

REFUGEES HELPING

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- Habiba Rashid, Associate Director of the Minnesota Council of Churches' Refugee Services in Mankato

BY CARLIENNE A. FRISCH

“I want Americans to understand that a refugee is a person fleeing danger, violence or persecution, seeking a better life,” Habiba Rashid, the Associate Director of the Minnesota Council of Churches' Refugee Services in Mankato, said. “The number of refugees is at its highest since World War II, driven by long-term conflicts that show no signs of abating.”

Habiba is one of many refugees from Africa who have settled in Minnesota communities. She has developed a career in helping other refugees become part of their new community. One way is by speaking to community groups about the road to safety that refugees like her must travel. When she recently spoke to a group in Mankato, one person in the audience asked her, “Do you know that you speak English with a Minnesota accent?” Habiba nodded but did not explain her adaptability in languages.

Habiba first learned British English while a refugee in South Africa, she lived for a while in the American South (but carries no sound of it in her speech), and she speaks six African lan-

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guages as well as Portuguese. Her experiences as a refugee and her ability to communicate in several languages are assets in her current job.

Originally from Angola, Habiba grew up in refugee camps throughout Africa, where she learned various languages. "When I was two years old, my family was forced to flee our home in Angola due to war," she said. "We bounced around in a lot of African refugee camps, sometimes fearing for our lives."

In one camp she met her future husband, a refugee from Somalia, so she learned the Somali language. They married in 2005 and applied to the United Nations for resettlement. They had two children by the time they were resettled in Atlanta, GA, where Habiba pursued her

desire to help others by earning an Associate Degree in midwifery.

In July 2015, the family was resettled in Mankato, where Habiba was soon employed as an interpreter with the Tapestry Project. Last September, she was promoted to her current position as Tapestry's Associate Director. "It has been my passion, as a refugee myself, to settle families in the land of freedom because I know how hard it is to navigate a new



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- Raahmo Hersi, outreach worker at VINE

country and new resources," she said. "In 2018, we assisted 298 families. We work only with secondary resettled refugees who began their experience in another part of the United States, like my family. The Minneapolis office does primary resettlement." (The 2019 total of families assisted had not yet been determined at the time of this interview.)

Like many American women, Habiba has two full-time jobs. She balances caring for a family of six children and her husband with the supervision of staff and community connection arrangements, as well as public speaking. Her goal is to make people aware of the refugee experience and to help the community welcome refugees rather than stigmatizing them.

Like Habiba, Raahmo Hersi also came to the United States as a refugee. She began her life in Somalia and escaped the war there by spending four years in Nairobi, Kenya, with her mother and 10 siblings before arriving in the United States in 2005. Raahmo's oldest sister had already come to America and had begun making arrangements for the rest of the family to follow her.

"My mom wanted a better life for us," Raahmo said. "All we knew was that my sister was in Minnesota. It took four years to make the arrangements. My father remained in Somalia to take care of his widowed sisters." As with Habiba's family, the United Nations sponsored Raahmo's family through a refugee immigration program. Eventually, the family arrived in Minnesota and stayed with the oldest sister for a couple of months.

"I was 12 when we settled in Minneapolis," Raahmo said. "Twelve of us lived in a two-bedroom apartment until my mother found a five-bedroom house, but it was in an unsafe neighborhood. After a few bad incidents over a few months, we moved to Owatonna for a couple of years. In 2009, we moved to Mankato because my brothers wanted to attend Minnesota State University here."

Although Raahmo had little opportunity to attend school in Africa, she caught up on her education after coming to Minnesota. She graduated from Mankato East High School, then earned a diploma in the two-year medical assistance program at South Central College in North Mankato, where she met her husband. After serving an internship at Wickersham Clinic in Mankato, she realized she was meant to help others in a different way.

"I knew about the Minnesota Council of Churches and that they were looking for someone who knew both American and Somali culture," she explained. "So

I applied and was contracted as an interpreter in early 2018. I still help out when I have time.” She now has a full-time job as an outreach worker at VINE, a community center that serves the greater Mankato area.

“My job is to be an advocate for anyone age 60 and over,” Raahmo said. “I do home visits, help people respond to mail they have received and attend medical appointments with them. Although there is another interpreter, I’m there to focus on the reason the patient is there, perhaps because they had a fall. I also help people find public housing. I’m the middle person, the bridge. If an emergency occurs, I get a call.”

Three mornings each week, Raahmo also acts as an interpreter in

the VINE adult literacy program. She explained, “There’s a teacher, but I’m there to help out. I can explain in English more slowly, and the students also help one another.”

Raahmo’s plans include obtaining a social work degree from Minnesota State University, Mankato, and eventually having children. She will rely on her mother and sisters to provide day care while she continues to work. “I’ve been working since I was 15. My first job was through the Minnesota Valley Action Council as a cashier at Hy-Vee. After two months, Hy-Vee hired me directly,” she said.

Carlennie A. Frisch is a Mankato-based writer and volunteer.

THE TAPESTRY PROJECT

The Tapestry Project, which began in Mankato in 2012, is unique to the area’s refugee services, according to Nancy Altmann, the project’s community engagement specialist. It originated when the Minnesota Council of Churches, local police, and Lloyd Management (a property management company) came together to provide an opportunity for people to learn who their neighbors are.

Participants are refugees who come primarily from Somalia, South Sudan and Ethiopia. Some attend churches of various Christian denominations, while others worship in one of two mosques in Mankato. The Tapestry Project’s purpose is to help the newcomers understand the community and to become part of it.

“Our purpose is to build relationships within the community and to provide education for refugees,” Nancy said. “We have a 15-hour course over six weeks, twice a year, with new people each time. We come together on topics we can all relate to--public safety, housing and health, including vaccinations, mental health and preventive care. We bring in speakers from various community agencies, such as police, housing specialists, the fire department and Adult Basic Education. We always have a public safety day to build knowledge and trust in the community.”

Topics include the judicial system, the driver’s permit and test, financial literacy, car seat safety, and community organization resources, such as public libraries, the YMCA, the YWCA, etc.

Nancy said, “When our refugees arrive, we try to get them a job right away, even when they have limited English. People need to have a job. We try to help with transportation, putting people on the same shift so they can carpool to work.”

“It’s not ‘Let’s show you how to be an American,’” she said. “It’s ‘Let’s do this together.’ That’s the basis of Tapestry--and that’s the basis of community.”

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