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### **Refugee Story (Iraq)**

My name is Rihab Alzubaidi. I am from Iraq. I was born in Baghdad in 1958.

My family and I came to the United States because it was too dangerous for us to stay in my home country. After the war started, my wife's brother was killed. My wife's family house was burned down. My brother was threatened and then killed. It grew increasingly risky to stay since they target any person with a high degree in a job.

I received my bachelor's degree in Accounting from Iraq in 1981. Then a master's degree in 1987, and a PhD degree in Accounting in 1991.

I studied for many years in Iraq and Ukraine and got my PhD certification in Accounting and worked as a professor in many universities in Jordan and have more than 15 years of experience teaching.

I came to Massachusetts in August 11, 2010 with my beautiful wife and three children. The first steps in my new life and new country were difficult. I remember how Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts sent two people, Abdul and Saad, to meet my family and I at the airport. Then I got assistance with applying for MassHealth, cash assistance and food stamps. JFS helped register my kids to school, helped my wife and I with job search and gave us some used furniture for our first apartment.

I appreciate all the services which we received from JFS in our first year here. The first year was especially hard for me because I struggled to find a job. JFS gave me two job opportunities but they didn't suit my past job experience. Shortly after, Westfield State University gave me a call, and I was accepted as a professor. This is going to be my fourth year in Westfield State University.

I now work at the Economic and Management Department and serve as Associate Professor teaching accounting. I have been involved in several committees: Finance, Curriculum, and Faculty Center Advising Committee. I have taught accounting information systems over a period of fifteen years, because it's my favorite course.

My family and I are deeply grateful to United State Government for accepting us as refugees, as well as to Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts for their support and care.

Today, I am proud to be a worker who serves the community and a taxpayer for three years now who is able to return a part of what I got from United States Government. Also I am proud of my wife. She is trying to get certification in early education to be a preschool teacher. I am also proud of my children who study and when they bring me a school report card with all "A+" grades.

I truly appreciate all the time and care that Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts and others put in to help bring my family and I these accomplishments.

## Refugee Story (Somalia)

My name is Adan Abdi. I am from Somalia. I was seven years old when the civil war broke out in my country and I became a refugee. My family was part of the minority group in Somalia. The Somali Bantu are peaceful people. We were farmers and migrants, making a living as farmers near the riverbanks in Somalia. During the civil war, gunmen from various Somali tribes came in and took away our land. They wanted the good soil. We fled into the forest without protection. For a whole year we lived in the woods, sharing water with animals and there was not enough food. After a whole year of running away from the warlords we had no option but to leave so we could be safe. In 1992, we ended up on the border of Kenya where UNHCR found us and transported us to the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. I was with my father, mother, younger brother Omar and sister.

I remember one night in Dadaab when a gunman came into our tent in the refugee camp. My family was inside. They came looking for my father. He ran away but they caught me. I was crying. I had no answer for them, they took what they wanted and left.

My family and I lived in Dadaab from 1992 until 2002. After 10 years, we were sent to Kakuma refugee camp. In Dadaab, I went to a religious school in the morning to learn Quran, and to a regular school where I learned English for the rest of the day. My father sought work in town. He took any jobs, something that would last us a day or two. One day, a Somali Bantu chief in the camp told us about U.S. Immigration Services. He received news that a good number of Somali Bantus would be able to go to America. We were very hopeful. Still we had to wait three more years before our resettlement case was processed. We knew that there was still no guarantee that we would leave until we actually got on the plane. I was 18 years old when we got notice that we would leave to the United States. We went to Nairobi first, stayed there a week, then got on a plane to London and from London flew to Springfield. My oldest sister arrived in America a month before us. The night before leaving Kakuma we had a big celebration. We invited our neighbors and friends to say goodbye. It was very exciting.

I spoke good English when I came here. Raya and Alda from Jewish Family Service met us in the airport with a driver on a minivan. It was April but it felt very cold. When we got off the plane, my parents asked that they bring us to be reunited with my sister. JFS found us housing in Springfield. My family really appreciates what JFS did for us.

I have lived in Springfield for 10 years now. When I just came, I was not able to get into High School because I was too old. I was not hoping to be anything special. I just wanted a better life- that was my dream. I did go to STCC for eight months studying engineering but did not finish. I had a lot of jobs in the U.S. My first job was in BigY bagging groceries. Then I had a construction job and two more bakery jobs after that. Right now I am a maintenance worker at Baystate Health. I've been with them for four years. My plan is to go back to school.

I like helping people. I have tutored refugees from Somalia, Kenya and Burundi for the Holyoke Public Schools. In 2007, I joined the Somali Bantu Association and today I am the president. I don't like all the responsibility of the job but I like helping people. In 2008, I started the Springfield Stars soccer team. I organized a team of high school teenage boys who had no afterschool activities to play soccer. Our team is part of the Pioneer Valley Summer Soccer League. In 2012, we came in third place and only had to beat Belchertown and Ludlow. I still want a chance to play Ludlow!

Since coming to Springfield, I got married. I have a daughter in second grade, a son in preschool and three younger daughters. They are doing well in school. They are the hardest challenge I could face. I am fortunate to have my brothers and sisters with me in Springfield. We appreciate the life we have here. I like Springfield. If I had to choose anywhere else to live, I would still choose Springfield. One year my friend invited me to move to San Antonio with him. He said there are a lot of good jobs. I said no. Springfield is my home. I have good friends here. I found my better life here in Springfield.

## Refugee Story (Bhutan)

My name is Sudarson Gautam. Let me start my refugee journey in a faraway destination. I was born in a small Southeast Asian country called Bhutan. I left Bhutan with my parents and two brothers when I was six years old. We left to escape persecution and brutality of the royal government of Bhutan and its ethnic cleansing policies against Nepali-speaking Bhutanese. From 1990 to 1994, more than 120,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese like us were forced to flee Bhutan.

Hundreds of neighbors were shot to death; many were arrested, tortured and killed in the prisons. Nepali schools were banned, anti-Nepali demonstrations fired up whole villages and cities were ignited with violence. My father dragged us out of the house during the middle of night even without telling his own siblings. We had to walk about 40 miles on foot to cross the Bhutanese boarder. I was seven years old. I walked for nine hours following the footsteps of my parents and siblings. We had to sleep at night in the middle of the woods with bitter rice and stream water to drink. My parents broke tree branches and used the leaves to make a common bed for us.

Finally we crossed the woods into India. We stayed a week in India with some distant relatives. After more people like us started to enter India, contractors unknown to us managed to transport us into Nepal. Later I came to know that the government of India assigned those contractors. There was no formal reception in Nepal. We all gathered at the bank of the river where there were hundreds of other people like us clustered together. By this time, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and other humanitarian agencies were already involved. We registered with UNHCR as formal refugees in the camp.

I lived in a refugee camp in Nepal for 16 years. Fortunately, the volunteers inside the refugee camp started informal teaching and mentoring programs and later got outside funding to run the basic education system. I finished grade ten from a school in the refugee camp. Refugee camp schools were free until grade 10. It was very tough for a refugee to go outside the camp to pursue education beyond tenth grade because of the high tuition costs. My father worked for the nearby villagers, earned some money and sent my brother and I out of the camp to continue receiving education. There was no day I went to school without working. Thanks to hard work, I was able to complete my high school and undergraduate studies.

My family and I always wanted to go back to our home country. We made several attempts but were unsuccessful every time we tried. Most of the refugees like me were living in a refugee camp with no hope for the future. Seeing the plight of the refugees, their frustration and hopelessness, United States along with seven other developed countries from the West brought in proposals to resettle interested Bhutanese refugees in their countries. It wasn't an easy decision for us to make, but because we did not have any other option, my brother and I decided to fill out resettlement interest forms. We had no clue where we would land in the United States. A month before our departure, we were told that we would be resettled in a city called Springfield in the state of Massachusetts by an agency called Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts.

From day one of our stay in the U.S., JFS helped us with everything. JFS staff managed to secure housing for us, brought us to medical appointments, helped apply for public assistance benefits and even helped me find my first job. Terry Koopman, the employment coordinator at JFS at that time found me a job at Marriot Hotel in downtown Springfield. I worked there as a houseman and a lobby attendant for 11 months. I was able to save some money, bought my first car and actively started looking for a college to continue my education. I joined STCC, completed all prerequisites and got accepted into an occupational therapy program at Springfield College. I completed the OT degree from Springfield College in December 2013.

Many significant events happened in my life this year. I became a citizen of United States in February, passed my registration exam in June, married in July and started working as an occupational therapist at Chapin Center in Springfield in August 2014. This is the story of my journey from Bhutan to Nepal and finally my unknown destination that is now my home- Springfield.

## **Refugee Story (FSU)**

I am Yana Powers, my family and I moved to Springfield, MA in April of 1991 from Baku, Azerbaijan which was part of the former Soviet Union. At the time, the Soviet Union was breaking apart from communism, anti-Semitism was on the rise, and corruption dominated the streets. Random fights would break out for no reason except that you looked like a Jew and didn't speak their native Azeri language. My parents knew that it wasn't the way they wanted to neither live nor raise their family, so they had to make the toughest decision - to pick up and leave everything they knew behind for a better future and opportunities for their children.

Our journey to United States started by leaving Azerbaijan in November of 1990 by train to Moscow, from where we boarded a plane to Austria. At the time HIAS and JDC (Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) were organizing the resettlement of the Russian Jews to the U.S. With the status of "refugee" you were able to leave Russia, but you were not automatically allowed to enter U.S. For that reason you had to go through Austria and Italy until you had an official invitation from the U.S. telling you where your final destination was going to be. Upon our arrival to Austria, the buses were already waiting to take us five hours away to a hotel outside of Vienna that was used to host Jewish refugees. We spent one month in Austria. At the end of the month we boarded a train to Italy. The countries where we stayed were beautiful. I would definitely go back one of these days, but during that period, my family didn't have the time to appreciate neither its culture nor what it had to offer.

It was a very chaotic scene when we arrived in Italy. We were told to quickly leave the train and for women and children to board the bus that was waiting for us. There was a lot of confusion, fear, multiple foreign languages and unfamiliar culture. Men had to stay back and board a different bus. I remember getting on the bus and not knowing when and if I'd ever see my dad and grandfather again. Since our bus driver didn't speak any English, we didn't know where we were being taken and why we had to be separated. Shortly after we got to our destination, another bus pulled up with all the men.

We were in Ostia, a small seaside resort just outside of Rome which is best known for its beaches and its fourth century Roman port. But for 15,000 Jews that left in late 1980's and early 90's from the former Soviet Union, Ostia will always be remembered as a temporary home for Jewish refugees that were on their way to their new lives in America. The resort was more of a campsite called Castelfusano that was fenced in with barbed wire. It had cabins and a cafeteria where you were served three meals a day. Some families stayed for a few weeks and some stayed for months. My family spent five long months in Italy waiting for our official invitation. While we were in the waiting period to get approval to enter United States, we attended multiple interviews at the embassy where every single member of the family was questioned on why you left your country and why you want to go to U.S. The waiting period was long. I remember that there was a place right in the middle of the campsite where all of the refugees awaiting their approval would gather once a week on Thursday and wait for a mailman to deliver an envelope. Everyone waited anxiously and patiently for their name to be called. We all hoped for an envelope because inside the envelope were airline tickets and a welcome letter to U.S. I remember how excited and anxious my family was the day that we got our envelope. In April of 1991 we were finally approved by our sponsors and we were on our way to Springfield- back to the new unknown.

Little did we know that when we arrived to Springfield we would be greeted by a large Jewish Community that took us under their wing. We were connected to all the Jewish agencies in the area including Jewish Family Service that helped us settle. We were introduced to the Temple where we were also matched with another family that took us into their home for the High Holidays and introduced us to Jewish rituals and traditions. My sister and I started going to Jewish Day School at LYA, where we had a tutor to help us learn the language and integrate into the classes. We learned the history of the Jewish people and what it means to be Jewish. My parents and grandparents were able to take ESL classes that were offered at the JCC. We were given an opportunity to join JCC and Temple and be part of the community at large. Without the support and help of all the Jewish organizations, I'm unsure it would have been possible for us to make it and connect in this place we now call home. My family and I are so appreciative and fortunate to have been able to have met so many people that reached out to us during our time of need. Now that I have a family of my own, it is important to both my husband and I that our children know their roots and have a strong Jewish identity. Through sending our kids to Jewish Day School at Heritage Academy, remaining active in our Temple, Jewish Federation, and Jewish Family Service we hope to further strengthen our Jewish Community.