

Bantu refugees find new life, home

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Abdikadir Ali Abshir returned to his Greece apartment Nov. 2 after a long day of work at Rochester's Heberle Disposal, taking off several of his coats as he came in the door.

"How many jackets do you have on tonight? Four?" asked Fred Judge, a parishioner at St. Mark's Parish in Greece.

"Six," Abshir answered, laughing.

Abshir is one of 29 Somali-Bantu refugees who have been resettled in Rochester through Catholic Family Center and area churches of various denominations. Jim Delaney, who retired Oct. 1 as associate director of refugee and immigration services for CFC, recruited participating churches. He still serves the program as a consultant.

Volunteers from interested churches form teams, which each sponsor one refugee family, Delaney said. The teams help oversee the education, financial, transportation and companionship needs of the families until they become self-sufficient.

According to Delaney, the needs of the Bantu refugees are more acute than those of other groups resettled by CFC in recent years. Somali Bantus originated in Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania and were sold into slavery more than 200 years ago. Although slavery was later abolished in Somalia, the Bantus continued to be abused and discriminated against by majority Somali clans, Delaney said. This clan warfare forced many farmers, including Abshir and fellow refugee Hamadi Luhiso Abdalla, to leave their land in the early 1990s and flee to refugee camps.

"Frankly, when I looked at their deficits, I was very concerned," Delaney said. "It's been a pleasant surprise for everybody. Because these



Leila Navidi/Catholic Courier

Jangwa Muhando (from left), her 6-year-old daughter, Mukundo Luhiso, and 13-year-old son Abdikadir Luhiso, laugh after dinner in their Honeoye Falls home Oct. 30. The family are Somali-Bantu refugees who have resettled in Rochester with the help of Catholic Family Center and area churches.

people are so highly motivated, it's one of the more fulfilling resettlements. They have an incredible resilience."

Adjusting to the Rochester weather is not the only challenge for the Bantus, who come from a land where the temperature only rarely falls below 70 degrees. Most of the refugees have never experienced electricity or running water and don't speak English. Many of the children were born in refugee camps, where they had no access to education.

This has created a challenge, according to St. Mark's parishioner Ann Hauser, who has been coordinating education for Abshir's family. Since Abshir's 16-year-old daughter, Jido, had never been to school before, Hauser decided to instead enroll her in the general educational development program offered by the Greece School District.



Hamadi Abdalla helps his 7-year-old daughter, Ehedhe Luhiso, carve her first jack-o'-lantern Oct. 30.

Leslie Kumler is one of the team leaders of an ecumenical group in Honeoye Falls, which is sponsoring Abdalla's family. She said explaining the concept of school to the family's four children was difficult, since they didn't know what it was like to have a locker, switch classes or sit still in a classroom.

Members of both teams visit their refugee families every evening to help the children with homework. Since the parents don't speak or write English fluently, team members act as parents when it comes to dealing with the school or teachers.

Team members communicate with the Bantus through translators, usually other Bantus who have been in America longer and are more fluent in English.

Team members said the Bantus are eager to learn and are making great progress. Abshir's family arrived in Rochester July 9, and Abshir recently received his learner's permit. Abdalla's family arrived in town Aug. 12, and his 13-year-old son, Abdikadir, played on the Honeoye Falls-Lima Middle School soccer team and is quite popular at school, Kumler said.

"We see a lot of rights, a lot of opportunities here," Abdalla said, adding that the language, like the cold, is new to him and his family, but "we will learn."

Both Abshir and Abdalla said they are grateful for their new life. Abshir said sometimes he asks himself, "are you dreaming or do you live in this life forever?"

Both families were glad to leave the hunger and violence of the refugee camps behind, although relatives were also left behind.

"They are still suffering, and we can do nothing for them. We can pray for them that they can come here, and that's all we can do," Abshir said.

GENERAL

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