

Religion

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INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Community discussion to feature perspectives from resettlement agencies, refugees in Michigan

A humanitarian imperative

By Douglas Kindschi

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From 7 to 9 p.m. Tuesday, the community will gather at the Catholic Information Center in Grand Rapids for the event, "Welcoming Refugees: Do Unto Others."

People from churches and mosques to businesses and schools will learn from, engage with and support our local refugee and immigrant communities. The event is sponsored by more than 50 religious organizations and civic institutions, which have signed on to strengthen our message of hospitality over hatred. Find the list at bit.ly/DoUntoOthers-GR.

The Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," which is found in some form in all major traditions, is motivating congregations and communities to put this value into action by welcoming our new neighbors.

On the evening of Michigan's presidential primary, we will seek to affirm our responsibility and opportunity to welcome those in need to our communities.

We will hear from representatives of our city, from the Michigan Office for New Americans, the local social service agencies Bethany Christian Services and Lutheran Social Services, as well as from refugees who have come to Grand Rapids to make their new homes.

We will hear the stories from these refugees who have come from around the world to escape violence and find security and safety in our country.

This issue is not a political debate, but a moral concern and a humanitarian imperative. If we truly "do unto others," as many of our traditions tell us to, then we will welcome refugees as our new neighbors, colleagues, community leaders and friends.

Some stories are included here. Read about a family separated for five years because of violence in their country but are now together. Hear the story of a daughter and her mother who fled from war and violence in Afghanistan. Learn how a Bhutanese refugee has established his own business in West Michigan.

Among the sponsoring organizations are two of the agencies responsible for



Refugees and migrants, who entered Macedonia illegally and were detained by the police, wait to be returned to Greece at a checkpoint on the border near southern Macedonia's town of Gevgelija on Monday. Unlike refugees who travel to Europe, who can simply pay a smuggler to transport them, refugees coming to the U.S. are vetted by the United Nations refugee agency, then by the State Department, the FBI, and the departments of Homeland Security and Defense. The process takes 18 months to two years. (AP)

refugee services in Michigan.

Lutheran Social Services of Michigan is the largest refugee resettlement agency in the state. It has helped resettle refugees from more than 20 countries since 1949. It places refugees in Metro Detroit, Lansing, Grand Rapids and Battle Creek, serving 4,328 refugees last year alone. Of that total, 1,127 were newly resettled adults and families, and 211 were refugee minors placed in foster care settings.

LSSM works in partnership with local housing providers, employers, churches and community members to guide refugees toward self-sufficiency.

Through its Refugee Adult and Family Programs, Bethany Christian Services provides resettlement, employment and health services to refugees in West Michigan.

The Resettlement Program will welcome 430 individuals this year from countries such as Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma, South Sudan, Iraq, Syria and Cuba. The Employment Program, which serves refugees for up to five years in the United States, will assist about 800 refugees in connecting with job opportunities through local employers.

On Tuesday, learn how you can help new refugees coming into our communities,

how your church or organization can help sponsor families in need and how our communities can be more welcoming to these new neighbors.

We are expecting a large attendance, so please register to attend Tuesday by calling 616-459-7267 or sending an email to register@catholicinformationcenter.org. Further information also is available at interfaithunderstanding.org.

Join us and the dozens of co-sponsoring organizations to be a part of shifting the narrative around refugees, and to ensure Michigan continues to welcome our new neighbors.

UNITING A FAMILY

It has been eight years since Flory and Elodie lost their children amid the chaos at the border between Congo and Uganda.

"When the gunfight broke out at the border, everyone scattered. My daughters ran into the forest to avoid being captured. And they lived there for five years."

Even after the couple was safely resettled in Grand Rapids in 2012, not a day went by when Flory and Elodie did not cry for their daughters' safety.

Imagine seeing your family members and friends murdered every day as part of a seemingly never-ending conflict for wealth and power. What hope would you have left after losing your own children in that same war-torn nation?

"After five years, that hope diminishes more and more. But we never gave up finding them."

That persistence paid off in 2013, when Flory and Elodie received a call from the

American Red Cross stating their children had been found alive.

After the girls fled, they were located by Elodie's parents and were with them, eventually making their way to Uganda.

Feeling so euphoric, the rejuvenated parents immediately began a grueling two-year immigration process to bring the children to the U.S.

The entire family finally was reunited in Grand Rapids in 2015.



SUNITA SAFI

Sunita Safi was born in Afghanistan. She fled with her mother, Mobina, and sister to India at the age of 12. She arrived in Grand Rapids 10 weeks ago as a refugee. She is 20 years old and full of hope.

"We felt really good coming here," she said. "We fled Afghanistan because we weren't safe there, there was so much war."

"It's good here, we like it a lot. There are the same rights for a foreigner that there are for Americans; we have ID cards and go to work — any work; we have a work permit and can go to school, it's amazing."

Sunita asked her mom about her dreams for the future. Mobina said, "I hope that my daughter completes her education, becomes a doctor, and gets a good job to stand on her feet and support herself."

"My mom is my superhero and my role model," Sunita said. "She has suffered so much from when she was young, to losing her husband and raising my sister and me alone. All I want is to work hard so she can have a better future with joy and happiness and leave the bad things in her past behind."

Sunita likes West Michigan.

"I'm really excited to be here," she said. "My mom has struggled her whole life and has some health issues. I want to get a job,



continue my education and take care of my mom."

Asked what the West Michigan community should know about refugees, she said, "They should know that a refugee is also a human being; no one wants to leave their home, their relatives, and flee their country. The problems are life-threatening; they cannot live in their country with their family, so that's why they flee to another country as a refugee," she said.

Sunita and Mobina are Muslims, and are grateful for freedom of religion.

"There are no restrictions here for continuing our faith," she said. "We are still able to pray from our home five times a day. So far in my experience, I haven't seen any Americans that have judged us. We are allowed to speak and not be afraid."

REFUGEE ENTREPRENEUR

Nandu Dangal, owner of Everest Marketplace in the Towne and Country Shopping Mall at 4301 Kalamazoo SE, arrived in Grand Rapids as a refugee from Bhutan in 2008.

Everest Marketplace is Dangal's second venture, boasting colorful displays of traditional clothing, produce and packaged food from various South Asian cultures.

With little English and few prospects during the recession, he struggled until landing a job at Meijer, which he held for five-and-a-half years.

"Working as a cashier, and then in customer service at Meijer taught me so many things about doing business."

Before long, Dangal was taking classes in business and home ownership at an area college while working extra hours as a cab driver, factory worker and interpreter to put away money.

In 2012, he had saved enough money to open a business and buy a home.

Dangal said he has "always had a vision, not only for personal success, but also helping others."

Since 2008, many Bhutanese refu-



gees have resettled in Grand Rapids after long years sojourning in camps in Nepal.

Part of Dangal's success has been helping others put down roots.

"When I came to the U.S., I needed an interpreter. Now, I am an interpreter."

Six months ago, Dangal was able to purchase space for Everest Marketplace, which provides familiar foods, such as panipuri, to the Bhutanese community — and also to Burmese, Somali, Tanzanian and customers from other parts of the globe.

Research also shows, in addition to starting businesses, refugee and immigrant workers buy homes, pay taxes and purchase goods — a boon for all involved in our local economy.