A LONG-AWAITED REUNION…
Then, A Worldwide Pandemic

Coming to the United States is a new beginning for refugees like Lalia. They look ahead with optimism, determined to rebuild the lives they lost to violence or persecution.

For Lalia, a young Congolese refugee, that new beginning was two-fold: She was pregnant with her first child when we welcomed her to Chicago in 2016!

However, her journey was as much about what she left behind as the future ahead. When finally offered the chance to resettle in the U.S., Lalia had to leave her husband Bob in the Tanzanian refugee camp where they met while he awaited clearance to join her.

You can imagine how difficult that must have been. Uprooting everything she knew to provide her family with a better life, with no guarantee of when she’d see her husband again.

Over the next four years, Lalia worked hard to become self-reliant and create a better future for her son, awaiting the day her family would be reunited.

Thanks to your support, Lalia enrolled in RefugeeOne’s English classes to prepare her for work. We helped her find a job at The Selfhelp Home, a senior living facility founded to help Holocaust survivors. She’s worked there four years now, serving people who fled similar circumstances as she did.

Meanwhile, we helped her navigate the complex immigration process required for Bob to join her and their son—a prolonged fight that, at times, seemed next to impossible. But Lalia never gave up. She even took the initiative to contact her U.S. Congresswoman, Jan Schakowsky, to help expediate their application for reunification.

Finally, after years of waiting and uncertainty, Lalia and Bob received the exciting news that they would be reunited this past February.

It was a joyful reunion! We joined Lalia at O’Hare—the first time she’d returned since her own arrival—as she greeted Bob and introduced him to their now nearly 4-year-old son. Bob was also greeted by the friendly faces of the Second City Welcome co-sponsorship team, led by Phil and Olivia Barnes, a Chicago couple who had organized support for Bob’s arrival and set up a new apartment for the family.

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Together at last, Lalia and Bob were eager to begin building their life together, but it was only a matter of weeks before their plans were interrupted once again.

With the onset of the global pandemic, they were met with new challenges that would be difficult for any family to overcome, but especially refugee families like theirs.

Bob had just begun learning English at RefugeeOne and searching for work—a difficult charge when the entire country was experiencing unprecedented lay-offs and unemployment.

To make matters worse, recently-arrived refugees like Bob didn’t qualify for the $1,200 cash payments offered through the CARES Act, a federal pandemic relief bill. Since he hadn’t yet found work, he didn’t receive unemployment or other forms of pandemic assistance, either.

Like many refugees, Lalia continued working on the front lines. Although she was fortunate to maintain her job at the senior living facility, there was added anxiety of exposure to the virus at work and on her daily commute.

Soon, the couple was met with yet another surprise when they learned Lalia was expecting! While they were excited to share the news with their family, friends, and co-sponsors, they also felt the pressure of providing for another child.

Fortunately, thanks to his hard work and the help of our employment team, Bob was recently hired by The Selfhelp Home, working alongside Lalia. He’s one of more than 25 refugees we helped find new employment throughout the pandemic.

Co-sponsors Phil and Olivia have also been there for Lalia and Bob as they’ve navigated life in the era of COVID-19. They keep in touch using video chat on WhatsApp and even met up at the park over the summer—with masks and social distancing, of course.

Despite the challenges they face, Lalia and Bob are eager for what the future holds. Life in Chicago provides their family with the safety and opportunity needed to flourish—together.

Recent studies find that refugees are critical to the fight, response, and recovery our nation needs—especially in key sectors like healthcare and the food supply chain.*

**REFUGEES AS ESSENTIAL WORKERS...**

**Keeping us healthy and safe**
- More than 176,000 refugees work in the U.S. healthcare sector
- Among them, 70.6% are refugee women
- Refugees work at all levels of the workforce as physicians, surgeons, dentists, nurses, aids, housekeepers, and laboratory technologists and technicians

**Putting food on our tables**
- More than 175,000 refugees work in industries within the U.S. food supply chain
- Refugees work at all levels, from farms and manufacturers to food service and restaurants

*Data from “Immigration and COVID-19” The New American Economy, July 23, 2020

Help Refugees Find Work:

[Email us at info@refugeeone.org!](mailto:info@refugeeone.org)
“We’ve got a friendly competition going,” said Judy, a member of Bethany United Church of Christ in Chicago’s Ravenswood neighborhood.

She’s referring to the Chili Cookoff they host each year with their friends at nearby Pilgrim Lutheran Church. The two congregations use the funds raised to welcome refugee families like Mohammad’s, a Rohingya family we resettled in 2018.

Judy and other congregation members were at O’Hare with RefugeeOne to greet Mohammad, his wife, and their then 2-year-old daughter. They’ve been friends ever since.

Mohammad—a hard worker—quickly found a job at O’Hare and began working toward self-reliance. Having been denied the ability to work in Burma, he was proud to be providing for his family.

Then everything changed due to COVID-19.

Like hundreds of refugees in Chicago, Mohammad’s stability was upended by the pandemic. This spring, he was furloughed from the job he had maintained for more than a year. Soon, his employer would let the majority of the staff go completely, including Mohammad.

Accessing unemployment, public benefits, and other forms of pandemic assistance can be difficult for refugee families who are still learning English and grappling to adjust to life in the U.S.

Thankfully, Mohammad’s co-sponsors were there to offer support during this moment of need.

Judy and other volunteers organized food deliveries and checked in with the family often. They even took them grocery shopping, helping them understand important health and safety protocol like wearing masks and how to properly wipe down surfaces.

This isn’t the group’s first time co-sponsoring a refugee family. Some of Judy’s favorite memories over the years include learning how to make tom yum soup and sharing in each other’s cultures, holidays, and traditions.

“It’s been such a rewarding experience. We were especially grateful for the trainings RefugeeOne provided,” said Judy. “They really prepare you for a lot of things you might not expect.”

The two churches forged their partnership days after President Trump announced a refugee and Muslim travel ban one week after his inauguration.

Originally motivated by the rampant myths and negative rhetoric about refugees, Judy says they continue the work today because of the relationships they’ve formed.

That affinity was evident at a gathering the group hosted for the family. When asked if they had other relatives in the U.S., Mohammad looked around proudly and stated: “This is our family now.”

Interested in co-sponsoring a refugee family? Although arrivals have slowed due to COVID-19, we continue to welcome refugees each month. Want to welcome a refugee family as a co-sponsor? Visit refugeeone.org/co-sponsor for information.

Meet Sandra, one the refugee women using skills learned in our Sewing Studio to give back to the place they now call home—by sewing face masks.

It all started with a small grant from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ Wilmette congregation to make 600 masks to donate throughout the community. Although our Sewing Studio was closed due to COVID-19, we delivered brand new sewing machines to women like Sandra so they could work from home.

Since then, they’ve made more than 4,000 masks for essential workers, people in need.

Support refugee women—buy a handmade mask at refugeeone.org/masks today!

Many refugees have been laid off as a result of the pandemic. Sewing masks allows them to earn supplemental income while using their new skills.
Dear friends,

This year, as we weather the storm of COVID-19, I’m reminded of the old adage that says, “change is life’s only constant.”

As a refugee myself, I know that change can interrupt even our best laid plans. However, it’s also in those moments of uncertainty that we define ourselves.

Daily, I am moved by the compassion I see in our community. I draw strength from resilient refugees like Lalia and Bob, working on the front lines of the pandemic to serve their new neighbors. I find hope in the generosity of volunteers and donors like you, who make RefugeeOne’s innovative services possible.

Thanks to your support, refugee families are receiving quality remote services, which extend our reach to those previously inaccessible due to distance and other barriers. We’re helping them access benefits and mitigate loss of wages and employment. And, we’re still welcoming new arrivals! See the story inside about what a difference co-sponsors make and how you can volunteer.

You may have heard about our recent move to Chicago’s West Ridge neighborhood and our plans to build a permanent home there by 2022. In the months ahead, I look forward to sharing how our future home will open doors of opportunity for refugees and how you can support this exciting endeavor.

Learn more at RefugeeOne.org/2020move.

Though the challenges stemming from COVID-19 are many, it’s people like you who make all the difference in the lives of refugees.

With gratitude,

Melineh Kano
Executive Director