Exemplary Women

This spring, in honor of International Women’s Day, we want to highlight some of the women that add to the beautiful tapestry of RefugeeOne. In this newsletter you will read about 5 amazing women: Nekbahkt, an Afghan refugee and women’s rights advocate; Kateryna, a Ukrainian mother and survivor of the siege of Mariupol; Linda, an exemplary RefugeeOne co-sponsor; Eca, a Congolese mother who led 8 family members to the U.S.; and our own executive director, Melineh, an Armenian refugee from Iran.

Inside these pages we also want to share the unique situation of refugee women—the struggles they face and the extraordinary gifts they bring to their communities. We acknowledge that women are often the first responders in a crisis, and whether en route or in camps, in home countries or destination countries, they play a crucial role in caring for, sustaining and rebuilding their communities. At the same time, women refugees too often suffer from marginalization, sexual and gender-based violence, and child marriage. They also often carry the heaviest of household responsibilities.

Moving to the U.S. can enable refugee women and girls to take on new roles and initiate positive change for themselves, their families, and their community. At RefugeeOne, we strive to equip women and girls to turn obstacles into building blocks for better lives.

RefugeeOne’s services are intentionally designed to benefit women and girls from around the world. Our programs address feelings of isolation and create opportunity throughout resettlement. Donate today at refugeeone.org/donate
Nekbahkt Merzayee has overcome the unimaginable with bravery and resilience. Born in Afghanistan in 1990, she lived in Kabul through turbulent decades. When she was only 18, a bomb blast took most of her immediate family and her arms, which had to be amputated.

While recovering in the hospital, she was inspired by two women volunteers who cared for her ceaselessly. Their examples of kindness and commitment to empowering women moved her to do the same. She became a disability and women’s rights activist in Afghanistan.

In 2021, the Taliban takeover forced her to flee. RefugeeOne welcomed her; providing an apartment, sourcing doctors to upgrade her 15-year-old prosthetics, and connecting her with Afghan American volunteers from her community. These volunteers helped Nekhbakt with simple tasks, like getting dressed, which used to take her hours due to her prosthetics. Now, Nekhbakt has a helper who visits daily, and her new prosthetics allow her to live more independently in many ways.

“AFTER THE BOMB BLAST, TWO WOMEN VOLUNTEERS HELPED ME CONSTANTLY. THEY INSPIRED ME TO ALSO VOLUNTEER. THEY LED ME TO BEING AN ACTIVIST.”

Kateryna Shvartsman has been a model of self-giving and motherly love. Born in Mariupol, Ukraine in 1983, her life before the Russian invasion in 2022 had been normal. She was married, raising a young boy, and had a degree in nursing.

The war changed everything. In the face of constant shelling, death, hunger, and cold, she remained resilient and sought to help others; administering medical aid to those in need.

After two unbearable weeks, Kateryna, her son, and a neighbor took the brave step of leaving the besieged city. They fled, surviving impossible odds to make it to Western Ukraine. Kateryna came to the U.S. via sponsorship from a family friend and support from RefugeeOne. Now she has finally reunited with her last remaining family members and has plans to pursue a nursing degree here in the U.S., to return to serving others how she knows best.

“WHEN I CAME, I WAS SO UNCOMFORTABLE WITH EVERYTHING... BUT [AN AMERICAN FRIEND] TOOK ME IN AND FILLED ME WITH CONFIDENCE. I WAS ABLE TO FEEL AT HOME.”
Linda Street has gone above and beyond as a RefugeeOne co-sponsor volunteer. The wife of a military husband, Linda spent many years living in different countries and became curious about cross-cultural connections. A school teacher by trade, Linda describes herself as a problem-solver and loves working with others to better the lives of others. Two years ago, she felt a fire within her to reach out to her church about helping refugees. That is when she was put in touch with RefugeeOne and immediately became a co-sponsor. “We were all in.”

In two short years, Linda has organized Grace Lutheran Church of River Forest to co-sponsor three different refugee families, and engaged others churches in the process.

“I LIKE THE OPEN DOORS [THAT CO-SPONSORSHIP PROVIDES]. INVITING IN OTHER PEOPLE TO GET INVOLVED IN THE GOOD WORK... IT’S BETTER WHEN REFUGEES CAN BE WELCOMED BY MULTIPLE PARTS OF COMMUNITY.”

As a leader, Eca Ekyamba has shown strength and fortitude and proven herself to be a true matriarch of her family. Eca was born in Congo and fled from her home country as a young woman to escape the civil war. For 24 years, Eca raised her family in a Tanzanian refugee camp, leading them through all obstacles.

Through strength of will and grace, Eca kept her family of eight together as they faced abysmal conditions, including a lack of food and clean water. She never imagined that one day she would actually be resettled to the United States.

Through it all, she drew on her faith and the strength of the women in her family. She gives thanks to God for the ability to come here and looks to her mother as a role model and her source of strength. Here in Chicago, she continues to lead her family to pursue the opportunities before them. Her energy inspires all those she comes in contact with at RefugeeOne.

“IT IS ALWAYS A PLEASURE BEING A MOTHER... IT WAS MY OWN MOTHER WHO INSPIRED ME. FROM HER, I RECEIVED A LOT OF ADVICE AND STORIES THAT HELPED TO GUIDE ME.”
Dear friends,

It is an honor and a privilege to write about RefugeeOne’s outstanding executive director, Melineh Kano, for this edition of the newsletter.

Melineh is the recipient of the Chicago Foundation for Women’s 2023 Founders Award and we want to celebrate her!

Melineh was resettled by RefugeeOne in 1984 as an Armenian refugee from Iran. She started working on staff and has risen through the ranks to become the executive director, growing the organization from a staff of three to more than 100 today.

In 37 years with RefugeeOne, Melineh has shown great compassion, knowledge, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to help refugees restart their lives in Chicago on the best possible terms. When I first met Melineh I was immediately struck by these qualities, and my admiration for her has only grown. The depth of her knowledge is remarkable. It’s clear that she’s never forgotten her own experience as a refugee while she works on behalf of others.

The past few years have tested all of us, including RefugeeOne, but Melineh has successfully navigated all challenges with grace and confidence. After years of being uprooted, we are now settled into our new building and each week we welcome refugees from Ukraine, Afghanistan, and other countries. Melineh is humble and would rather not have the spotlight on her, but she is so very deserving of the Chicago Foundation for Women award. We are thrilled to see her receive this credit for her tireless work on behalf of refugees. Congratulations, Melineh!

Sincerely,

Jennifer R. Borrell

Jennifer R. Borrell, RefugeeOne President