entity (OPE). The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) works with international and non-governmental organizations to run eight regional OPEs around the world. Under PRM's guidance, the OPEs process applications of refugees eligible for resettlement in the United States.

Some refugees can start the application process with the OPE without a referral from UNHCR or another

United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is comprised of:

- the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) of the U.S. Department of State;
- the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security;
- the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services;
- ten domestic non-governmental organizations with a total of more than 350 affiliated offices across the United States;
- thousands of private citizens who volunteer their time and skills to help refugees resettle in the United States.

The total processing time varies depending on an applicant's location and other circumstances, but the average time from the initial UNHCR referral to arrival as a refugee in the United States is generally from eight months to one year.

Planning for Refugees' Arrival in the United States

entity. This includes close relatives of refugees already resettled in the United States and refugees who belong to specific groups set forth in statute or identified by the Department of State as being eligible for direct access to the program.

The OPEs collect biographic and other information from the applicants for security screening. The security screening ensures that terrorists and/or criminals do not enter the United States through the refugee program. Officers from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) review all the information that the OPE has collected and also have a face-to-face interview with each refugee applicant before deciding whether to approve him or her for resettlement in the United States.

When a USCIS officer approves a refugee for admission, the next step is a medical screening to identify medical needs and to ensure that people with a contagious disease, such as tuberculosis, do not enter the United States. Finally, the OPE requests a "sponsorship assurance" from a U.S.-based resettlement agency that is experienced in providing assistance to newly arrived refugees. All refugees are offered a brief U.S. cultural orientation course prior to departure for the United States.

Those refugees who receive USCIS approval to resettle in the United States enter the Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). USRAP is a cooperative public-private program made up of a number of participants. The support of millions of Americans is fundamental to the program's success. Though Congress mandated the program, it is local communities that have ensured the success of the resettlement program by welcoming and helping refugees from around the world.

The Department of State works with ten domestic resettlement agencies that have proven knowledge and resources to resettle refugees. Every week, representatives of each of these ten agencies meet near Washington, D.C., to review the biographic information and other case records sent by the OPEs in order to determine where a refugee will be resettled in the United States. During this meeting, the resettlement agencies match the particular needs of each incoming refugee with the specific resources available. If a refugee has relatives in the United States, he or she is likely to be resettled near or with them. Otherwise, the resettlement agency that agrees to "sponsor" the case decides on the best match between a community's resources and the refugee's needs.

The information about the location and the name of the sponsoring agency are communicated back to the originating OPE, which then works with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to bring the refugee to his or her new home. The cost of refugee transportation is provided as a loan which refugees are required to begin repaying after they are established in the United States.

Once in the United States

As stated above, the Department of State has cooperative agreements with ten domestic resettlement agencies to resettle refugees. While some of the agencies have religious affiliations, they are not allowed to proselytize. The standard cooperative agreement between the Department of State and each of the domestic resettlement agencies specifies the goods and services that the agency must provide to each refugee.

©AP Photo/Sayyid Azim

Burundian refugees wave goodbye as they leave Tanzania for new homes in the United States.

All together, the ten domestic resettlement agencies have about 350 affiliates throughout the United States. Each agency headquarters stays in touch with the affiliates to monitor the resources (e.g., interpreters who speak various languages, the size and special features of available housing, the availability of schools with special services, medical care, English classes, counseling, etc.) that each affiliate's community can offer.

As the cooperative agreement requires, all refugees are met at the airport upon arrival in the United States by someone from the sponsoring resettlement affiliate and/or a family member or friend. They are taken to their apartment, which has furnishings, appliances, climate-appropriate clothing and some of the food typical of the refugee's culture. Shortly after arrival, refugees are helped to start their lives in the United States. This includes applying for a social security card, registering children in school, learning how to reach and use shopping facilities, arranging medical appointments and connecting with social or language services.

The Department of State's Reception and Placement program provides assistance for refugees to settle in the United States. It supplies resettlement agencies a one-time sum of $1,800 per refugee to defray a refugee's costs during the first few weeks. Most of these funds go toward the refugees' rent, furniture, food and clothing, as well as to pay for agency staff salaries, office space and other resettlement-related expenses that are not donated or provided by volunteers.

Though the Department of State's Reception and Placement program is limited to the first weeks after arrival, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement works through the states and non-governmental organizations to provide longer-term cash and medical assistance, as well as language and social services.

Refugees receive work authorization cards and are encouraged to become employed as soon as possible. Based on years of experience, the U.S. refugee resettlement program has found that people learn English and begin to function comfortably much faster if they start work soon after arrival. Most refugees begin in entry-level jobs, even if they have high-level skills or education. With time, many, if not most, refugees move ahead professionally and find both success and satisfaction in the United States.

After one year, refugees are expected to apply for permanent residence (commonly referred to as a green card) and, after five years in the United States, a refugee is eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship. ■

U.S. Resettlement Agencies

- Church World Service
- Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society
- Ethiopian Community Development Council
- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
- Bureau of Refugee Programs
- International Rescue Committee
- Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service
- U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
- U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
- World Relief

Thirty Years of the Refugee Act of 1980

By Doris Meissner

© AP Photo/Adam Madel

Since passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, more than 3 million refugees and asylum-seekers have come to the United States. Here, an Albanian family from Kosovo registers for resettlement in the United States.

Doris Meissner served as Commissioner of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service from 1993 to 2000 and as a senior official in the U.S. Department of Justice from 1973 to 1986. She is presently a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.

The Refugee Act of 1980 has made it possible for more than 3 million people to find protection and resettlement in the United States. By establishing the legal basis through which individuals can secure refugee or asylum status, the Act has extended the nation's welcoming hand to refugees and asylum-seekers worldwide.*

The Act signaled a fundamental re-thinking of the way the United States fulfills its longstanding commitment to principles of international human rights and refugee relief. In spearheading its passage, the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy helped complete an overhaul of immigration law and policy begun by his brother, President John F. Kennedy, in 1963. The Refugee Act built upon the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson that had ended 40 years of quotas based on national origin and opened the United States to immigrants from all parts of the world.

For 15 years after the adoption of the 1965 amendments, U.S. law continued to limit refugee admissions to those escaping communism or

Credit: © AP Images/Scott Applewhite

Senator Edward M. Kennedy addresses a U.S. Senate committee on refugee policy in 1985.

repression in Middle Eastern countries. The Refugee Act of 1980 completed the overhaul, allowing for historic levels of immigration and refugee resettlement leading some to call the United States the "first universal nation." The Act:

- adopted the international definition of a refugee established by the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as someone who is unable to return to his or her country because of a "well-founded fear of persecution" based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a social group;
- replaced *ad hoc* responses to refugee emergencies with a systematic process for annually reviewing and adjusting refugee admissions ceilings;
- authorized the granting of refugee status to individuals who are already present in the United States under a legal designation known as political asylum;
- provided for resettlement assistance — both monetary and through support for sponsorships — to newly arrived refugees to help them rebuild their lives and start anew.

Within weeks of its passage, the provisions of the 1980 act were put to the test.

Between April and October 1980, a boatlift from Mariel, Cuba, brought 125,000 asylum-seekers to Florida's shores. The boatlift represented the first significant asylum emergency the United States had experienced on its own territory. Before 1980, only those already approved for admission from abroad were eligible to come to the United States as refugees.

Mariel was followed by successive waves of asylum-seekers from Central American countries plagued by long-running civil conflicts. The U.S. response was initially underfunded and fragmented. However, in the early 1990s the United States re-designed its asylum process and established a new system that has proven timely and responsive, as well as fair and impartial. As a result, the United States now grants political asylum to people from more than 105 countries each year.

Likewise, U.S. overseas refugee admissions programs have been transformed. In the 1980s these programs served primarily refugees from the former Soviet Union and Southeast Asia. Today U.S. admissions programs include a much wider range of refugee populations. The programs work in conjunction with key international humanitarian institutions, such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and other countries that share the U.S.'s commitment to refugees, for example Canada and Norway. As a result, the United States now resettles refugees from more than 65 countries and provides relief and assistance for refugee and displaced populations around the world. Each new refugee group expands U.S. diversity and enriches American culture.

While immigration has often been controversial, the U.S. refugee and asylum system is widely accepted as a success. By affirming core principles of international human rights and refugee protection within a legal framework that allows for flexibility to meet new and changing needs, the Refugee Act of 1980 has advanced the United States' commitment to providing safety to many of the world's most vulnerable people. As a result millions — from Somalia to Kosovo to Iraq — have found welcome and hope in the United States. ■

** Refugees receive permission to enter the U.S. from another country, while asylum-seekers arrive without prior screening and apply for political asylum upon entry into the country.*

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

No Longer Running for His Life

One of Sudan's "Lost Boys" Helps Recently Arrived Refugees Settle in His New Homeland

Courtesy of Julie Denesha

Adier Deng was forced to leave his home in South Sudan at the age of four and spent his childhood on the run and in a refugee camp until resettling in the United States in 2000.

Adier Deng fled his home in South Sudan at the age of four in 1989 during the Second Sudanese Civil War. He was separated from his family, who now lives in a refugee camp in Uganda. Deng's mother died while on the way to the camp.

After an arduous journey to Ethiopia and to a refugee camp in Kenya, Adier was resettled in the United States at the age of 15. Now, already having earned a Masters in Business Administration, Adier is in law school and also works as a Human Rights Officer at the Diocese of Kansas City–St. Joseph, helping newly arrived refugees.

Question: Why did you leave your home in South Sudan?
Adier: I left my home in Sudan because of the war that took place since the '80s between Northern Sudan and Southern Sudan. I had to escape for safety; we were chased out of our villages when I was 4 years old and had to flee to Ethiopia.

Q: Were you with your family when you left Sudan?
Adier: [I was] not [with] my family. My family [was] in the village and I worked in the cattle camp at the time. The cattle camp and the village were attacked separately and we were forced to flee to different directions. My parents [fled] south towards Uganda and I [fled towards] Ethiopia. So I was separated [from] them. I was with my cousin; he was 11 years old at the time.

Q: How long did it take for you and your cousin to get from Sudan to Ethiopia?
Adier: It took us about three months to go there because we had to cross a desert and then from there, we went to the border, which took us a long time because it was a jungle. It was almost 3,000 miles to go to Ethiopia so it took us almost three months to go there.

Q: What happened when you got to Ethiopia?
Adier: When we got to Ethiopia, we crossed the Gila River, [which] is one of the most dangerous and highly

© AP Photo

Deng was one of Sudan's "Lost Boys," the more than 27,000 Southern Sudanese boys who were driven out of their homes during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). Shown here in 1989, displaced Southern Sudanese live in a camp outside of the war zone in order to escape the violence.

infested rivers in Ethiopia. And I would say maybe in Africa, at large. A lot of our guys lost their lives in the waters, either eaten by crocodiles or drowned. We had to cross that river [to get to] Ethiopia. And then we just had to settle down there and build our own huts by ourselves. At the time, there was no U.N. [United Nations]. There was no one around. We were in the jungle. And we are far away from the cities in Ethiopia — that really [made] it a little difficult for us.

Q: What happened after you were in Ethiopia?
Adier: A war broke out in Ethiopia and then no one wanted us to be there. So we were actually chased back at gunpoint to Sudan and we had to cross the same river again. This time, we were heading to Kenya. This was about 2,000 miles from where we were at the river. [Going] from Sudan to Ethiopia and then to Kenya took almost a year.

Q: How did you survive?
Adier: Basically, it was through my cousin and also the faith that I [had] and the hope. Those were the ones that I was relying on. I was still hoping that things would get better one day; the war is going to be over and I will [be able] to return back to my homeland.

And at the same time, I had to eat what everyone was eating — either being leaves or anything. [I tried not to] think about my parents because the minute [I would] do that, I would lose hope. [I was] just hoping that I will make it. That's what makes [hope] alive. Just pray — things like that.

Q: What happened when you arrived in Kenya?
Adier: We started living in Kenya by the border [with Ethiopia], a place called Lokichoggio. Then we were taken to the northern side of Kenya. There were no buildings. There was no water, just dry land. We [were] now in a place called Kakuma Refugee Camp. [Eventually] the Red Cross and UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] started to bring in some supplies, books, pencils, some things like that.

Q: What was life like in the refugee camp?
Adier: When I arrived in the refugee camp I was turning five years old. The life [in the camp] was not good. It was terrible. In the camp, we didn't have enough [for] basic needs. At the same time, we wanted to go to school. [But] if you don't have anything to eat, there's no way that you can go to school. And there was a lot of sickness. Basically all of the life was not good in the refugee camp and I was in the camp for nine and a half years.

Q: Where did you want to resettle?
Adier: I wanted to go to the U.S. That was the best place possible. I wanted to come to America so that I can go to school and someday contribute to the peace process in Sudan.

Q: When did you and your cousin leave Kenya for the United States.?
Adier: It was in November 2000 and I was turning 15.

Q: Who sponsored you?
Adier: I was sponsored by Bethany Christian Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They located a foster family [for

me and] I stayed with them until I turned 18. They were really good. They were like parents.

Q: Describe your arrival in the United States.
Adier: It was wintertime and I [hadn't] [experienced] winter before. I'm talking about snow. It was real cold. They were holding my name on a board, I came out and then I saw my name and I came to them and I introduced myself and I was the right person that they were waiting for and they had a big jacket and some other clothes to wear. I had to put those on and we went to the car and then we went home. I was real excited to meet them.

Q: How was it adjusting to life in the United States?
Adier: It was really difficult to get adjusted. Basically, the culture is different. [I had] culture shock. I had to get used to American food, to the winters, and going to new schools. When I arrived I could understand English but I [could not] really speak it. So it was a difficult time for me to really put all of this together.

Q: How did you finally get more adjusted to your new life?
Adier: Well, it started with being able to settle down. Just being able to find your niche and what you want to do and getting advice. There were Bethany Christian Services programs, meetings and playing some sports and things like that. [I got] friends, it was a good experience. But at the same time, yeah, you have to have in mind why — the reason that brought you to America. And certainly, those are the reasons that would keep you going.

Q: And what did you want to do?
Adier: Basically, what I wanted to do was to finish education. That was number one — that was my priority. Number two was to work at an organization that helps people from Third World countries. Or if I don't find something like that, then I will have to found one myself.

Q: After so many years of being on the run, how did it feel to finally have a stable home?
Adier: It feels good. The security is good over here. At the same time, you still have that feeling that…you want to do something [for] the place that you left. I still feel that I have to work harder. I have to help in some way.

Q: What was high school like?
Adier: High school was really good — it was great. I [loved] it.

Q: What were some things that you loved about it?
Adier: Having a lot of friends and at the same time, the instruction, the teachers, were really, really good. I [loved] playing with kids, going to classes and going out. Life was good. It was really good.

Q: What did you do after high school?
Adier: After high school, I went to college. I went to Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I finished my bachelor's degree in 2007. After that, I studied business at John F. Kennedy University and I finished my MBA in 2008.

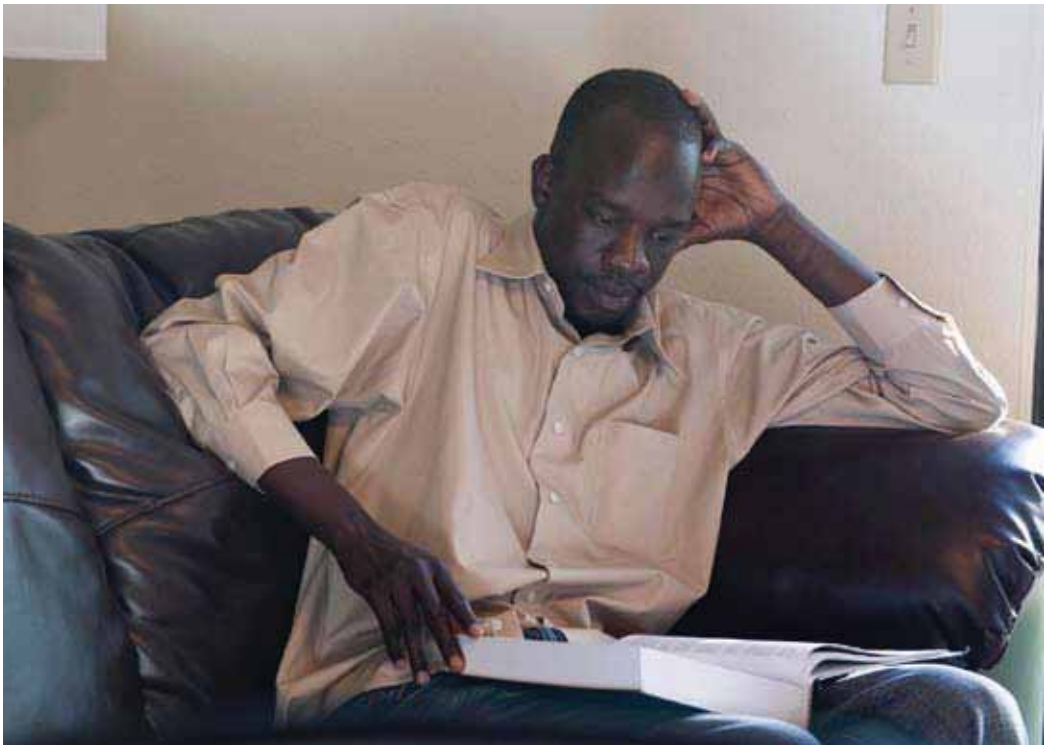
Q: What are you doing now?
Adier: Now, I'm in law school at Concord Law School. And that feels good. Law school is not simple. It is expensive and takes time. But it's going well so far.

Q: While you are in law school you are also working. Where do you work?
Adier: I'm working at the Diocese of Kansas City–St. Joseph and I'm Human Rights Officer. I find jobs for refugees. Given the kind of situation [economic recession] that we're in now, finding a job is a big deal for immigrants. I like what I'm doing. And definitely, it's the kind of things that I had been through since I came to America. And I have the motivation. I like what I do.

Q: How do you think your background as a refugee has helped you in your job now?
Adier: It has helped me a lot because basically, I find myself wearing two lenses. One is being a refugee — I have been in your shoes, I've been there. And another thing is being an American. So you have to put these two things together so that you can deliver a good [service]. And at the same time, you have to have some strategic vision to do good things.

[I] know exactly what to do because my mind just flashes back. [For example], if a client called me and said, "Hey, I'm supposed to be going to work today and I don't have a ride," my mind would flash back. I was that person not long ago and I know how they feel.

Q: Do you feel at home in the United States?
Adier: Where you are is basically your home. I feel at home [in the U.S.]. Here, I'm going to school. I have a job and I have my apartment. And I have a lot of networks, a lot of friends. I know the system in the U.S. And I know how to do my things by myself. I got used to the American ways of doing things.



Courtesy of Julie Denesha

Deng goes to law school while working as a Human Rights Officer at the Diocese of Kansas City–St. Joseph and uses his background to help newly arrived refugees to the United States.

Q: How do you identify yourself?
Adier: (Chuckles) I'm still both [Sudanese and American]. Well, I am an American citizen so I am an American. That's number one. Either domestically or citizenship-wise, I am an American. Number two, I'm still a Sudanese because I am originally from Sudan.

And I still — I'm forming both cultures — American culture and the Sudanese culture as well. That's a part of the culture that's not going to go away. So I have these two things still going on, running on. I still speak my language, which is good. And I'm now talking in English, which is really another good thing. So I'm in two worlds. But again, I am in America. It's good keeping your identity. At the same time, you don't need to reject a new system that you [are] introduced into.

Q: How did you feel on the day you became a citizen?
Adier: I felt really good. I was happy to do it. I had stayed here for a long time and it was time to become a citizen. So [embracing] my new culture and my new country was really good. And I wanted to do that.

Q: How did you achieve so much in such a short time?
Adier: I think, the thing that you have to remember is make sure you don't lose your vision. And those were the visions, the objectives that I set aside for myself. It was harder going there. But at the same time, the way that I've done it is to make sure you're studying how to achieve things. You have to plan, then you have to prepare yourself for it, and then you have to proceed without being instructed by other actors in the environment or in the community. So those are the ways to approaching it and that's how I approached them: not [to] lose your vision. And then you have to know how to go about it. A lot of people don't share those kind of visions or get lost somehow on the way. But again, it's a personal way of doing things. ■

To hear excerpts from Adier's interview, please visit *http://www.america.gov/refugees.html*

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Afghan-American Helps Cuban Family Achieve Homeownership, Economic Security in the United States

Courtesy of Jay Capers

Rogelio Espinosa (front) poses with (from left to right) his daughter, Yaniuris; wife, Yaneisy Sosa; son, Osvaldo; mother, Margarita Cepero; brother-in-law, Daniel Hernandez; and niece, Chanaya Hernandez, in their Rochester, New York home. The family settled in Rochester from Cuba in 2005.

By Rogelio Espinosa
Translated from Spanish by the U.S. Department of State

The Espinosa Family

My name is Rogelio Espinosa. My family and I are political refugees from the Municipality of Florida in Camagüey Province, Cuba. I will start by telling you why we came to this wonderful country, which welcomed us with open arms. My father, Rogelio A. Espinosa Romo, was imprisoned in a concentration camp, which the Communist Government of Cuba calls the Youth Labor Army [Ejército Juvenil del Trabajo], but is nothing more than a prison for people who oppose the system.

Our entire family of 10 arrived in Miami, Florida, in September 2005. We spent one day there taking care of paperwork and other things, and the next day we left for Rochester, New York. When we got there, Mr. Ali Nadir was waiting for us. He introduced himself very formally

Courtesy of Jay Capers

As an outreach worker with the CFC, Ali Nadir helped many refugees adapt to their new lives.

Ali Nadir

I have worked with refugees and incoming immigrants to the United States since my childhood. As the son of an immigrant from Kabul, Afghanistan, I spent much of my youth assisting other Afghan families that had fled to the United States to escape the war during the 1980s. My family's home in upstate New York served as a transition house for countless Afghan families and individuals seeking to escape the conflict and avoid persecution in their home country. Our dinner table, bedrooms, and basement were all frequently shared with those seeking to find a better life for themselves and their

and explained that he had been selected by the Catholic Family Center (CFC), the organization that deals with political refugee cases, because he speaks our language, Spanish. After that we had a very pleasant and friendly conversation. We had been worried about our arrival to a country so completely different from our own. Mr. Nadir took us to our temporary home. The apartments were already set up with beds, food and everything that we would need for the time we stayed there. Little by little, he explained how things work in this country and what the CFC would do for us so that we could begin the settlement process, which is very difficult for elderly people like my mother, father and grandmother, who have lived almost their entire lives in Cuba. The CFC, along with our new caseworker Ali Nadir, took care of processing all of our official paperwork. They also familiarized us with the relevant social institutions so we could understand U.S. laws, particularly New York State laws, and get all of our refugee benefits. Mr. Ali Nadir also took us to all of our medical and other appointments and showed us how to become independent and work with the system. Everything was new for us and completely different from where we come from.

I should mention that the CFC also provided free English classes and courses on how to establish good credit so we could better adapt to life in the United States Mr. Ali Nadir explained the Match Grant program, which would provide us with money under the condition that we would start working as soon as possible in the United States. He also explained the importance of holding a stable job in this country and how to save money and pay bills. Without his help and generosity we would not have been able to get settled, feel secure and attain the American dream. Thanks to all of his advice and guidance, which we still follow today, we have good credit and we bought a house, which is going wonderfully.

Homeownership is one of the most important things in this country and now my family and I are a part of that. We would not have been able to achieve this dream without his help.

I should also mention that the CFC helped us to find work, which is very difficult for people who don't speak the [English] language. They showed us the steps for applying for different types of jobs, which is very important because we had no idea about that.

I would like to say that, in general, the assistance, trust, and professionalism of Mr. Ali Nadir and the CFC were so helpful for me and my family. I am completely

children in America. What always amazed me about the families was how quickly they learned English, began working, and assimilated into their local communities and places of worship in the United States.

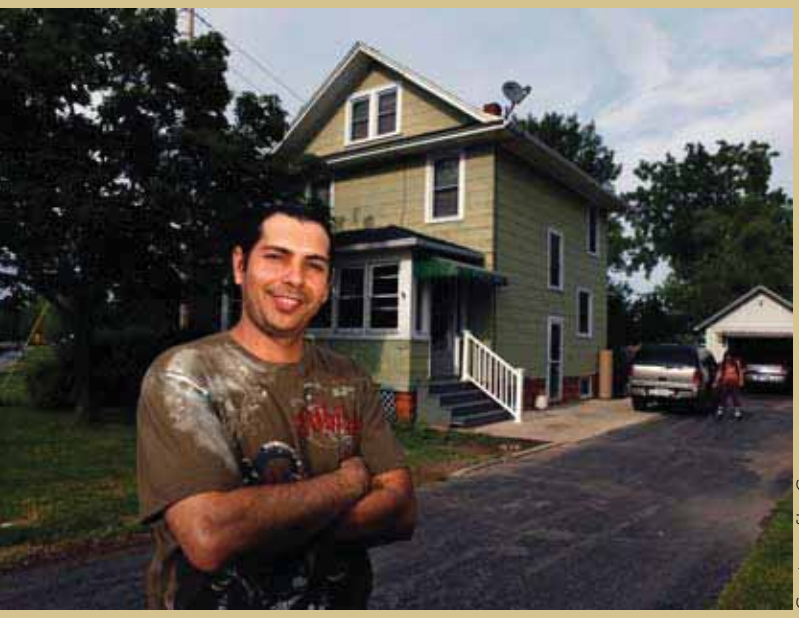
After years of helping members of other families commence their new lives in America, when I was 13 years old, we finally welcomed part of our own family into the country. After spending several years taking refuge in Pakistan to escape the war, my own aunt and uncle, along with their five children, made their way to America. Much as we had done for previous families, we helped them find housing, begin school and English classes, and obtain gainful employment. Sixteen years later, my cousins are successful mothers, PhD students and engineers living healthy and productive lives in the United States.

After graduating from college, I decided to build upon my childhood experiences and once again assist refugees coming to the United States. Upon returning to my home city of Rochester, New York, I discovered the Catholic Family Center Refugee Resettlement agency (CFC). Everything about the agency amazed me — the diverse range of refugees it assisted, the scope of services it provided, and the strong relationships the agency and its employees formed with their clients. Most importantly, I saw the positive and tangible impact that CFC and its employees had on people's lives.

When the CFC hired me as an Outreach Worker, one of my first cases was the Espinosa family from Cuba. The Espinosas, 10 in all, were originally approved for refugee status because of the past imprisonment and subsequent work-camp interment of Rogelio A. Espinosa Romo, the patriarch of the family, by Fidel Castro's government. Not only was the family one of my first CFC cases, it was also one of the largest I worked with during my time at the agency.

The size of the family, of six adults and four children, presented unique challenges. CFC's standard resettlement process included providing furnished housing, access to social and health services, seasonal clothing and household items, support with child school enrollment, assistance with the immigration and legal adjustment process, and employment placement. With a family of 10, however, routine appointments such as applying for Social Security cards or getting tuberculosis vaccinations proved to be formidable tasks.

Despite the delays and setbacks that sometimes accompanied the resettlement process, the Espinosa



Courtesy of Jay Capers

Rogelio stands outside of his home. The family worked hard to save money and earn good credit in order to buy the house.

certain that without their help we wouldn't be where we are today, completely integrated into the society and the system. We continue to follow Ali's advice, which was very professional and educational. Even at his young age he had much experience. Without this we would not have reached our goal. After almost five years in the United States, he still keeps in touch with us to see how the family is doing and how things are going for us. My family and I, and friends in the same situation as us, have never had any personal or professional problem with Ali or the CFC.

These organizations and people should never stop doing what they are doing. Many people from around the world come here under the same circumstances as my family and me. It is nice to know that professionals like Mr. Ali Nadir and government [sic] institutions like the CFC will take care of you and give you all of their unconditional support to make your stay and your settlement in the United States the best and most positive experience possible.

Thank you to the U.S. Government, through the Catholic Family Center and especially to Mr. Ali Nadir, for all of the sincere, professional, and unconditional support. We will be forever grateful for everything you have done for our family. ■

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family consistently demonstrated patience, perseverance and determination to succeed in their new life in the United States. With the help of the CFC, within six months the family achieved complete self-sufficiency and successfully adjusted to a life in the United States. Those able to work were successfully employed and financially independent, the children were enrolled in school and were gradually learning English, and the family even managed to purchase their first car.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the Espinosas' resettlement in the United States was not their own success, but how fast they incorporated themselves into the community of established immigrants in Rochester and began regularly to help other incoming refugees. In order to provide the maximum assistance possible, the CFC cooperates with a network of volunteers, religious groups and the local diaspora in the Rochester area. The Espinosas quickly became part of that local network. They frequently welcomed other new Cuban families to Rochester, selflessly providing home-cooked meals, temporary lodging and assistance with transportation. The Espinosas were intent on returning the same measure of kindness and generosity that was shown to them when they were new arrivals.

Today, less than four years after arriving in the United States, the Espinosa family is a perfect example of how the resettlement process is supposed to work. With the support provided by the CFC during their first few months in the United States, they now own their own home, are financially independent and have fully adjusted to life in the United States. Their children, now fluent in English, excel in school, and will have the opportunity to attend college if they choose. Like many of the Afghan families I met as a child, they were welcomed to the United States with the chance for a new life, and they have taken full advantage of the opportunity. ■

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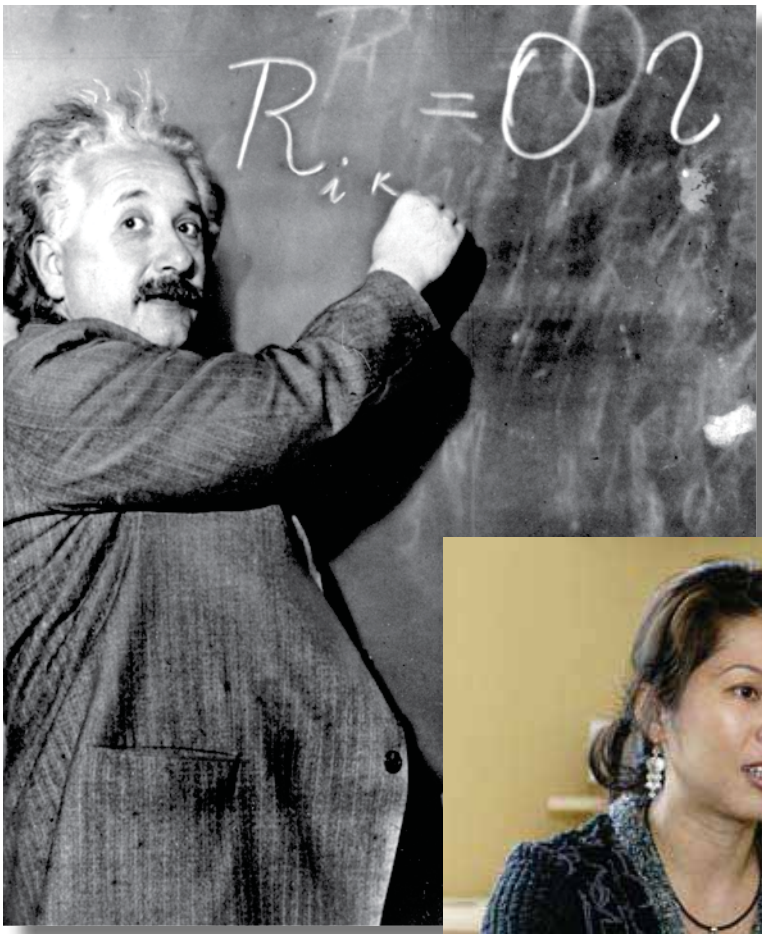
Famous (and Not-So-Famous) Refugees Making a Difference

Albert Einstein
One of the world's greatest scientific minds, Einstein won prestige and acclaim for his discoveries, including the theory of relativity. In 1921, Einstein won the Nobel Prize in Physics. In the 1930s, when the Nazis came to power in Einstein's home country of Germany, Einstein faced anti-Semitism and persecution and fled to the United States, taking a teaching position at Princeton University. Einstein lobbied vigorously for the protection of German Jews and remained in the United States until his death in 1955.

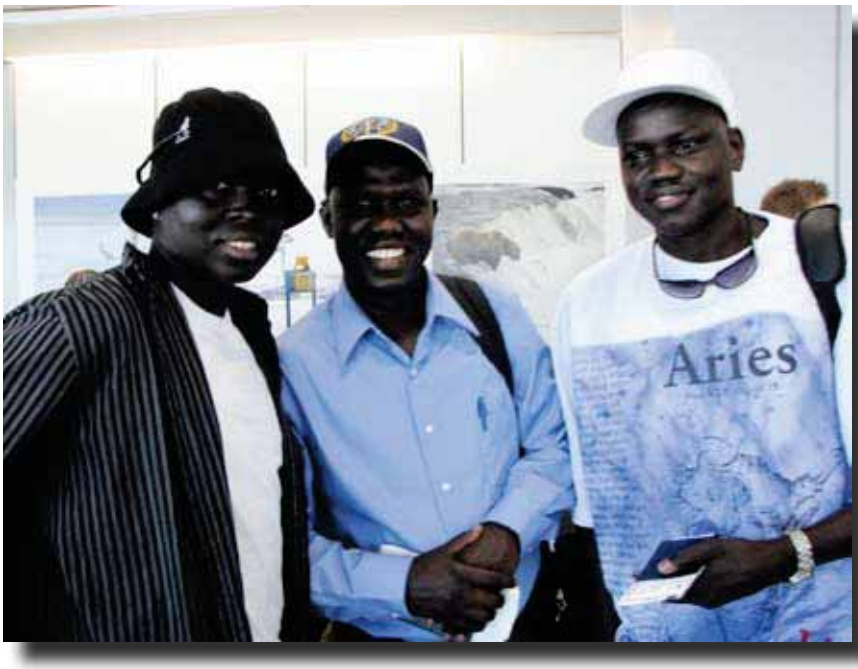


© AP Photo

Loung Ung
In 1975, when Ung was five years old, the Khmer Rouge overthrew the Cambodian government. Ung and her family were forced to leave their home in the capital, Phnom Penh, on a death march through Cambodia. Ung was trained as a child soldier by the Khmer Rouge but managed to escape the country with some relatives and went to a refugee camp in Thailand. Ung was later resettled to the United States and after college she became an author and activist for human rights in Cambodia. Ung is also a spokesperson for the USA Campaign for a Landmine Free World.

© AP Photo/Ron Schwane

Refugees often face challenges when resettling in a new country, but many are able to overcome these obstacles. Here are some notable examples of famous (and not-so-famous) refugees who resettled in the United States, went on to achieve success and have made a difference in their local communities and beyond.



Courtesy of David Morse, www.david-morse.com

Gabriel Bol Deng (center), Garang Mayuol (right) and Koor Garang (left)

As young children in 1987, Deng, Mayuol and Garang were forced to leave their homes in South Sudan during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). Part of the "Lost Boys" — the more than 27,000 South Sudanese boys who were displaced — the three fled to a refugee camp in Ethiopia. From there they went to a camp in Kenya and arrived in the United States in 2001. Individually the three have raised money to help bring better healthcare and education to villages in South Sudan. In 2007 they returned to South Sudan as part of a documentary film, *Rebuilding Hope*.

Gloria Estefan

As a baby, Estefan and her family fled Cuba following the Cuban Revolution and resettled in Miami. Estefan went on to become a successful singer with more than 90 million albums sold worldwide. She has won five Grammy Awards and is referred to as the "Queen of Latin Pop."

© AP Photo/David J. Phillip

© AP Photo/Frank Franklin II

Wyclef Jean

At the age of nine, Jean and his family fled Haiti for the United States, eventually settling in New Jersey. Jean was a member of the Fugees (taken from the word "refugees"), a popular and critically acclaimed hip hop group. Jean has since gone on to have a successful solo music career and is an advocate for development in Haiti.

Roberto Suarez

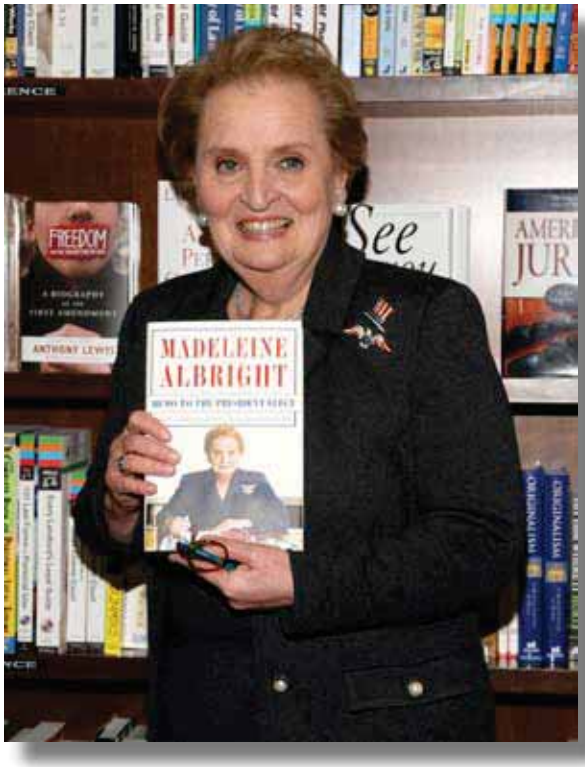
At the age of 33, Suarez left his native Cuba after Fidel Castro seized power and came to the United States He worked in the mailroom of the newspaper, the *Miami Herald*, for minimum wage. He rose through the ranks to eventually become the president of the *Miami Herald* and went on to found the Spanish-language paper, *El Nuevo Herald*. Suarez was an active voice in South Florida's Hispanic community as well as in the field of journalism.

Courtesy of Jeep Hunter, The Charlotte Observer

© AP Photo/Alex Brandon

Anh "Joseph" Cao

Cao was born in Vietnam in 1967. His father was an officer in the South Vietnamese Army and was imprisoned by the North Vietnamese. In 1975, Cao and two of his siblings escaped to the United States and settled in New Orleans. After college Cao became an advocate for refugees, eventually earning a law degree. In 2008, he was elected as a U.S. representative from Louisiana, the first Vietnamese-American elected to the U.S. Congress.



© Jason Kempin/Wire Image

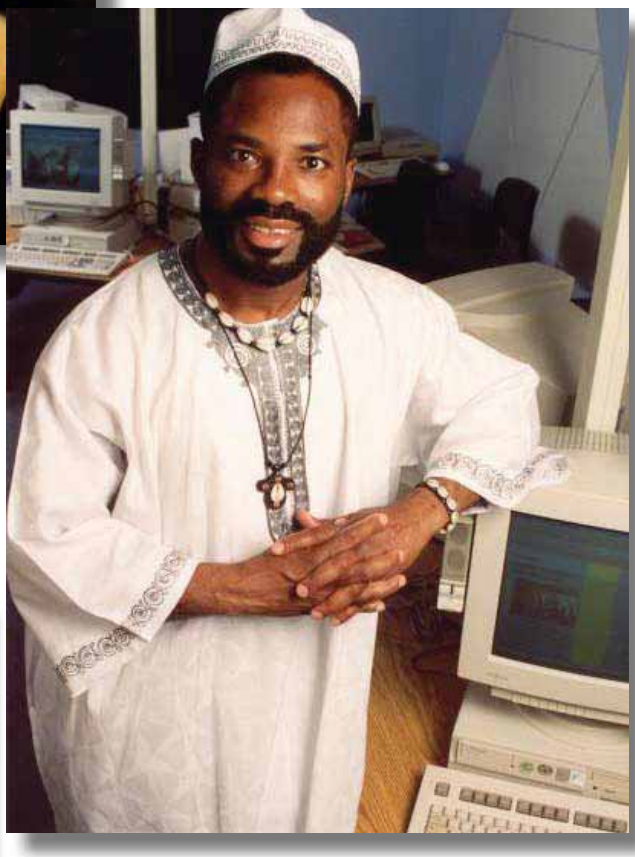
Madeleine Korbel Albright

Born in what is now the Czech Republic, Albright and her family fled to the United States in 1948 when communists took over the government. The family settled in Denver, Colorado. Albright went to Wellesley College and got involved in politics. In 1997, Albright became the first female Secretary of State and the highest-ranking woman in U.S. government at the time.

Courtesy of The Miami Herald, 2010

Ivonne Cuesta

In 1980, at the age of seven, Cuesta and her family were part of the Mariel boatlift, when 125,000 people left Cuba for Miami. Cuesta went on to become an assistant public defender in Florida's Miami-Dade County. She is now under consideration to become a Miami-Dade judge. If selected, Cuesta would become the first sitting Miami-Dade judge from the Mariel boatlift.



Courtesy of emeagwali.com

Philip Emeagwali

Emeagwali, who grew up in Nigeria, is a member of the Ibo ethnic group. In 1966, the Biafran Civil War erupted between the Nigerian central government and the Ibo population in the south. During the war, Emeagwali spent three years in a refugee camp. In 1974, Emeagwali came to the United States and later graduated with degrees in Mathematics; Civil, Coastal and Marine Engineering; and Computer Science. Emeagwali's advances in Computer Engineering earned him the prestigious Gordon Bell Prize in Computer Science in 1989.

© AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews

Li Lu

After participating in the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, Li left Beijing for Hong Kong and made his way to the United States, where he enrolled in Columbia University in New York. In 1996, Li became the first person in the school's history to graduate with three separate degrees in a single day, having simultaneously earned undergraduate, law and business degrees. Li became a successful investment banker and serves on the Reebok Human Rights Award board of advisors.

"They Just Have Good Hearts"

Two Families Recount Their Pennsylvania Welcome

Two Meskhetian Turkish families from Georgia and Uzbekistan transited through Russia and were resettled in Pennsylvania. Arriving in the United States in 2005 and 2006, both families received support from the Upper Dublin Lutheran Church in Ambler, Pennsylvania, and from neighbors.

Ayvos and Elmira Kapitanov came to the United States with their children and Ayvos's parents and siblings, including sister Khalida.

Sonamzhon Kapitanova settled in the United States with her husband and four children, including daughter Saida.

Courtesy of John Berry

Sonamzhon Kapitanova, Saida Kapitanova, Khalida Kapitanov, Ayvos Kapitanov and Elmira Kapitanov (from left to right). The Kapitanova and Kapitanov families are Meskhetian Turks, an ethnic group dispersed throughout Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan.

Question: What happened when you and your family first arrived in the U.S.?
Saida: Well, we were the first ones [from my family]. It was very difficult, very different. My parents were concerned because my dad had no clue where he was going and we had no idea who was going to meet us on the other side. And when we came, we had about 15 people meeting us in the airport at 3 A.M. [from] Upper Dublin Church. That was just one of the greatest nights, I guess.

Q: Who were some of the people who helped you when you first arrived in the U.S.?
Ayvos: The first thing was [that] Mr. and Mrs. Renigar [two neighbors] helped us. They helped us find a house and jobs. They helped us get all the documents.
Saida: [Upper Dublin Church] had rented a house for us. They had food, furniture, everything you can name. [We could] just walk in and live. They provided everything; helped us choose schools, helped us find jobs for my parents, and all kinds of stuff. We had English lessons every night. There [were] a lot of volunteers coming in from all of the churches, or any other place that really wanted to help.

Q: What were some of the hardest things to get adjusted to when you came to the U.S.?
Khalida: Mainly, it was the language and the school. It was the classes. They were kind of different. And the language; it was hard to talk and comprehend. [I overcame this] by studying English more and doing my best.
Sonamzhon: It was [hard at first]. It was hard to speak English. Now, we are happy in America, very happy.

Q: How have you adjusted to your home in the U.S.?
Elmira: I like the United States and I like to live here. People always smile and I can work and study in college. I'm a gardener and I take classes like ESL [English as a Second Language], reading and mathematics.

Q: What do you think of your new home in Pennsylvania?
Ayvos: It's pretty good. It's a good area, not too many people and cars and it's clean. It's fresh and I like it.

Courtesy of John Berry

Saida Kapitanova (left) and her mother, Sonamzhon. Saida was surprised when a police officer came to their home to welcome them to the community.

Q: What is your school like?
Khalida: I'm in middle school. It's a good school and I am in all honors classes. [The students are] friendly. They helped me a lot — (chuckles) — with my English, especially some of the friends that I met in sixth grade.

Q: Before you came to the U.S. what was your image of America?
Sonamzhon: Like American movies, too glamorous. [But reality] is much different.

[Editor's Note: For more on this theme, see the book *Pop Culture versus Real America,* available at *http://www.america.gov/publications/books-content/pop-culture-vs-real-america.html]*

Q: What was something that surprised you about the U.S.?
Saida: [It was] meeting a policeman for the first time — like, at our door, on the second day. We were shocked. We were like, wow, a cop knocking on our door and saying "Welcome," you know?

Q: Were there other examples like that, where random people, strangers came up and helped you or said hello to your family?
Saida: Yeah, we had a lot of nice neighbors. Our landlord was very nice, helped us a lot with furniture and stuff, and people in schools, mostly Upper Dublin Lutheran Church [helped us]. We had a lot of people volunteer and come in. That was really exciting and we were very surprised about [the]...open hearts, [people] want to help. It doesn't matter if they're rich, if they're poor, if — whatever. They just have good hearts. They just want to help you. It doesn't — they don't have any bad feelings towards you, you know?

Q: How do you describe yourself? Do you see yourself as an American? As a Turk?
Elmira: I feel like [I am] American-Turkish. [In the U.S.] I can be American and keep my traditions. We celebrate Turkish holidays and we cook American, Russian and Turkish food.
Khalida: As years pass, I feel more American. [I feel that I am] fitting in. And I still have my [Turkish] culture.

Q: You have been in the U.S. for five years. How do you think you've changed in those five years?
Saida: A lot. I became more Americanized. I got my driver's license. That was exciting.

Q: What are some of the things that you want to achieve? What do you want to be when you grow up?
Khalida: I would like to finish high school and take some psychology classes. That's pretty much it. Go to college, become a psychologist if I can.
Saida: [Now I am in] a primary college, studying business and accounting. I love college. As soon as I graduate, I would like to enroll in university, as soon as I get my associate's degree. ■

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Iraqi Veterinarian's Spirit, Persistence Inspire American Volunteer

Courtesy of Javier Barrera

In February 2009, Mohammed Yousuf (left) came with his family from Iraq to the United States where he met Andrew Masloski (right), a volunteer with the International Rescue Committee..

Mohammed Yousuf

In 2003, I and indeed all Iraqis hoped that the war would end as soon as possible, that Saddam Hussein would fall from power, and that the Iraqi people would enjoy a life free from war, killing and destruction.

In May 2003, I and dozens of other Iraqis who speak English started working as translators with U.S. forces. This was one of the few jobs available after the war. I was proud of my work because I helped communicate the problems and concerns of Iraqis to the U.S. military and the military worked to resolve many of these problems. I then served as a translator with the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and was the intermediary between the Iraqis and embassy officials through translation.

I continued work at the embassy until the end of 2004 when armed militia started attacking U.S. troops and those who worked with them. Many translators were killed, including some of my colleagues. I then started working with the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) in Baghdad until July 2007. I had to leave my beloved Iraq after I received a death threat. I traveled

Andrew Masloski

When I first decided to volunteer with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 2008, I was inspired by the stories I had read in newspapers about people and families fleeing conflict and persecution for a better life in the U.S. I imagined that helping recently arrived refugees to resettle here would be both easy and rewarding. I thought that the work would be straightforward; I thought that I would be able to impart my knowledge of living in the U.S. as a bona fide, born-and-bred American. I thought that the people I would work with would simply ask me questions and I would have all the answers. I imagined that helping a refugee family settle in the U.S. and acclimate to life in America would be like helping a student to pass a test that I had aced a long time ago and without much effort. Only later did I realize how little I understood what I was about to do, and how much I would learn from those who were supposed to be learning from me.

I met Mohammed and his family one day in March of 2009. Before we met I had received an email from the

Yousuf continued

Courtesy of Paul W. Gillespie www.pwgphoto.com

with my family to Syria and stayed there for more than a year and a half waiting for resettlement in the United States.

In February 2009 my wife, our four children (three boys and a girl) and I traveled to the United States to begin a new chapter in our lives. Everything here was new to us and it was hard to get used to even the simplest things such as riding the bus and the metro and booking appointments with doctors. Because I speak English it has been easier for me to understand and interact with Americans than it has been for some other Iraqi refugees who don't know English. I help these refugees with translation when they need it. My family and I faced many challenges in adjusting to our new lives; but the important thing is that we felt secure in the United States.

In America we have received some assistance from the International Rescue Committee (IRC), but the real assistance was from friends and volunteers who helped us a lot by explaining things to us and answering our questions. One IRC volunteer, Andrew Masloski, helped us in the first days of our arrival. He became a close friend and still, to this day, helps me and my family. Andy was one of the first Americans we met when we arrived. He supported us by giving us information on many things like finding doctors. Andy and some friends helped me and my family move to our new apartment. He also helped me to write my resume. When I need to know anything, I ask Andy and he helps me to find the right answer. Sometimes I ask him questions from other Iraqi refugees and he helps me with that as well.

In the early days of resettlement, refugees need correct information to be able to integrate into the new society and Andy and other volunteers help us with many matters such as writing resumes, searching for jobs,

Masloski continued

Courtesy of Paul W. Gillespie www.pwgphoto.com

(Left) Yousuf's sons Abdullah Yahya, 5, Haider Yahya, 7, and Ahmed Yahya, 11, (front, left to right) and Mohammed Yousuf, daughter Rahaf Yahya, 2, and wife Susan Mohammed (back, left to right), outside their Maryland home.

(Top) Yousuf and his wife, Susan, proudly show the green card that recently arrived for their daughter, Rahaf, (not pictured). Yousuf is hopeful that his children will have good lives in the U.S.

IRC containing little more than the names of his family members and their address in a suburb of Washington, D.C. We spent our first meeting getting to know one another. Though I was a complete stranger to the family, they received me with great generosity, offering me juice and pieces of fruit. After I was introduced to everyone, it was my turn to talk. I had already determined in my mind all of the things that Mohammed would want and need to do. He needed an American-style resume; he had to think about getting a driver's license; he needed to know how to look for jobs online. All of these things seemed like obvious first steps to me.

And so I wasn't prepared when one of the first things Mohammed asked me about was how to find local surgeons who would accept the Medicaid insurance that newly arrived refugees in Maryland receive. There was an Iraqi woman Mohammed had met in the United States who was resettled in the same D.C. suburb and had been living with a bullet lodged in her body from before she had left Iraq. He wanted to know how I could help him to help her.

I quickly learned that my idea of the anxieties, concerns and worries of a refugee arriving in the U.S. for the first time were far from the full picture. Of course Mohammed was concerned for his own family;

Yousuf continued

pointing out good places to shop to reduce expenses and helping us know other new things that make our lives easier. Volunteers and friends have helped my family and have given us a lot of moral support.

When I got to America I had a dream that I would have a good job with a good income and that I could support my family. Although I knocked on all doors looking for work I have not yet found a suitable job. The only work I found was as a volunteer helping refugees from Iraq and other nations, but this work was without wages. For now my family's only income is Food Stamps and a cash stipend from the government.

I thought that the IRC would pay our rent for three or four months, as well as provide some material assistance. But they paid only one month. Thankfully, some of our new American friends helped us. With their support we were able to rent a smaller apartment that is more affordable. Without their help, I would not be able to rent this apartment.

Other refugees and I do not want to depend on government aid; we want to work to get an income to be able to give our families a decent life. Suitable work is the solution to problems facing resettled refugees. Even those refugees who do not know English well will be able to improve their language through close contact with English speakers at work.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the U.S. government have helped thousands of refugees resettle in the United States The next step is to find suitable work to help my family and other refugees better integrate into American society. Most Iraqi refugees have university degrees, have experience in various fields and we want to put our skills to good use. Other refugees and I want to be productive and engaged members of U.S. society and I hope that this will happen.

While finding work has been difficult, I think that my children will have opportunities. The education here in the United States is the best. One of my children is in the first grade and he can read and write English because he is in a good school. He has wonderful teachers and they take good care of him. I think that my children will get a good education and that they will have good lives in America. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Masloski continued

he worried about getting a job and providing for his wife and kids. Certainly he was interested in resuming his career as a veterinarian — a career he had to abandon after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. But for Mohammed, it was just as important to help other people in need of assistance as it was to help his own family.

Aside from Mohammed's generosity of spirit and his willingness and desire to help others, his ability to remain hopeful about the future never ceases to amaze me. In addition to coming to the U.S. from a war-torn country where he feared for his life, Mohammed had the ill fortune to arrive here at a time when many Americans were struggling to find jobs during a deep economic recession. The resources available to refugees were designed under the assumption that refugees would find employment and become economically self-sufficient in a matter of months. While it is never easy to come to a new country, find a job, begin to build one's life again, this process was all the more difficult during the economic downturn. Despite this, Mohammed remains optimistic and focused on a better future for himself and his family.

When I volunteered to work with recently arrived refugees I assumed they would simply articulate their needs and that my job would be to supply them with whatever information or assistance they needed. I expected that, in a few months, the people I worked with would be comfortably settled and employed. I also expected to feel a distinct sense of accomplishment. Instead, my relationship with Mohammed and his family has extended beyond just a few months. Instead, progress on basic issues like finding Mohammed a job remains steady but incomplete. Instead, I feel a distinct sense of gratitude for the friendship that has grown between Mohammed and myself, and a deep sense of appreciation for the bravery and courage of people like Mohammed and his family. ■

***Editors' note: For more information on the U.S. Refugee Assistance program in Iraq, visit the U.S. Embassy's website at* http://iraq.usembassy.gov/refugeeidpaffairs.html**

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Interview

Refugee's 10-Year Odyssey Takes Him from Danger, Despair to New Life As Proud Caregiver

Courtesy of Mike Fender

Pictured here with a co-worker, Janvier Tuyishime works as a home health aide with United Home Healthcare and says that having a job "[helped] rebuild my life in the U.S."

Janvier Tuyishime fled his home in Rwanda and began a journey that took him to West Africa and to Belgium before arriving in the United States in 2009. Janvier discusses his ten-year journey, which included homelessness and four years in a refugee camp, and his new life in the United States.

The transcript below combines an interview with Janvier along with text from his emails.

Question: When did you leave Rwanda?
Janvier: I left Rwanda in 1999.

Q: Why did you leave Rwanda?
Janvier: After the genocide in 1994, extremist Hutus fled to the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo]. In 1994, the genocidaires destroyed my house but then I rebuilt it. In 1999, the Hutu genocidaires came back to kill more Tutsis in Rwanda. They came to my house. They forced the doors open of my house, but I jumped through a window and ran away in order to save my life. I left by myself and escaped to Kigali. I never went back.

Q: Where did you go?
Janvier: I went from Kigali to Togo and then went to Belgium. I was in Togo for one year and I was hidden by Togolese friends. I was in Belgium for one month. In Belgium I stayed in a center for illegal immigrants and refugees but I was deported from Belgium.

Q: How did you feel when you were deported?
Janvier: Oh, I felt very, very, very, very, very bad and very sad. It is difficult to describe this situation.

Q: How long were you in Togo and what happened there?
Janvier: I was in Togo for 9 days. When I arrived in Togo the *gendarmerie* [police] arrested me and sent me to prison. They said that I was not a legal immigrant and I was in jail for 9 days.

I was tortured and I slept on the floor in a cell with many people. There was not enough room to lie down to sleep. There were many mosquitoes and when it was raining the rain would come through the window. I could not take a shower and I was not allowed to use a toilet. There was just a bucket and no toilet paper. It was very, very bad. Sometimes the guards slapped me and I had some sort of disease on my skin.

Courtesy of Mike Fender

Tuyishime escaped ethnic violence in his home country, Rwanda, in 1999 at the age of 33 and now lives in Indianapolis, Indiana.

I was only given a little bit of food, just once a day. I was very weak and the *gendarmerie* [police] said that they did not want to take care of me anymore. I was handcuffed, put in a car, and they took me to the border between Togo and Ghana. The officer gave me a paper to sign. It said that if I ever came back to Togo they would arrest me or deport me back to Rwanda. I signed the paper. They took my handcuffs off and sent me over the border to Ghana.

Q: What happened next?
Janvier: [I made my way] to the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] in the capital, Accra. I was homeless and jobless. In May 2002, the UNHCR accepted me in the transit center in Accra. In January 2005, UNHCR moved me to the Krisan Refugee Camp in Ghana. I was there until March 2009.

Q: What was life like in the refugee camp?
Janvier: Life was very bad, there were no facilities. The water was not good to drink and the soil was poor, so we couldn't farm and we couldn't get much to eat. The food that they gave us was not enough and we were very hungry. There was infection and disease. There was despair and the trauma was too high. There were snakes and scorpions that bit people and many more miseries. I lost hope. It is a long and bad story.

Q: Where did you want to go?
Janvier: I liked America and I wanted to go there. America is the land of opportunity and it is the land to restart life and to be free. The nation is very, very great and in America there are many possibilities to regain life and to rebuild. The people in America are very good, generous and welcoming. I knew that and I liked America.

Q: What was the process of coming to the United States like?
Janvier: I got a chance to meet the American people at the U.S. Embassy in Accra and the UNHCR gave them my case file in either 2007 or 2008. In two years it was just interviews, medical check-up, and orientation and after that was departure. The people at the embassy were very great and gave me much support.

Q: How did you feel on the day you left for America?
Janvier: I felt saved. I was very, very happy.

Q: Where did you arrive? Who met you at the airport?
Janvier: I arrived in Indianapolis. The local organization that sponsored me, Exodus Immigration, met me at the airport. They were very fine, nice people.

Q: What is your first memory of life in the United States?
Janvier: It was euphoria. I felt very very happy to be here. I was very most happy.

Q: What did you do after the airport?
Janvier: They brought me to my new residence and they showed me my house. Immediately they led me to the store to buy food.

Q: How did you feel during that first day in your house?
Janvier: I felt I was in paradise.

Q: Did you know any English before you came to the U.S.? Did you have a French translator from Exodus?
Janvier: I knew only a little bit of English. There was someone who spoke French but he used simple English and we tried to understand each other. He made the effort to talk to me and I made the effort to hear from him, so it was not difficult to understand him. Immediately, Exodus took me to English classes. The teachers were experienced, active, and they were good educators.

Q: Did Exodus help you to find a job?
Janvier: Yes, I was working within one month. I worked as a landscaper at a company.

Q: What were some difficulties that you faced?
Janvier: The difficulties were just about the language. The little bit of English that I knew in Africa is different than in the U.S. I had accent and pronunciation problems. Some people talked very fast and to follow them was not easy. I didn't meet any problems with the culture, though, because I am very flexible.

Q: How do you feel about your life now compared to when you first arrived?
Janvier: The difference is now I'm getting some maturity. When I first arrived in America I was new and it is now that I feel that I have rebuilt my life. I was someone when I arrived in America but I feel more someone today. I'm feeling an active part of the nation. I feel brotherhood with the people. I feel that this is my home.

Q: Why do you think that you were able to make this transition and feel a part of America?
Janvier: People greeted me, helped me and I was able to acquire the social life. Americans integrated me into American society. There were very good people who helped me. I was able to get a job and get a Home Health Aide certification because of my skills and because people helped me. I'm feeling very, very, very happy.

Q: Who were some of the people who helped you? How did they welcome you and make you feel at home?
Janvier: There were people from Exodus and some I met at church. Some invited me to their house for dinner and for Christmas and Thanksgiving. Some invited me to social outings and some invited me to discover the countryside of Indiana. Some invited me for church activities. Some visited me in my home and some called me to talk, sent me emails and gave me gifts. They helped me get a job. They helped me rebuild my life. People from Exodus took me to medical and job appointments and driving school.

Q: How do you feel about your life in Indianapolis?
Janvier: I like it very much. It is very sweet. I am very happy. I like American energy, I like people and I like the culture. I like everything in America.

Q: What is your job?
Janvier: My new job is I am a home health aide. I work for United Home Healthcare. I help patients. I like my job very much. I have Certified Nursing Assistant [CNA] certification and a Home Health Aide certification. The staff at United Home Healthcare is very nice. They have a very great humanitarian character. When I applied to United Home Healthcare, through the interview about my life as a newcomer to the U.S., they felt concerned. They wanted to see me starting fast the job in order to rebuild my life in the U.S. And…they were very pleased with the quality of my work and the service I provide to the client. Because of the great job I am doing, the staff supported me and I passed a test and earned another certificate we call "Home Health Aide" [HHA] issued by Indiana State Department of Health. So, I have now two types of certificate: CNA and HHA. The staff is very supportive.

The staff continues to support me to go ahead. They looked for me [to have] the new shift where I can work more hours earning more wage. I will work 12 hours a day, 60 hours a week! Excellent shift if I start! I like it.

Q: Do you feel that you are an American or a Rwandan?
Janvier: I feel more that I am an American. I want to stay forever in America. ■

To hear excerpts from Janvier's interview, please visit *http://www.america.gov/refugees.html*

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Helping Refugees Make a Home in the United States

©AP Images/Dave Weaver

In the state of Nebraska, a woman tutors a Sudanese refugee child in English. The civil war between North and South Sudan caused millions of people to flee their homes and to seek refuge elsewhere.

©AP Images/Mary Ann Chastain

A volunteer serves food to a Somali Bantu refugee at a Christmas dinner in South Carolina. Volunteers host cultural events, introducing refugees to new foods and customs and helping them feel part of their new communities. Refugees reciprocate, sharing their culture and experiences with their new friends.

When refugees arrive in the United States they receive help from resettlement organizations, sponsors, volunteers and neighbors. This support helps refugees begin to feel at home and to rebuild their lives. Shown here are images of refugees receiving help in the United States, making new homes and thriving.

© AP Photo/The Indianapolis Star, Robert Scheer

A community member shows a recently arrived Somali Bantu refugee how to operate the kitchen faucet. Most Bantu refugees were rural farmers in Somalia who fled to refugee camps in Kenya. For many refugees, using U.S.-style household appliances and utilities is a marked change from their previous lives.

©AP Images/The Gazette,Laurie Matanich

A volunteer accompanies an Afghan refugee to the grocery store to discuss the products for sale. Afghan refugees began arriving in the United States after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

© AP Photo/Darron Cummings

Burmese refugees gather at a meeting in the state of Indiana with a staff worker from Exodus Refugee Immigration, a resettlement organization. The staff worker helps explain the forms they need to fill out and how to adjust to their new lives.

© AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast

At Fort Dix, New Jersey, a Kosovar refugee helps other refugees from Kosovo use a computer and surf the Internet for refugee-related sites. In 1999, some 4,000 Kosovar refugees stayed at Fort Dix temporarily while awaiting settlement in other parts of the U.S.

© AP Photo/Steven Senne

A refugee from Burma talks with his foster parents in their Massachusetts home. Many Burmese refugees are ethnically Karen and fled the Burmese military junta. Some spent many years in refugee camps in Thailand before arriving in the U.S.

© AP Photo/Keith Srakocic

A Catholic Charities caseworker shows two refugees how to use the shower and bath in their family's new apartment. The family fled Bhutan for Nepal and was later resettled to the state of Pennsylvania. In 2008, the U.S. offered to resettle 60,000 Bhutanese refugees and began accepting the refugees that same year.

© AP Photo/The Baltimore Examiner, Kristine Buls

A National Geographic photographer works with students at a photo camp in the state of Maryland. The students, Meskhetian Turk refugees, are interested in photography and participate in the Refugee Youth Project at Baltimore City Community College.

©AP Images/The Free Lance-Star, Reza A. Marvashti

A woman in Fredericksburg, Virginia, helps refugees to the area with many tasks, including arranging doctor's appointments and setting up housing. Here she helps a refugee from Liberia apply for a driver's license at the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles. Thousands of Liberian refugees fled the country's 14-year civil war to resettle in the United States.

©AP Images/Paul Sancya

A refugee sponsor and a caseworker meet with an Iraqi refugee family. The sponsor and the caseworker explain the forms necessary to receive medical assistance and to be eligible to work.

Bhutanese Refugee, Classmates Learn English and More on Teacher's Town Tour

Courtesy of Max Bittle

Kapil Dhungel, a refugee from Bhutan, takes a trolley with his English for Speakers of Other Languages class on a field trip around their town of Concord, New Hampshire.

Courtesy of Max Bittle

When she was a graduate student, Johanna Young became motivated to help refugees. Now she teaches English to recently resettled refugees in the United States.

Kapil Dhungel

On July 29, 2009, which was just one month and seven days after my arrival in the USA from a Bhutanese refugee camp in Nepal, I was learning English and discovering my new community. I was in Johanna Young's ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] class under the generous agency Lutheran Social Services. She taught us things that are useful to me and the other resettled refugees. We learned pronunciation and how to write English. Apart from those lessons she took the class on field trips, which were very exciting. When I first arrived in Concord, New Hampshire, everything was new to me and adapting was very challenging. Through the ESOL class and the field trips I got familiar with my new home.

When our teacher took us on the field trips we learned many new things. For example, in Nepal the traffic rules are quite different than here. In Bhutan, the driver sits on the right-hand side and drives on the left but in the United States it is the opposite. In Bhutan you do not have to press a button in order to cross the road, you only have to go to a crosswalk, make sure there is

Johanna Young

It is a warm summer day. I am taking my class of over 20 ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students on a field trip around Concord, New Hampshire. Adult refugees ranging in age from their early 20s to their mid-70s, pencils and papers in hand, search for landmarks to find and check off on their vocabulary worksheets.

The real purpose of the field trip is not just to show them around town but to teach the class how to play baseball. The students, primarily Bhutanese who lived in refugee camps in Nepal for 17 or more years before arriving in the United States, and various refugees from African countries, are game to learn a little about baseball. Most of the women, though, hang back and let the men have a swing. We have learned some simple vocabulary about the game beforehand; words such as "hotdog," "home run," "catch" and "throw." I explain the basic rules, but quickly the game becomes American baseball Bhutanese style. Some know a little about cricket, but not about baseball. Luckily, I have a soft bat and ball because my students throw the ball at the batter to try to

Courtesy of Max Bittle

Young (center) and her ESOL Class.

no traffic and walk across. On the field trip, we walked through the town and learned how to cross the road by pressing the crosswalk button and waiting for the light to change.

As we walked, the class, all 22 students, watched and discussed whatever we saw on the way. Our teacher asked us to read the name of the new thing, and to write down its name and location. After a few minutes we arrived at a restaurant where we bought pizza. We came to know new things and new food. Just after a few steps from the restaurant we found Food Basket and we learned that it was also a shop for food.

After learning a bit about Food Basket we just walked a few steps to the Washington Street Café. It was similar to the tea stalls we have in Bhutan. After that we began walking and reached, on the right-hand side, the Franklin Pierce Law School. We asked our teacher, "What kind of school is it?" She told us that it is a law school and that our children could learn here in the future.

And in front of the law school was a fountain. It was just like a park and I asked the teacher to explain more about it and she did. There was a beautiful pond and we found wild ducks in a flock, which was very big. They were swimming on the pond fearlessly. According to our teacher they were all female ducks! The ducks had become domesticated because people were feeding them breadcrumbs. The ducks reminded me of Bhutan because we have the same kinds of wild ducks in Bhutan.

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tag them out. Those who decide not to take a turn have a good laugh at the others up at bat. On the way back to class, we pass a barbecue at Franklin Pierce Law School. It becomes a teachable moment; now I can show them hotdogs cooking on the grill. One of the cooks greets us and the students all chime in and say "hello."

In addition to learning new vocabulary and something more about their community, the field trips give the students a chance to relax, to have a good laugh, to ask questions and even to look at what people grow in their gardens. For one lesson they are learning about new flora and fauna. "Daffodil!" exclaims one student on a visit to the White Park, pointing to the flower. "That's right!" I reply. "North State Street," another student says reading the street sign on the corner. Their eyes are wide open, taking everything in. In 2005, at the Lutheran Social Services [LSS] World Refugee Day celebration in Manchester, New Hampshire, a Somali Bantu refugee said, "We are like children, learning everything new."

Although my students are not children, many things are new to them. I am their tour guide and as I observe them exploring their environment, I can begin to see what is important and valuable to them and understand better what makes them feel comfortable.

I have taught new Americans — refugees receiving services from LSS — since 2005. However, my interest in the plight of refugees and refugee resettlement goes back further. In the mid 1980s, I first learned the formal definition of a refugee in a History of American Immigration class. It was 1984 and I was pursuing my master's degree in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at Central Connecticut University. In the years to come, a few words from the legal definition lingered: that refugees fled their homes because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.

As a graduate student I taught an ESOL class in which several of my students were refugees, young Hmong villagers from semi-nomadic farming families in the mountains of Laos. With the 1975 victory of the communist Pathet Lao forces in the Laotian Civil War, their lives were imperiled. They escaped across the Mekong River to Thailand, where they lived in refugee camps, before being resettled in the United States by church sponsors in Manchester, Connecticut.

My history professor required that every student conduct a primary research project on an immigrant or refugee group in the state of Connecticut. I felt a sense of responsibility to understand more about Laotian refugees,

Courtesy of Max Bittle

Courtesy of Max Bittle

Courtesy of Max Bittle

YOUNG CONTINUED

especially given my country's involvement in Vietnam and Laos. It was no surprise, then, that my students and their families became my primary subject. I interviewed them and recorded their harrowing stories of escape.

Although I was not destined to work again with refugees until years later, I did not forget those stories of flight and survival. I continued to read news and stories about the Hmong people and other refugee groups. In the meantime, I moved to Manhattan, earned a master's degree in divinity from Union Theological Seminary, and later moved to New Jersey and worked for the Episcopal Diocese of Newark.

In 2005, looking to move from the city to the countryside, my husband and I moved to Concord, New Hampshire. Before we arrived, my sister, a journalist, forwarded me a series of articles about refugee groups resettled in New Hampshire by Lutheran Social Services. I had an M.S. in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and a concern about the plight of refugees so I applied for an ESOL teaching position with Lutheran Social Services. I was hired and started teaching adults in March of 2005.

Since then, I have taught many refugees from many countries, including Liberia, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Iraq, Afghanistan and Croatia. My current students are primarily from Bhutan. Right now I have 30, but at times I have had 75 students at once. I have taught beginners, intermediate English-learners and college-educated students.

In all of my classes I have found that language is best learned by living it and by using it in the real world, by immersing oneself in new surroundings, by making new friendships and by becoming part of a new community. As a teacher I take my students outside the classroom to learn and practice English. Leading field trips is a big part of my job. We visited the local park to teach them how to play baseball and to our State Capitol Building for a tour and to learn about the New Hampshire state government. On the field trips my students and I have also window-shopped in downtown Concord and visited many places.

(Top left) On the field trip, Young (center), points out interesting sites around town to teach new English vocabulary and to help acquaint the students with their new town.

(Center left) Young also teaches American culture in her ESOL class. Here, students learn how to play baseball.

(Bottom left) Young (left) and Dhungel (right) discuss the day's events. For Dhungel and the other students, "our field trips have become a source of education and have helped us learn about our new homes."

DHUNGEL CONTINUED

On the field trip I also met two Americans. They asked me, "Where are all these people going?" I answered him we all are new to America and we are from an ESOL class going on a field trip. Another man asked, "Where are you from?" and I replied, "I am from Bhutan." He asked, "Do you like here?" I told him, "Yes I like very much." I didn't know these people but I felt they were very friendly and good people.

All of the students were very excited and enthusiastic to learn about the different sites on the field trip. One of my friends told the teacher that these kinds of field trips are very useful to us because they help us know more about the town. He further added that he saw many things like houses for rent and different types of shops and restaurants, which is very important information for us. I also feel that the field trips are very important. Most of the students like the field trips and view them very positively.

Our field trips have become a source of education and have helped us learn about our new homes. ■

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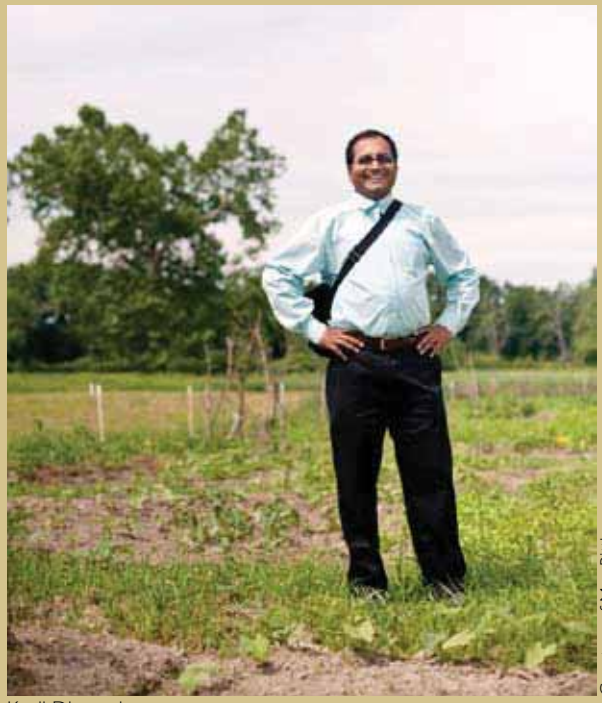

Courtesy of Max Bittle

Kapil Dhungel.

YOUNG CONTINUED

including the public radio station, the supermarket, the bookstore, an outdoor market, the bus station and the New Hampshire Museum. On one trip to a park, I asked volunteers from the class to document the trip so that we could later write a story about the trip and include photos. An intermediate student, Kapil Dhungel, was the reporter for the day. Another student volunteered to be the photographer. The field trips helped the students learn English and become accustomed to and better integrated in their new homes.

Helping the students find a new sense of place has been a rewarding experience. They come, often a bit bewildered, having been uprooted more than once. At first they are disoriented until they learn more about their neighbors, fellow classmates and new surroundings — and as more established Americans learn more about them. In time, most refugees begin to feel at home. On our field trips, sometimes they find something that connects them to the homes they have left behind. On a recent visit to a local department store, the Bhutanese students paused, their faces lit up with smiles, before a cheese store with a window displaying a life-size replica of a cow. Many had been farmers in Bhutan and they retain fond memories of their farm animals. Many are Hindu, and hold cows sacred. On a field trip to a nearby park last summer, one student found the same kind of grass she had used to make medicine back in the refugee camp in Nepal. In a clothing store, one Bhutanese gentleman pointed out the kind of cloth they used to make saris. Residents stopped to wave and smile and ask questions about the new Americans. Finding things around their new town that were similar to old homes and meeting other Americans help the students adjust to their new lives.

It is not only mastering practical matters like getting connected to services, filling out forms and the like that makes the refugees I work with more comfortable in their new lives. More important are the ties they develop to their environment and to other members of their new American communities that help them thrive, despite a sense of loss and longing for the worlds they have left behind. What little I can do to help them is a gift not just for them, but for me. My new American friends help connect me to my own world and to see it with new eyes. ■

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Former Child Refugee Now Helps Advance U.S. Refugee Protection Policy

Courtesy of Ken White

With a doctorate in Applied Anthropology, Hoa Tran worked on refugee and immigration issues for 20 years. Since 2004, Tran has worked on refugee policy at the U.S. Department of State.

Hoa Tran left Vietnam as a young child in 1975 and resettled in the United States. She now works on refugee policy at the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

Question: When did you arrive to the United States?
Hoa: I arrived in November 1975 in Atlanta, Georgia, nine months after we departed Vietnam. That's where my family was resettled. I was seven years old.

Q: Did you come with your entire family?
Hoa: My whole family came except for my oldest sister and oldest brother, who stayed back in Vietnam with my grandparents. My grandparents were in their late 80s at the time and they basically said that they would like to die in their own country rather than take the long trek over with us.

Q: Describe your journey from Vietnam.
Hoa: It was very chaotic, I remember that. It took us several months to get to the U.S. We first left our hometown, Quy Nhon, in February of 1975 and we made it to a U.S. Navy base in Cam Ranh Bay the following month. We departed Phu Quoc in April and then spent some time in a couple of refugee camps at U.S. Air Force and military bases in Guam and Wake Island before coming to the U.S. At the time, the U.S. policy was to resettle Vietnamese refugees to every state in the U.S. so that no one state was over-burdened by the influx of refugees. There were four refugee processing centers set up and we were sent to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, in August of 1975 and from there we were resettled to Atlanta.

Q: When you arrived to the United States, who helped you find an apartment, show you around town, and such?
Hoa: We were sponsored by the First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, so they took care of us in the beginning,

finding a place to live, getting us settled with some job opportunities, and then helping to get me and my siblings into school.

Q: When did you begin to feel that the United States was your new home or did you always feel like a visitor?
Hoa: Both; kids are very honest with their feelings and I was constantly harassed by other kids in school. I also have a temper, so I would fight back. I was constantly in trouble throughout elementary school. Eventually, they set up an ESL [English as a Second Language] program …and I was in the class with my brother and sister and kids from elsewhere. We were able to learn English more systematically. We were able to relate to each other and that helped with the transition into the regular classroom.

Q: Was it hard to get adjusted to the new culture?
Hoa: I was a very curious child and was always exploring and getting into all sorts of trouble. I confronted challenges head on. I was also very playful and would do the sorts of things that little kids do and got in trouble for that too. The challenges that my older siblings and my parents went through, of course, impacted the family. I remember my father got really ill a few years after we were in the States and we didn't understand the health care system and didn't know what to do. He struggled through cancer and eventually passed away. It was very, very difficult for us during that whole period.

Q: Who were the people who helped you and your family?
Hoa: My ESL teacher was super helpful. She was very compassionate and understanding. I remember her getting married and leaving Atlanta and I was very upset by that. The people at the Presbyterian Church were also very helpful and responsive to our needs.

Q: How did you reconcile the divide between the people who helped you and those who were less understanding?
Hoa: You grow up in life encountering people with various perspectives of viewing life and dealing with other people from different parts of the world. The way that I dealt with it was to rely on and trust the people who are helpful, to know when to reach out for help, and to know that you can't fight every battle.

Q: Were there people who made you feel welcome in Atlanta and made you and your family feel at home?
Hoa: It's very interesting that I don't ever remember being invited over to someone's house for dinner, but the people that helped us the most were the people from the church. We would see them regularly on Sundays and then they would come to our house to visit and…to make sure that we had the things that we needed. We were very grateful for that. They also helped us find jobs. My dad and my mom had to do [menial] service jobs as compared to what they were doing before in Vietnam. My mom ran her own business and my dad worked for the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments, which was part of the reason why we were lucky enough to be evacuated early.

Q: When did you and your family become U.S. citizens?
Hoa: At various times. For me, it was in 1991.

Q: How did you feel during this time?
Hoa: When we went to the courthouse in Atlanta for me to be sworn in, everyone was given a little U.S. flag and everyone had to raise it and it was just great to be in that room and there were so many people from all over the world, even people who could hardly speak a word of English. There were people in their late 70s. It was really great. I remember my dad was very involved in the struggle in Vietnam and then we were assisted to be evacuated. To come to a safe place and then to come to the point where I am now officially a U.S. citizen — it was a good feeling.

Q: When you were growing up did you think of yourself as an American?
Hoa: I don't think I ever thought of myself as an American just because, one, there isn't a single American identity and two, there also isn't a single Vietnamese identity. I worked with a lot of Vietnamese-Americans and other ethnic groups and other refugee and immigrant groups and it's very hard to…define who you are since you and everything around you change over time.

Q: In the context that you are living now, how do you think of yourself: Vietnamese-American, Vietnamese, or something else?
Hoa: I guess I would say, Vietnamese-American.

Q: Why did you decide to work for the State Department?
Hoa: When I was in high school, I started volunteering for a homeless shelter and worked with children there. Also in my high school, we had a magnet program that focused on communications and so I became interested in documentary photography. After high school, I got involved in refugee work when the 1988 Amerasian Homecoming Act was passed, and I started working with refugees that were able to be resettled in the U.S. I worked very closely with several families and did another documentary photography exhibit with the families

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South Vietnamese in Da Nang, Vietnam, after the fall of Saigon in 1975, struggle to climb aboard ships that will evacuate them to Cam Ranh Bay. Tran and her family were evacuated to Cam Ranh Bay and eventually resettled in Atlanta, Georgia.

present. It was a way for them to share their experiences and to make their issues public.

During undergraduate and graduate school, I continued to do advocacy work, including work with refugees. After getting my doctorate in Anthropology, I found out about the AAAS [American Association for the Advancement of Science] Diplomacy Fellowship Program. I applied, got in and thought that I would only be in DC for a short time. I wanted to be at State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) and luckily it worked out with PRM. I intended on being here for only a year or two, but I really admire the work of the bureau and the people who work there are extremely dedicated. They really work hard to provide humanitarian protection and assistance to victims of conflict worldwide and work endless hours to make things happen.

Q: As a former refugee yourself, what did you think that you could bring extra to helping other refugees?
Hoa: I just thought that they were struggling the same way that I did, not knowing the lay of the land. I wanted to be helpful to them, giving them whatever advice they needed or taking them to the doctor or doing whatever I could to make their lives a little easier. I felt that I could relate, given our family's experiences, and I would be able to communicate with them in their own language and also take the kids out to do fun things and just hang out.

Q: Do you think that refugee services in the United States have improved since you first arrived in 1975?
Hoa: Assistance was there when we arrived, but of course, with many years of experience with refugee flows, there are more agencies and organizations involved and also more…former refugees who are staff. The pool [of people who help refugees] is much more diverse and they bring experience and insight that I think is definitely a big step forward from when we arrived in 1975. Of course, even those who came in 1975 are still struggling now, trying to survive and navigate the system.

Q: Are there aspects of American life/culture that you think played a specific role in your success? Do you think that if you had been resettled to another country you would have had the same opportunities?
Hoa: Definitely there are all sorts of opportunities here [in the U.S.] and it is really up to the individual, whether a refugee or not, to work towards achieving your goals and try to find ways to maneuver through the challenges and obstacles. Of course, there are underlying structural and institutional systems that can be very difficult to overcome and it may take one individual many more years than another, but definitely opportunities are there and in other circumstances opportunities are not there for many people. It's hard to compare, if I had been resettled in Sweden or elsewhere and given whatever kind of challenges or opportunities are there; just speaking for me and my stubbornness, I will find a way to endure and deal with challenges in one way or another.

Q: Describe your work on refugee policy given your background as a former refugee.
Hoa: I believe that I understand the challenges of trying to negotiate and work through numerous issues on humanitarian protection and assistance for vulnerable populations that we [PRM] cover, and trying our hardest to achieve durable solutions or temporary protection options. And when we can't reach that objective no matter how hard, we advocate…I lose sleep over it. It's very hard, but then there are times when it is possible to achieve a solution to a complex situation and that's extremely rewarding. Again, as in life, you just put in your best effort and try to fight as hard as you can to try to reach a goal. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose but you don't ever give up. ■

To hear excerpts from Hoa's interview, please visit *http://www.america.gov/refugees.html*

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Additional Resources

Publications, websites and films on refugees

Books and Articles

Refugees' Stories

Beah, Ishmael. A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a *Boy Soldier*. New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007.

Bernstein, Nina. "First Day in America, First Sight of Snow." *New York Times* (February 11, 2010). *http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B02E0D9103FF932A25751C0A9669D8B63*

Celeste, Erika. "From Job Skills to People Skills: Learning U.S. Ways." *National Public Radio* (July 6, 2010). *http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128116102*

Gourevitch, Phillip. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

Horowitz, Joseph. *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from 20th Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008.

Jolie, Angelina. *Notes from My Travels: Visits with Refugees in Africa, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Ecuador*. New York: Pocket Books, 2003.

Kase, Aaron and F.H. Rubino. "Refugees Settling in Philadelphia: Refugees Seek New Beginnings in the City of Brotherly Love." *Philadelphia Weekly* (March 2, 2010). *http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/news-and-opinion/cover-story/Refugees-settling-in-Philadelphia.html*

Kidder, Tracy. *Strength in What Remains: A Journey of Remembrance and Forgiveness*. New York: Random House, 2009.

Kim, Mike. *Escaping North Korea: Defiance and Hope in the World's Most Repressive Country*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008.

Marton, Kati. *The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

Ogata, Sadako. *The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005.

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Ung, Luong. *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1960.

Policy Resources

Loescher, Gil. *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Loescher, Gil and Ann Dull Loescher. *The Global Refugee Crisis: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1994.

Loescher, Gil, James Milner, Edward Newman, and Gary Troeller, eds. *Protracted Refugee Situations: Political, Human Rights and Security Implications*. Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University Press, 2008.

Martin, Susan Forbes. *Refugee Women*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004.

Steiner, Niklaus, Mark Gibney, and Gil Loescher, eds. *Problems of Protection: The UNHCR, Refugees, and Human Rights*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Fictionalized Accounts

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.

Eggers, Dave. *What is What: The Autobiography of Valentina Achak Deng. A Novel*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006.

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.

Mengestu, Dinaw. *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.

Websites

FY 2010 Report to Congress on Refugee Admission
Defines the U.S.'s proposed refugee admissions ceilings for 2010 and the process of refugee admissions to the U.S.
http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/presidential-memoranda-93009

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
A humanitarian organization that provides assistance to victims of armed conflict.
http://www.icrc.org

International Organization for Migration (IOM)
An intergovernmental organization that works with governments, non-governmental organizations, and other partners to provide assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons.
http://www.iom.int/jahia/jsp/index.jsp

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
UNHCR leads and coordinates international efforts to protect refugees and to help them seek asylum and resettlement.
http://www.unhcr.org
See Also:
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): The Global Appeal 2010-2011
http://www.unhcr.org/ga10/index.html

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East (UNRWA)
Provides protection and assistance for Palestinians in the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.
http://www.unrwa.org/

U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM)
PRM provides aid and sustainable solutions for refugees, victims of conflict and stateless people around the world, through repatriation, local integration, and resettlement in the U.S. PRM also promotes the U.S.'s population and migration policies.
http://www.state.gov/g/prm/

U.S. Refugee Admissions Statistics
Facts and figures on the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) by region.
http://www.wrapsnet.org

Filmography

In This World (2002)
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310154/
Director: Michael Winterbottom
Summary: Young Afghan refugees living in Pakistan embark on a dangerous journey to seek asylum in London

Lost Boys of Sudan (2003)
http://www.lostboysfilm.com/
Director: Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk
Summary: The documentary follows two Sudanese refugees to Kenya and on to the United States. Winner of an Independent Spirit Award and two Emmy nominations.

North Korea - Shadows and Whispers (2000)
http://www.journeyman.tv/8988/documentaries/shadows-and-whispers.html
Director: Kim Jung-Eun
Summary: Filmed in the remote northeast mountains of China, this documentary showcases the difficulties faced by North Korean refugees who flee to China.

Rebuilding Hope (2009)
http://www.rebuildinghopesudan.org/
Director: Jen Marlowe
Summary: Follows the journey of three South Sudanese refugees returning to their old homes. The documentary shows them reconnecting with family and friends and discovering how to help their old communities.

The Split Horn: Life of a Hmong Shaman in America (2001)
http://www.pbs.org/splithorn/index.html
Director: Taggart Siegel
Summary: Traces the lives of Laotian refugees Paja Thao and his family in the United States For over 17 years, Siegel chronicled the lives of Paja Thao, a shaman, his wife, and their 13 children.

War Child (2008)
http://www.warchildmovie.com/
Director: Christian Karim Chrobog
Summary: Documents the story of Emmanuel Jal, a former child soldier in Sudan's civil war. Jal is now an emerging hip hop star dedicated to spreading messages of hope and peace across Africa.

The U.S. Department of State assumes no responsibility for the content and availability of the resources listed above. All Internet links were active as of May 2010.

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http://america.gov/publications/ejournalusa.html

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