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Refugees

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to begin new lives in the Rochester area during the 1990s.

Given her motivation for working with the CFC, it seemed only fitting that in 1998, Luu was honored with a JC Penney/United Way Golden Rule Award.

"People helped me, and now it's my time to help them back," she said.

Defining plight

The current influx of Kosovar refugees to the United States highlights the fact that the world is flooded with refugees from various wars and conflicts. According to the U.S. Committee on Refugees, a private organization, 14 million people worldwide have fled their homelands. Millions more have been displaced within their homelands.

The U.S. government defines a refugee as anyone who leaves his or her homeland and fears persecution upon return. UN refugee workers and U.S. representatives are present in refugee camps throughout the world, and determine whether camp residents qualify for U.S. refugee status, according to Jim Delaney, CFC's refugee program manager. Unlike immigrants who leave their countries for economic or other reasons, refugees generally don't want to leave their homelands.

"Ninety-eight percent would rather be home," said Delaney, who has worked in a number of refugee camps. "Roots are far more important than dollar signs."

After being screened for various communicable diseases and criminal or terrorist connections, refugees who pass muster may apply to come to the United States. Acceptance is not automatic however: Congress annually sets quotas on the number of refugees allowed to come from various countries, according to Marie M. Quinlan, special projects coordinator for the U.S. Catholic Conference's Migration & Refugee Services.

Speaking from her Washington, D.C., office, Quinlan said that the United States has agreed in 1999 to take as many as 20,000 Kosovars and 78,000 refugees from various other countries.

Delaney added that once they are flown by the U.S. government to the United States, refugees must pay back their air fare within three years. He also pointed out that all eligible male refugees must register for Selective Service, which means that they could be called for military duty should the draft return.

Opening the door

Although the U.S. government provides much of the funding for refugee programs like the one at CFC, Quinlan noted that all resettlement efforts would collapse without the aid of thousands of volunteers and private donations. Volunteers do such tasks as finding refugee families apartments, dri-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer
Sudanese refugees Mary Kuon, left, Nyeruach Bor, Nyamonga Wal, Nyakhor Gatkuoth, Nyadon Wal and Nyawal Gatkuoth dance to Sudanese music in their North Street, Rochester, apartment June 30.

ving them to health and social service appointments, tutoring them in English, and helping them to navigate the U.S. system, she explained.

"It's absolutely essential that folks come forward with their many gifts and talents," she said. "It's an opportunity to share those gifts with the refugees. So many needs need to be met."

Agencies like CFC resettle one-third of the refugees that come to the United States each year, meaning that the Catholic Church is responsible for the largest single refugee resettlement effort of any organization in this country, Quinlan said.

Here in the Diocese of Rochester, the number of volunteers working to resettle refugees has increased dramatically since the Kosovars began coming, Delaney said.

In addition to his core of more than 300 volunteers, Delaney's recruited about 100 new volunteers in recent weeks, and garnered the help of such Catholic parishes as St. John the Evangelist in Rochester, St. Joseph's in Penfield and Sacred Heart in Auburn. Parishioners at these churches are either working with, or preparing to work with, Kosovar refugees, he noted.

For the most part, though, refugee resettlement teams are ecumenical and interfaith in nature. Delaney commented that one of the unintended blessings of the media attention given CFC's pledge to resettle 125 Kosovars is that he now has volunteers who can help him resettle 220 refugees from other countries whom CFC will accept this year.

For example, a resettlement team originally formed to help Kosovars coming here in late July decided instead to help a Sudanese family that arrived June 11. Headed by the Rev. Lawrence Guilford Jr., pastor of Miracle Deliverance Church in Rochester, the team was waiting to aid the Kosovar family when the pastor asked CFC if there were any refugees who needed help right away. The team — made up of residents from Lima, Ontario, Albion, Spencerport, Fairport and Rochester — has since been working together to resettle the Long family, southern Sudanese Christians who fled the ongoing war between the

Muslim northern Sudanese government and southern Sudanese rebels. Most of the family has lived in Ethiopian refugee camps since the early 1980s, according to Dak Long, one of the extended family's 10 members. Dak came to the United States in 1995, before the rest of his family, and now lives in Minneapolis, Minn.

Suffering seemed to be part and parcel of the family's life in Africa. For example, Dak's brother, Danniell, said his 16-month-old daughter, Nyadon, is five months behind in her growth — and having difficulty walking — because of malnourishment she suffered in a refugee camp.

Despite the struggles they've undergone, Rev. Guilford said he was impressed by the Sudanese family's desire to make as smooth a transition as possible into U.S. life.

"They're very astute, very eager to learn, and very willing to do what they need to do to support themselves," he said.

Ann Finkbeiner, a Spencerport Catholic who serves on the resettlement team working with the Longs, was originally drawn to volunteering when she saw TV news reports that CFC needed help resettling Kosovars. However, she was glad for the chance to work with the Sudanese refugees, whose plight is rarely mentioned in the press.

"I can't explain what I'm getting out of it," she said as one of the Long children played with her. "I just feel God is working through me."

Getting on track

Resettling refugees takes flexibility, compassion and common sense, according to Luu. Volunteers must spend five to 10 hours per week taking refugees to health clinics, social services offices, learning centers and supermarkets.

Delaney said it generally takes about three sessions of one or two hours each to train volunteers, who then remain in contact with his agency throughout the resettlement process. It takes two to four months to complete most of the tasks that resettlement demands.

Delaney stressed that the ultimate goal of refugee resettlement is making refugees economically self-sufficient. He noted that the federal government mandates that employable refugees find a job within 135 days of their arrival. CFC currently works with about 50 employers in the Rochester region who are interested in hiring refugees, and about 95 percent of employable refugees who come to the diocese get a job by their 135th day in the country.

One employer that has made refugees a vital part of its work force is Nationwide

Precision Products Corporation in Henrietta. If you want to meet refugees from such countries as Somalia, Cuba and Bosnia, all you have to do is walk onto the company's shop floor at any time, according to Ronald S. Ricotta, Nationwide's president and a parishioner at Church of the Transfiguration in Pittsford.

Ricotta said about three years ago, his company was having difficulty finding workers, a problem he said is common to many Rochester-area manufacturing firms. The labor shortage was preventing his company from accepting work, so he contacted CFC to find out if there were refugees or immigrants who might want to work there.

Since then, Ricotta said, CFC has referred numerous job applicants to his business, and of his 270 current employees, more than 20 percent are refugees or immigrants. The company funds English classes for employees who are not fluent in the language, though they must speak minimal English to get a job.

"Basically, they've got to fill out a job application and see what it means," he said.

Two such employees are Mohamed Adde and Aweis Salah, Somali machine operators who have worked there for about a year.

"We left our country because of the war," Adde said of the ongoing civil strife in Somalia.

Both men came to Nationwide through CFC's referral and exemplify the quality employees CFC has brought to the company, according to Raymond J. Kieliszak, director of manufacturing and a parishioner at Christ the King Church, Irondequoit.

"Generally, they're excellent workers," Kieliszak said of the refugees employed at Nationwide. "The shrinking labor pool has made the immigrant much more competitive in the American economy."

The final reward

Resettling refugees is hard work, but there are rewards, according to several volunteers who spoke to the *Catholic Courier*.

Rochester Sudanese community activist Gatluck Othnyang summed it up best when he told Ann Finkbeiner and Rev. Guilford what the volunteers meant to the refugees.

"I'm glad, and I thank you for your help," he told them, noting that he had been a refugee four years ago. "We are not going to give you nothing. But God is going to give you a reward."

Like many refugee workers, Luu pointed out that refugees generally become tax-paying, working citizens within a matter of months after their arrival.

"The U.S. is a country of immigrants," she said. "We need new blood coming in. That's what makes our country so rich."

EDITORS' NOTE: To learn about volunteering on a refugee resettlement team, contact Jim Delaney at 716/262-7074. To learn about the U.S. Catholic Conference's refugee program, call 202/544-0004, or visit their Web site at <http://www.nccbuscc.org/mrs/resettlement.htm>.

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