



IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES:



TEN PROFILES OF LEADERSHIP



New Hampshire is home to an increasing number of immigrants and refugees, many of whom have come to our state seeking refuge from political strife, violence, and poverty. Many also bring tremendous talents, life experiences, and a passion for making their new communities stronger. Like so many of our ancestors, newcomers aspire to create a better future in the United States for themselves, their families, their neighbors and compatriots. Foreign-born populations in our state include individuals from Romania, Bosnia, Russia, India, Thailand, Mexico, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia, Brazil, Canada and so many other places.

As we prepared for the funder's forum *The Changing Face of New Hampshire: The Role of Foundations in Promoting Immigrant Integration*, we wanted to bring a few of these newer faces and voices into the room. At the same time, we were committed to a dialogue specific to funders and grantmakers. And so we interviewed a number of individuals who are recognized for their community leadership and crafted the profiles that follow. Our hope is that this small sample will afford a glimpse into the experiences these immigrants and refugees have had, the challenges they have overcome, and the important contributions they are making within our state.

We are enormously grateful to each of these individuals for sharing their very personal stories.

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3. Chantal Kayitesi
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I. HONORE

Honore* and his family fled the Democratic Republic of Congo, the only country they had ever known, just prior to the eruption of civil war in 1995. Fearing for their safety, they left behind the pharmacy he owned, their house, and everything that belonged to them.

Their good fortune in finding a home in neighboring Rwanda was linked to the hard reality of genocide there, where many homes were either abandoned or left vacant due to the millions of people killed. In the remaining ruins of this east-central African nation, Honore found a new passion as the executive director of Children of Rwanda, an orphanage that cared for the countless number of orphaned babies and children who suffered from health-endangering malnutrition, lack of proper medical attention, and the merciless pain of hunger.

“You cannot imagine what it is like to listen to 50 babies crying because they don’t have food,” he says. Although finances were tight for his family of four, and Honore’s compensation was minimal, he allocated all of his wife’s earnings from her small business toward the purchase of food for the starving orphans, whom he refers to as “my children.” In his culture, “When you are responsible for children you refer to them as your own ... so that there will not be any compromise.”

Even after the genocide, strife continued in this war-torn country, and Honore decided to uproot his family again. He came to the United States by himself in 2001 and petitioned for asylum. Based on what he had learned in school, he decided to settle in New Hampshire, erroneously believing it was a town near Boston, where a friend lived. Four months later, his wife and children joined him in Laconia.

Although he now speaks eight languages and holds a bachelor’s degree in education, his English was limited then and he felt lost. But Christ Life Church took him in, providing him with free room and board. He worked at the parish food bank and

with St. Vincent de Paul. For his children the transition to life in the U.S. was easy, but Honore and his wife felt beleaguered with concerns over their very survival. “We had the fear for tomorrow; where we were going to be, what we were going to do.”

Prior to leaving the Congo, Honore worked in and owned businesses. However, since his three-year tenure at Children of Rwanda, he has devoted his professional life to improving conditions for others. He has worked with a variety of community-based organizations in New Hampshire, helping people attain affordable housing and finding opportunities for the disabled.

His volunteer work and his passion is helping other African refugees as part of an organization he co-founded in 2004 called New American Africans. With the hardships and isolation he experienced following his own arrival to this country marked indelibly on his psyche, he endeavors to make similar transitions easier for other immigrants through this relatively new effort. “I help with everything. I go to visit them when they come, to see what their needs are and welcome them. I let them know we can help.” Counting isn’t intrinsic to his culture and so he doesn’t keep track of the hours he spends responding to the many needs of Africans arriving here. “I respond at any hour of the day,” he says. “We need to help our brothers and sisters so that they can make it.”

Honore appreciates the opportunity to live in the United States, where his 20-year-old daughter just finished her second year of college, and his 18-year-old son is a senior in high school. Grateful for the sanctuary this country has provided his family, Honore, now 54, desires to make a meaningful contribution in return. So he reaches out to others, urging newcomers to become good citizens and teaching them the importance of contributing to the growth and development of their new communities. “I try to be a lamppost to others, and a role model to the young.”

*Last name withheld by request

2. LETICIA ORTIZ

Leticia Ortiz never wanted to play the “privilege card,” even though she came from a well-to-do family in Mexico City. Her parents, prominent business owners, were also well connected. Her father served two of Mexico’s presidents as a member of the government’s special security force. Despite all of this, or perhaps because of it, Leticia decided from an early age that she would make her own way in life, without relying on family connections.

Leticia is now influential in her own right as a community leader and advocate. She serves on the Governor’s Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs, she is a board member of the New England Trained Interpreters Association, and assistant chair of the Multicultural Network. You might say she has reached a pinnacle. But the journey to get to this point has been long and hard. Leticia, despite all of this accomplishment, admits that she is still learning to perfect her English and learn more about how to navigate the system, while seeking better employment opportunities that offer more stability, financial reward and career advancement.

“I want people to understand that immigrants are working hard. They are often more accomplished and educated than society realizes.”

When Leticia first came to the United States in 1984, she found herself in a physically and emotionally abusive marriage. Eventually, with little outside support, she affirmed her own self-worth and left the relationship. Her partner, however, did not quietly accept Leticia’s decision. In fear for her safety and that of her young son, Leticia endured an extended period of hiding, and was frequently forced to flee from this violent man. She went into seclusion when she returned to Mexico, but did not find peace from this troubled relationship until she eventually returned to the United States and joined her sister.

Her arrival to New Hampshire represented a new beginning, but also a process full of hard realities. Leticia did not speak English very well. “Though I studied high school English in Mexico City, it was too basic. At that early age, I did not foresee how much I would need to use the language.” Although Leticia had a college education from the National Autonomous University of Mexico and once worked for an important government agency in her home country, her experience, without strong language skills, was difficult to transfer in the United States.

She worked two and sometimes three jobs, mostly in the food-service and banquet industries. She learned English on the job, but it was a slow process. “If I had it to do over again, I would have immediately gone to school to learn English. But of course, I had to work to support my son. I could have asked

my family for help, but I was determined to do this on my own and to start a new life.”

That new life was recently punctuated by a special honor when she received an award from the NH Office of Minority Health. This award recognized “women leaders who have devoted time and energy to their communities in a meaningful way, have made an impact on reducing health disparities, and improved the health of minority women in the state.” Leticia humbly received this recognition, saying “It could have been given to so many other worthy people in the community.”

She takes issue with public perceptions of immigrants, particularly the misguided notion that undocumented immigrants are “taking advantage of social services.” She notes, for example, that even legal immigrants are generally ineligible for federal benefits like TANF, Medicaid, Food Stamps and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), as well as many other programs and services for their first five years in this country.

“I want people to understand that immigrants are working hard. They are often more accomplished and educated than society realizes. We do jobs that many others don’t want to do. We take these jobs because we want a better life for our families—just like anyone else would want for their family.” Leticia also points out that her community work extends to many Anglos in need. “There are a lot of factors that affect everyone’s life. It is just a little bit more difficult if you are from another country, but we are all human beings.”

Leticia is also involved with Family Understanding Nights at the Beech Street School, monthly events aimed at assisting and empowering newcomers. She works in association with local schools and parents to help families and their children adapt to cultural differences, gain access to services and to settle into a life of hope and possibility.

Leticia’s greatest reward? The example she tries to set for her sons, Clark and Christian. “My youngest son, for instance, has come with me for some of my community support work. It has helped him appreciate how much we have as a family and how important it is to give back to others who have less. He also recently attended a political house party. I was proud of the questions he asked of the candidate. He is going to be an informed and involved citizen,” she says with pride in her eyes.



3. CHANTAL KAYITESI

The genocide that began in 1994 in Rwanda took from Chantal Kayitesi most of the people who mattered to her, except her son. Determined to help others in her situation, Chantal joined a group of women and together they founded AVEGA, an organization established to address the many needs of genocide widows, many of whom had also been raped, stripped of all family, and left to count their losses while they themselves clung tentatively to life.

“Women lost everything,” Chantal says, as if the word could possibly encompass their layers of suffering. “At the same time, their homes were taken and their belongings stolen. The majority of women didn’t go to school and they suddenly found themselves needing to work to survive.”

At AVEGA, where Chantal was the vice president then president, women received counseling for their grief, medical attention for their wounds, and help in their search for a home. The organization also provided startup funds to help women develop small businesses and assistance with making their voices heard within the legal system.

Having trained as a nurse and equipped with a Bachelor’s of Science degree in public health, Chantal was well qualified for this work. Her determination and advocacy for Rwandan widows took her in 1995 to Beijing as part of a delegation that represented AVEGA. While in Rwanda, she also founded and was a member of a coalition that advocated for qualifying rape and other forms of sexual violence committed during the genocide as a crime against humanity. In addition, she was the president of the Commission of Social Affairs at Pro-Femmes, an umbrella of 35 associations of women in Rwanda.

By 1999, Chantal decided to move to the United States with her five-year-old son to Dover, New Hampshire. Unlike some refugees headed toward an uncertain future in a new land, she was not afraid as she boarded her flight. “I was determined to work hard to make it for me and my son. I had no doubt I was going to succeed. I told myself, ‘I’m healthy, I can make it. I just have to work hard.’”

Like many new immigrants, Chantal wasn’t able to utilize her vast experience, the three languages she spoke, or her education and decided to go back to school. She applied to and was accepted into a Master of Science in public health program at Boston University, which provided her with a scholarship. Chantal graduated from the program in 2002 and began working with the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services.

As an adolescent health program coordinator, she has addressed maternal/child health issues among refugees and others. Her work has focused on a variety of issues including access to health care, mental health, and positive youth development. Not confined to health issues, she has also helped with a variety of parenting concerns, such as communication between parents and adolescents, mentoring, and involving youth in the community.

“In Africa, parents feel comfortable with kids playing outside, but here it is seen as neglecting children. Parents don’t know that their children may not be safe.” She understands how quickly immigrant children are Americanized and the difficulties



this can present for their parents. “In my country, it is a given that children listen. The community enforces this. But here you have to sit down, talk to kids, and communicate to them why you want them to do things.”

One of Chantal’s core beliefs is that if we help women and children, we can resolve 70 percent of all health issues, so that is where she keeps her focus. In the last few months, she has worked with other African women to establish the Women for Women Coalition (WFWC). The mission of the WFWC is to empower and strengthen the role and participation of African women and girls in all spheres of development, promote self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and to provide a forum where they can be actively involved and where their voices can be heard.

She places a high value on the importance of the full integration of refugees and immigrants in this country. “When you come to this country, you have to learn everything from health care to the school system to the way you build friendships. You have to understand what success means in this country. Economic integration is a big priority. How do we do better? That depends on the whole community. Communities need to know how to integrate new families. It’s a collective investment.”

NOTE: As this profile goes to press, Chantal has accepted a new position with Mass General Community Health Program in Boston. She will be working closely with community groups to promote access to health care. Her talents and passion will be greatly missed in New Hampshire.



4. AROP DENG

When Arop Deng was born in southern Sudan in 1963, his country was already in turmoil. The north and the south had been in conflict for political reasons since 1955. In 1983, that conflict turned into a religious war that killed between two and three million people.

From 1988 to 1992, Arop attended law school at Cairo University, Khartoum Branch in Khartoum, Sudan. He obtained his license and began to practice law in the northern part of the country. In Sudan, lawyers are general practitioners, handling criminal, civil, and family law cases. He handled all kinds of cases, including defending those who were arrested for political reasons. "The situation was not safe for educated people who defended others," said Arop, "There was a lot of harassment in the courtroom. Security may come to your house and arrest you or take you to an unknown place to question you."

Arop practiced law until 1999, when he fled Sudan. Armed with a passport that identified his occupation as a waiter, he crossed the border into Egypt. He had sent all of his proper identification to someone in Egypt two months earlier so it would not be found when they searched him at the border. He applied to the United Nations for refugee status.

His resettlement assignment was Rochester, NY. Having done some homework communicating with other Sudanese refugees

already living in the U.S., Arop heard that Rochester was not safe. Contacts in New Hampshire said, "it was quiet and safe but cold." "I'd rather be someplace cold if it is safe," he said. So he requested resettlement in Manchester, NH. On the day he arrived in late 2000, it was snowing. "I had only seen snow on TV, never felt it or saw it before." He moved into an apartment on Chestnut Street. His first heating bill arrived, and for 53 days it was \$999. "The thermostat was set at 85 degrees and I was still cold!" he said.

Not knowing English was very hard for Arop. He remembers the frustration, "When you don't speak the language and you are an educated person who has ideas and can't express them. That was a bad experience for me that encouraged me to learn English." Now he is fluent in English, as well as Arabic and his tribal language, Dinka.

Within six months of arrival he found his first job as a bank teller at Citizens Bank in May 2001. He worked there for three years and then found employment in customer service at Budget Rental Car. In 2005 he began working with Hertz Rental Car.

That was also the year that Arop was elected as president of the Southern Sudan Community. The largest African refugee community in New Hampshire, the Sudanese officially formed a community and held elections for the first time in 2001. The elected leaders sat down to develop a clear vision of what they want for the members of their community. Their top priorities are: learning English, addressing health problems and lack of health knowledge, helping people understand the law and addressing domestic violence in the community.

While employed full-time at Hertz, Arop continues to serve his community as a board member and to help develop programs to address the top priorities. In the past year, the Southern Sudan Community began sharing office space with the Somali Development Center on South Willow Street in Manchester. They are offering computer classes, English classes, workshops on legal issues and other services through a completely volunteer effort. They have yet to secure any grant money, but are able to pay their part of the rent through monthly donations from board members.

"The Sudanese are quiet people, hard workers who want to participate and be helpful for the city. That makes the city rich of culture," said Arop. Nearly 99% of Sudanese adults are working and all seven of the Sudanese youth who graduated from high school last year are enrolled in college this fall. "The families are talking to kids (and telling them) the only way to succeed is to go to college and get a degree."

Valuing education as a way to further himself, Arop has returned to school. He is pursuing a Masters of Leadership in Organizations at Southern New Hampshire University. He will be able to use the knowledge gained in this degree program to further his career and to strengthen the Southern Sudan Community.



5. HECTOR FABIO URREA

When Hector Urrea and his brother finished high school in Palmira, Colombia in the early 1980s, they both wanted to go to college. Unfortunately, the family could only afford tuition for one. Hector decided his brother should be the one to go.

He and his family had at one time lived comfortably on their family ranch. “In my youth, we were very happy—but we lost everything,” says Hector. “We went to sleep sometimes without much food in our stomachs. We call those the depression times—a period that made us stronger.” Hector focused on soccer as a way to keep himself out of trouble and in “one piece mentally.”

One of eight children, Hector learned from his older brother the value of helping each other, working harder when times got tough and never giving up. “We didn’t steal or do something bad,” he says. Instead the family became the envy of their extended family and neighbors for the strong unity they shared.

Hector left Colombia in 1982 and after a short stay in England to learn English, he found his way to New York City to live and study. “My dream was to educate myself,” he says. He enrolled in Staten Island College, but felt overwhelmed by guilt that he was getting an education while his family was struggling back in Colombia. “I felt bad not being able to support my family so I stopped school. I had to do like my other brothers and bring something to the table.” He worked various jobs cleaning offices, selling clothing and electronics. Eventually he worked his way up to an assistant manager at an electronics store. “In America, I am proud to do any job,” says Hector. “Any honest job is of value as long as it pays me money for my family.”

Reflecting on the challenges he experienced as a recent immigrant from Colombia, Hector notes, “People don’t put themselves in our places.” He feels that immigrants have to convince people that “we are not here to destroy, but to construct and contribute to make America a better place to

live. We want to help people to make a better society, city, everything. We are like the Irish (or) the French Canadians of 100 years ago,” he says, referring to immigrant groups who came to the United States from a century past for a better life.

In 1997, ready for a change, Hector left New York to live near his sister in Nashua, NH. He worked in technology for a while and then for the first time in his life found himself out of work due to a layoff. He decided he wanted to do something he was passionate about. “My passion is bigger than me,” he says, referring to his penchant for community involvement. “I am willing to help anyone, regardless of their race and economic background, who needs help,” says Hector.

His ongoing volunteer work with the Nashua Boys and Girls Club soccer program was an excellent training ground for expanding his work with youth. He served for two years at the Boys and Girls Club in Manchester as the part-time director of the Latino Services Saturday program (2003-2005). In 2003 he also began working for Southern NH Services as Coordinator for ALPHA Youth Services, a community program designed to meet the needs of low-income, “at-risk” inner city youth and their families, based at the Boys and Girls Club of Manchester. Since 2006, Hector has also served the families of the Manchester School District as a part-time Bilingual Family Liaison, facilitating communication with the families of immigrant students and encouraging their involvement in the education of their children.

Now at the age of 47, Hector is a husband and father to two daughters and two sons. He is an engaged community activist who works two jobs and is finally realizing his dream of educating himself as he works to earn a BA in Science in Human Services at Springfield College. He hopes to receive his bachelor’s degree in December and plans to continue on to earn a master’s degree. “Working with youth, community and preaching to my own kids inspired me to finish school. I want to be a role model to my kids,” says Hector.

6. AYINKAMIYE ANNE BANDEMA

“It was a miracle,” says Ayinkamiye Anne Bandema, talking about how all of her immediate family members survived the genocide in Rwanda. Members of the Tutsi tribe, she and her sisters, brother and parents were scattered all over the country. Hundreds of thousands of other ethnic Tutsis were murdered during the Rwandan genocide in 1994 by two extremist Hutu militia groups.

Anne fled Rwanda the first time in 1994, but returned after a few weeks. Trained as a teacher, she taught elementary and secondary school. Then she worked for the District School where she met her husband Rugizecyane Samuel Bizimana. He was a former classmate from the eighth grade, and the couple met when they found themselves teaching in the same school. They were married in 1995.

Anne and her family left Rwanda for good in 1996. Her son, Prince, was eight months old and she was pregnant with their second child, Annette. The family fled to Uganda because her husband’s work with the United Nations put them in danger. He was reporting human rights violations to the United Nations and there was government interference and suspicion that he was a traitor. Eventually, the family made its way to Nairobi, Kenya where her husband continued his work with the United Nations. Knowing they could never return to Rwanda, the family registered as refugees and awaited resettlement.

Prince was nine years old and Annette was seven years old when the family arrived in New Hampshire in 2004. “They met friends right away. They looked forward to the winters they had seen in the movies. For them it was really good,” says Anne. Her children had learned English in Kenya so they did not have the same language problems other refugee children face.

For Anne the adjustment was a little more challenging. She was in culture shock. She couldn’t find familiar foods. She didn’t know anyone. Despite knowing English, French and four African languages, she had trouble finding work. “In Kenya, America was [perceived] like a paradise. When I got here I was disappointed ... most refugees have high expectations,” says Anne. At least, however, she was not harassed here. “In Nairobi we were harassed by the police who would threaten to take your papers if you didn’t give them money.”

Anne began volunteering with refugee women who were taking English classes. Her husband was gainfully employed, so Anne decided to go to school. Initially, she was going to work on becoming qualified to teach in the United States, but found herself drawn to Southern NH University for a Master of Science in International Community Economic Development.

In 2006, she was hired as a Volunteer In Service to America (VISTA) volunteer, serving as the Refugee Coordinator for the City of Manchester. Her role was to help bridge the gaps left by the resettlement programs. Refugees are essentially on their own eight months after resettlement and many still need considerable assistance. One of her accomplishments as a VISTA was to convene leaders from refugee and immigrant communities to form a group that will collectively identify needs and decide how they will be addressed. This group is called the Multicultural Network. “Another reward of this position,” says Anne, “was to understand the needs of women.



There is a need for women to address their own issues and to help each other move forward.”

Anne’s term as a VISTA ended in August 2007. Today, the 40-year old is focusing on developing an emerging organization, the Women for Women Coalition. Women for Women is the collaborative effort of several African women from various ethnic groups who want to empower and strengthen the role and participation of African women and girls in all spheres of development, promote self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and to provide a forum where they can be actively involved and where their voices can be heard.

Reflecting on what are the greatest needs of her community, Anne says, “People don’t believe in themselves. We need to have role models to build capacity of leaders. If people see others achieving something they will begin to believe they can too.” She also acknowledges the lack of English classes for women and men who are illiterate in their native language. “They want to learn English to get a job but they need someone who can speak their language and help translate it to English.”

While she has endured many challenges in Africa and in New Hampshire, Anne is full of hope and determination, “I am free. I have my breath, my strength—I will be able to achieve what I can.”

7. NASIR ABDI ARUSH

In the fall of 2000, Nasir Abdi Arush left Somalia for Manchester, New Hampshire to pursue graduate studies at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). He was fluent in both Somali and Italian, but knew only scattered words in English. After three months of intensive ESL classes here, he began a master's program in International Community Economic Development at SNHU. "It was difficult my first semester," he concedes, but Nasir is not afraid of things that are difficult.

Only 20 years old when, in December 1990, civil war began to tear apart his country, Nasir remained while many others fled. His sister, Starlin Abdi Arush, 15 years his senior, was an activist who returned to Somalia from abroad despite the danger, to help empower women and to mobilize people to improve their own lives. Her oldest brother still in Somalia, in a culture where a male family member could often prove invaluable, Nasir felt he had to stay to help.

"When you get past these challenges and reach real people, when you see their food production increase ... that is satisfaction. That is what you're looking for, to see people's lives change."

From 1993 through August 2000, Nasir worked with displaced refugees in Mogadishu, with farmers in rural villages, and with doctors seeking to bring in medicines and teach basic health care. He describes his role as a "cultural broker," helping international agencies meet with local communities, and seeking to build trust and transparency in an environment rife with violence, open corruption, and power-seeking middlemen.

"Sometimes you risked your life," he says simply. "Sometimes it seemed I spent half my time just talking ... to elders, to people with guns. It was essential to getting anything done."

And yet, Nasir explains, it was worth the sacrifice and risk: "When you get past these challenges and reach real people, when you see their food production increase ... that is satisfaction. That is what you're looking for, to see people's lives change."

In 1997, SNHU's School of Community Development came to Somalia with a program on conflict resolution. Nasir worked with them to identify women and youth to participate. Before leaving, the leader gave Nasir an application to the school. With his family's encouragement, he applied and enrolled, planning to stay in the United States for perhaps two or three years before returning home to continue his work.

Then, in 2002, his sister Starlin was assassinated. She was shot in Kenya while participating as a member of civil society in a reconciliation conference among Somali warlords. With emotion, Nasir recounts that 4,000 or 5,000 people came to her burial

in Somalia, including many women and children. Some came on foot, walking a day's journey. Nasir made the difficult choice not to be there. If he went back, he knew he would have to stay and carry on her work without her. Instead he entrusted others she had trained and inspired to carry on her legacy.

Somali Bantu refugees, most of them illiterate and without any formal schooling, began arriving in New Hampshire in June 2003. Nasir was busy studying for a second master's degree in Business Administration. He recollects: "Lutheran Social Services called on a Friday seeking any Somalis who could help, but my initial thought was to ignore the call." Monday they called again. And again on Wednesday. He called back and told them, "I am a student. I'm really busy. I can only help on week-ends." He met with that first Somali Bantu family, interpreting for them and learning about their struggles. Before long he found himself as a case worker for Lutheran Social Services (LSS). "You cannot really close your eyes," he explains. "In our culture, you have to help each other. It's a given that everyone expects you to help other members of your community." Nasir provided interpretation, helped families read their mail and navigate doctor's visits, find jobs and access services.

In early 2005, working toward a Graduate Certificate in Accounting, Nasir planned to pursue a career in business. He left LSS, but the Somali refugees kept calling. "You left your job, but you didn't leave us," he says they told him. He gave out his home phone number, did the same interpretation and family support work, but without a paycheck.

Nasir contacted the Somali Development Center (SDC) in Boston. They had years of experience, helpful advice and ideas, but no funds to offer. Thinking maybe he would volunteer and find others to help, he founded the NH branch of the Somali Development Center in 2005. Over the past two years Nasir has secured financial support from several local and one national foundation. Today he works full time, and then some, as Deputy Director of the SDC, leading the organization's Manchester office.

It is unusual to complete a conversation with Nasir without pausing for him to answer one of two cell phones he carries at all times. Requests for his assistance run the gamut. Does he have time to accompany the Manchester Health Department on a monthly tuberculosis home visit? Can he join the school district's social worker for a meeting to address one family's school enrollment and child care challenges? When can he be available for a meeting with an upset family recently relocated to temporary housing due to the children's lead poisoning? He makes it his business to be there.

His central strategy is: "To improve communication. More communication is key." Nasir tells refugees how important it is for them to study English so that they can communicate for themselves. Nasir is also a guest lecturer at several NH colleges, helping students in health and human service fields learn about Somali culture, religion, values and the integration difficulties refugees face. It is a good way, he feels, to reach members of the receiving community and to foster communication and trust. "Then these students will be educated and will educate their own families, and be sympathetic to the challenges they [refugees] are facing" he says.



8. NABIL MIGALLI

Nabil Migalli described the events of September 11 as “double grief.” The first was the tragedy itself—a deep and disturbing loss that every American felt. The second grief was that Arabs and Muslims in particular became victims of suspicion, threats and stereotyping. Luckily, only minor incidents of this nature were reported in New Hampshire.

Nabil’s work as a community leader has centered on Arab-American matters as well as outreach to immigrant and refugee groups in New Hampshire. In this role, Nabil sees first hand the barriers that newcomers face. Yet he describes his own arrival to the United States in 1978 as a relatively easy transition. “I learned English in Egypt, where I grew up and lived in Cairo which is really a crossroads for the Middle East as well as the world.”

“I have been a social worker all my life,” says Nabil, whose first U.S. experience was as an exchange social worker for the Council of International Programs in Philadelphia. There, he stayed with two host families and got a taste of middle-class American culture. He met his future wife, Anne-Marie, when he went to Charlottesville, NY, to assist the Institute of Cultural Affairs with a community development project in the village of Bayad in his native country.

After returning to Egypt for eighteen months, Nabil came back and married. The couple settled in New Hampshire, a state he describes as very welcoming. “I was one of the lucky ones. I never felt discrimination in this country. Perhaps it is that I am a Christian or that I adjusted to the culture easily. Of course, Arab culture is all about informal face-to-face relationships with your neighbors, so I set out to do the same here in this country. That is a good lesson in and of itself. Knowing your neighbors fosters understanding,” he says.

Determined to help newcomers and ethnic groups and his community at large, he became involved with nearly 10 community groups in the Manchester area and across New Hampshire. Some of his most passionate work is done on behalf of the Arab-American community. In 1988, Nabil co-founded the New Hampshire American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. In 2003, he co-founded The Arab-American Forum, a NH nonprofit organization focused on “educating for justice,” both at home and in the Middle East.

Nabil describes the group’s meetings as “a free speech zone.” Members discuss history, politics, literature, culture as well as challenges. “I would like to emphasize that it is impossible to lump 300 million Arabs or 1.2 million Muslims into one basket and label them all a threat to U.S. security,” he says.

Particularly sensitive to the needs of our state’s most vulnerable newcomers, Nabil says, “People do not understand the refugee tragedy. These are people who may never be able to go back home. They have been persecuted, tortured or imprisoned. Many may suffer guilt at leaving family members behind. They grapple daily with social and psychological issues.”

As part of Nabil’s work with the Immigrants Rights Task Force in 2004, he helped to promote an effort to lift restrictions placed on non-citizens by the New Hampshire Division of Motor Vehicles in the process of applying for a driver license. In



coordination with the group, New Hampshire Legal Assistance filed a federal lawsuit to end immigrant and refugee profiling on licenses and make it easier to obtain a permanent license without arbitrary restrictions. The group’s efforts paid off and the Court decision brought fairness to non-citizens applying to obtain driver licenses.

Nabil is also proud of his involvement in organizing a community forum for immigrants and refugees, through his contact with the office of U.S. Senator John E. Sununu. The forum was attended by Manchester Mayor Frank Guinta as well as several government officials and numerous service providers. A total of 110 people attended, representing nearly thirty countries, and voiced their issues and concerns. He notes, “It was an opportunity for immigrants and refugees to have a conversation and focus on basic needs of the community as a whole.”

Nabil continues to stay closely involved with the community as a leader who advocates for issues beyond immigrants and refugees. “One of my dreams is to launch an enhanced referral service, as part of a community center. It would not just be for immigrants and refugees. It would be a multi-cultural center serving the community at large. The Manchester community needs such a comprehensive service center.”

Nabil believes that newcomers to New Hampshire should still maintain and cherish their cultural identity but that the many factions and groups need to come together for coordinated advocacy and services. Understanding and connectedness will go a long way toward fostering integration. “You do fear what you don’t know. We must reach out to our neighbors and let them know we are good people,” he says. To that end, Nabil recently worked with a small group of community leaders to organize the first annual Multi-Cultural Festival in Manchester in October 2007. This is a revival of the International Festival that he and Anne-Marie were involved in until the early 1990’s.

Nabil has been recognized for his advocacy and leadership. In 1990, he received the national Alex Odeh Memorial Award for his efforts in organizing Arab-Americans and in 1997 was recognized by the State of New Hampshire with the Martin Luther King Award. He acknowledges the importance of raising new generations of ethnic leadership to provide support to their communities and participate effectively in the larger city community. And leadership training within the immigrant and refugee communities is an important investment for ensuring future leaders.

9. GERALDINE KIREGA

As an elementary school student in Tanzania, Geraldine Kirega walked from her small village alone, “four miles to school, four miles back” along a foggy plateau overlooking Lake Victoria, on the border of Tanzania and Uganda. She had no shoes. Broad banana leaves served as her leaky umbrella.

Students were beaten by their teacher for arriving at school in wet clothing. Geraldine had to endure that beating just once and she says it forced her to think creatively. The next day she sat at her desk, dry and ready to learn despite the perpetually rainy walk. The teacher was stumped and turned his cruel attention to others, many of whom dropped out later. Everyday thereafter, she would wrap her school clothes in banana leaves, tuck them under her arm and change out of her wet dress upon arrival at school.

This desire to learn and determination to clear obstacles carried Geraldine easily through school. She excelled at exams and, despite a societal bias against females being educated, Geraldine pursued advanced degrees in Education and Community Economic Development. Her studies took her to places far from her village—to England, Denmark, Austria, Italy, and Scotland. On a snowy February day in 1993, it took her to Southern New Hampshire University, where she earned her second master’s degree.

By this time, she had already worked for the Ministry of Education in Tanzania and taught women the importance of furthering themselves through education. She had represented her country at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. She came to the U.S. to study Community Economic Development. Her particular interest was in helping women and children. Geraldine paraphrases a quotation about the importance of reaching women, “When teaching a man, one person learns. When teaching a woman, a whole family learns.”

Connecting with the growing population of refugees in Manchester, Geraldine began teaching English and the importance of having the tools to navigate one’s own life. Her vision crystallized: refugees transformed into confident, independent and prosperous citizens. Eventually, she got a green card and brought her husband and five children to the U.S., mainly for the educational opportunities here. They’ve settled in well and dealt with typical challenges that parents and children face during the school-age years. One child is enrolled at the University of New Hampshire and another has married and started a family, making Geraldine a proud grandmother.

In Boston and in Manchester, she has served in many capacities: teacher, consultant, representative on task forces and commissions. Recently, Geraldine has cut back on full-time consulting so she can invest her energy in developing the Women for Women Coalition, a start-up nonprofit focused on African women. The resulting squeeze on personal funds has cut off her phone service and added challenges to an already daunting effort. Given the circumstances, she can’t contemplate taking her annual trip back home. Undeterred, she says, “You must suffer first, before you get something.” She speaks with passion and drive. After a frustrating two years searching for adequate space, Women for Women Coalition has secured a location for teaching African refugees literacy and math skills. The materials are piled high in a corner, the headlines shouting in all capitals, “YOU CAN READ.”



In her homeland, Geraldine taught people who were illiterate in their own tongue how to read and write. She brings that first-hand experience here to state unequivocally, “It can be done. Play your part.” She wants to plant her belief firmly, amidst the widespread frustration of struggling students, and then watch the glimmer of hope grow.

Teaching brings her in touch with all the social and cultural challenges that immigrants and refugees face. If children and parents do not learn English together, then parents can lose touch with their teens, who, in turn, are more vulnerable to violence and crime. Even if a child remains on a positive track, “the child may swim, but the parents sink,” she says, which is “not so good for the family.” Some of the other challenges she sees relate to family sizes and the housing and daycare dilemmas they pose. In Africa, the more children you have (10 is not atypical), the greater your security in old age. But it is difficult to find a safe, affordable three- or four-bedroom apartment here. Finding suitable, affordable daycare is also a challenge, making it difficult for mothers to work outside the home. She believes that one solution lies in educating women on family planning and healthcare, including the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS.

One of the gifts of her culture is that there is no loneliness. All are “brothers.” All are cared for by family. There are no nursing homes or special housing for the severely disabled. Geraldine says, there is no such thing as having no one to talk with about your worries. “If you have trouble, you have many aunts to go to. You are never without someone to talk with who will care.”

Geraldine has been inspired by mentors and leaders and writers. She quotes Okot P’Bitek, an African writer from Uganda, in his poem “Song of Lawino” about the mix of African and Western cultures, from which she translates a phrase, “The pumpkin in the old homestead should not be uprooted.” The pumpkin symbolizes traditions, deep and well established. When moving on to a new home, “we bring the seeds and spread them and mix them with the new,” she says. “It is good to maintain the culture ... what is old is gold.”

Incidentally, the pumpkin was recently named the New Hampshire state fruit.

10. FLORENTINA DINU

Growing up in Bucharest, Florentina Dinu felt reasonably comfortable in the “middle-income” household her parents created for their only child. But the relative comforts she enjoyed with two working parents in communist Romania vanished when her parents divorced, leaving then 19-year-old Florentina and her mother vulnerable to and dependent on a system that exploited them.

Forced to sell their home to divide the equity, Florentina and her mother’s only resource was the high-priced black market for housing which rapidly used up their savings. “In Romania you can get an apartment from the government but only if you’re married and have children. I wasn’t planning to get married or have kids so I had no chance.” Seeing no way out, Florentina and her mother initiated the lengthy process of applying for permission to leave the country. As a result of this application they were stripped of their Romanian citizenship, thereby losing their ID, work permit and access to health services. Each time Florentina ventured into the streets to purchase a loaf of bread, she risked being arrested simply for not having proof of employment.

Forbidden to obtain passports, they waited six years to gain exit documents and then contacted a variety of embassies in search of a safe haven. Only Canada, Australia, and the United States were willing to accept refugees. The U.S. accepted them first.

In 1988 Florentina, then 30 years old, and her mother arrived in New York City and were directed for resettlement in Manchester, New Hampshire. “When you’re a refugee, you go where they accept you.” She was shocked. Instead of the vibrant street scenes she had grown accustomed to, she found in Manchester empty streets and neighborhoods where homes were boarded up.

The abundance of food and materials was equally surprising. By the time Florentina and her mother left Romania, the shelves in Romania’s stores were empty. It was a poignant moment when they stepped past the open doors of an American grocery store for the first time. Florentina recalls, “My mother said, ‘Look how much food is here and how many goods are here when people in Romania have nothing.’ Tears were streaming down her face.”

Job opportunities came easily to Florentina, who speaks three languages and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Italian from Bucharest University. While with the International Institute of New Hampshire, her responsibilities included establishing and coordinating a medical interpreters’ bank, training and supervising bilingual case managers and interpreters, managing the health care coordination department, and providing cross-cultural training for agency volunteers and other social service providers.

She has also worked with the refugee resettlement program operated by Lutheran Social Services. Florentina began as a bilingual program coordinator, was later promoted to director, and finally served as a consultant. Currently, she works for the Southern New Hampshire Area Health Education Center (Southern NH AHEC). As their medical interpretation services coordinator/instructor she oversees the center’s training programs and teaches.

In addition to her work with Southern NH AHEC, Florentina is active as a community advocate and volunteer. She is president of the New England Trained Interpreters Association, which seeks to offer support and a network to interpreters, and plans to provide continuing education services. Florentina is also a co-chair of the Multicultural Network, a newly formed coalition of community leaders representing the numerous immigrant and refugee communities in the greater Manchester area.

“People don’t always understand the heartache and hardship immigrants are forced to bear and that ultimately tears them away from family and friends and everything they have ever known.”

As she scans the vast landscape of immigrants and refugees in this area, she sees that their greatest need is for a common venue to gather and learn about each other’s cultures and their new country’s culture. “They don’t see that other people suffered too and they don’t understand what happens in other countries,” Florentina says.

She is adamant that her suffering “was nothing” when compared with the adversities other people endured in refugee camps and the conditions people have escaped. “People don’t always understand,” she says, “the heartache and hardship immigrants are forced to bear and that ultimately tears them away from family and friends and everything they have ever known. You leave everything behind, everything you know. You leave your own identity sometimes.”

Nobody wants to leave one’s home and country, Florentina points out, simply because of the promise of opportunity in another land. They leave because they are forced to. Although she was grateful for the opportunity to flee Romania, Florentina was also terrified. She didn’t know where she was going in this wide country or if she would be able to find a job, and she had no idea how she and her mother would survive.

But after they arrived on U.S. soil she thought to herself, “God, I hope I can do something to bring more people from all over the world to this place.” Through her hard work, Florentina not only has helped fellow Romanians escape bleak situations but also has eased the transition and advocated for an array of nationalities of immigrants. She says, “My dream was achieved.”



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