Nyota remembers her time in the refugee camp well; it was where she was born. Her parents fled war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and spent ten years in Tanzania waiting to be resettled. For Nyota, growing up in a refugee camp severely constrained her opportunities.

“Being born as a refugee... all my dreams were shattered,” recalls Nyota. “...I never thought I would be able to go to college or get an education.”

Now, Nyota is starting her third year at DePaul University in Chicago, overjoyed to pursue an accounting degree. Nyota’s journey to college has not been straightforward. Her family arrived in Chicago in 2016 with almost nothing. RefugeeOne helped enroll her at Sullivan High School as a freshman. It was an arduous start—she was two years older than her peers and didn’t speak a word of English. The school district placed her, like all refugees, based on her age, not her level of education. However, with support from her family and help from RefugeeOne staff and volunteers, Nyota excelled and graduated on time with multiple college offers.

Nyota is one of many students RefugeeOne has supported in their college journey.

Mark Monke arrived alone in 2019 at the age of 22, as a refugee from Ukraine. Now, he is pursuing his Associate’s degree.

“I do school part-time and I work part-time. It’s not easy, but some people take on even more,” commented Mark. He is studying computer science at Truman College, a City College of Chicago, to fulfill his dream of one day working for a video game design company in California.

As refugees, Mark and Nyota have faced similar obstacles in their goal of earning a college degree here.

“Even if you speak English well, it’s very difficult to navigate the educational system and to just understand what to do. What is GPA? What is a GED?” said Mark, echoing the feelings of so many refugees entering higher education.

For Nyota, COVID disrupted her first years of college. Her classes were held online, and she did not meet her professors face-to-face until her second year of college.

Mark and Nyota have not had to face the challenges alone. Staff, volunteers, and supporters from RefugeeOne have rallied to both of their causes. Nyota gave
thanks to her volunteer tutor, Angela, who greatly supported her throughout her education. “Going to tour colleges [and] applying for financial aid; she [Angela] helped me a lot,” recalled Nyota. After overcoming so much Nyota looked back on her experience, commenting, “I am proud of myself for just being able to keep up with school and belong[ing] to a community.”

Mark praised RefugeeOne staff as vital in navigating all the cryptic details of college admission and scholarships. “I truly couldn’t believe how great [RefugeeOne staff] were. I feel just so lucky to have met people like Jamie [Youth and Advocacy Coordinator], and there are so many others at this organization that have been truly helpful and just like essential to establishing myself here,” Mark recalled fondly.

Mark noted several high points in his college career. With the help of RefugeeOne, he secured a Pell grant, MAP grant, and the $10,000 Julia Stasch Scholarship for Refugees. The brightest moment was when his mother arrived safely in the U.S. from Ukraine this summer, after 3 years apart. After overcoming so much Nyota looked back on her experience, commenting, “I am proud of myself for just being able to keep up with school and belong[ing] to a community.” She gave a note of advice to refugees, saying; “If they want to pursue an education, everything is harder. Just keep going, and you’ll get there.”

Each year, RefugeeOne helps more than 400 young refugees succeed in school and life through these comprehensive services:

- After-School Program
- Summer Program
- In-Home Tutoring & Mentoring
- Young Adult Mentoring
- Parent Education & Support
- Mental Health Care

LOOKING TO GIVE BACK?

Are you a young professional in Chicago looking to do something fulfilling? Be a friend and role model for a young adult refugee, age 16 to 24! Help them work toward their education and career goals. Be the change you want to see in the world. For more information, visit refugeeone.org/volunteer.
Chrysa's family fled the Turkish military invasion of Cyprus in 1974. She still remembers it clearly. “My uncle Jack, who was living in Chicago, sponsored our immigration process. After three long years of living in limbo between refugee camps, empty storefronts, and abandoned apartments, our application was approved in 1977.”

This is the story of Chrysa Xioufaridou Moster, the co-founder of the ZAFEE scholarship and a RefugeeOne volunteer.

Chrysa knows first-hand what it feels like to be forced to leave one’s home, to experience trauma and insecurity and overcome the challenges of a new language, culture, and way of life.

“My uncle, along with the Greek American community in Chicago, served as our resettlement and support network,” said Chrysa. “The strength of that community left an impression on me and guided me throughout my life to seek and be a part of collective efforts to make a greater impact where needed.”

Staying true to these words, Chrysa joined the RefugeeOne community 6 years ago as a volunteer mentor. She aided a Syrian family in establishing themselves in Chicago and assisting in the children’s education up to college. “It is our greatest joy to celebrate their successes and milestones,” says Chrysa about the family she mentored.

Recently, Chrysa and her family felt called to do more. They established the ZAFEE scholarship to help newly arrived refugees in Chicago go to a college or vocational school. The scholarship is renewable for up to 4 years, or $20,000 total.

Meet Ridwan, an 18-year-old Rohingya refugee and the first recipient of the ZAFEE scholarship. Born to a Rohingya Burmese family, RefugeeOne welcomed him and his family to Chicago in 2016.

This August, he set out on a pre-med track at Loyola University. His dream? To become a doctor so he can give back to his community and the country that welcomed his family.

Being the first in his family to go to college worries Ridwan. Despite living at home to keep expenses low, the stress of paying for college is ever-present.

“All that stress holding me down. But I can do this. Other people can do it; why can’t I?” says Ridwan. With hard work and guidance from RefugeeOne staff, Ridwan earned the ZAFEE scholarship, as well as financial aid through Loyola, and a Pell grant.

Though they have never met, Chrysa and Ridwan share incredible ties: Both are first-generation college graduates, and both deeply love their communities. Yet most distinctly has been their sense of gratitude and willingness to help others who have faced the hardship of being refugees.

Speaking from the heart to all RefugeeOne supporters, Ridwan said, “Thank you so much; there’s no way that we could do all this without you guys. We feel like this is our home. This is our country now, and we are going to be a strong family.”

“MY FAMILY AND I ARE FOREVER INDEBTED TO THE MANY PEOPLE WHO HELPED IN OUR REFUGEE JOURNEY. I WANT TO PAY IT FORWARD.”
–CHRYSYA MOSTER
We’re Home!

We are happy to announce that we are now located at 6008 N. California Ave in the West Rogers Park Neighborhood. Our new headquarters brings all our services under one roof for the first time in our 40-year history: English classes, case management, youth programs… and much more!

Learn More:
Web: refugeeone.org
Email: info@refugeeone.org

Dear friends,

I am happy to announce the revival of our newsletter this fall. This year we have navigated many changes: a new home, new staff, new challenges, and of course, new opportunities.

As a refugee myself, I know that change can interrupt our best-laid plans. That’s why we created a program for young adult refugees 3 years ago as a way to help them achieve their full potential. We want to prepare them for the changing road ahead, and provide support for not just those looking for employment, but also those looking for a brighter future.

In this letter you will read about Nyota, Mark, and Ridwan, all of whom show that education is a challenging but worthwhile investment.

Thanks to your support, RefugeeOne has been able to aid many young refugees on their journey. That includes helping some secure scholarships like the one on page 4, created by our volunteer Chrysa. I know what a blessing it is to have people like Chrysa, who are willing to pay it forward.

With our new home and our growing programs, I want to remind you that our client’s success would not be possible without you. Thank you for giving your time, talents, and resources to welcome refugees. Together we are building the foundations for a brighter future for all refugees here in Chicago.

Sincerely,

Melineh Kano

Letter from the Executive Director, Melineh Kano