



## Melineh Kano

RefugeeOne executive director helps immigrants integrate to life in the U.S.

By **Debbie Carlson**  
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As an Armenian Christian growing up in Iran in the 1970s, Melineh Kano never thought she would permanently leave her country.

"Life was good," she said.

As a youth, Kano went to a French school in Iran and later attended an Armenian boarding school in Paris. Because of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War that started the following year, the borders of Armenia were closed. At 15, Kano found herself in France separated from her family (as was her brother, who was attending college in Rome).

Persecution of religious minorities escalated in Iran, and her family decided to try to leave. Kano moved to Rome for college, where her brother still lived. Eventually, Kano's mother and sister separately joined them in Italy. Her

father remained in Iran, and the family held out hope that they could return. However, they eventually requested asylum in the U.S. Her father never left Iran and died of a heart attack at age 57.

"By then we had already received refugee status," Kano said, "so we couldn't go back for the funeral. So we never saw him again."

In 1984, Kano and her mother were resettled by [RefugeeOne](#), a Chicago nonprofit that works with refugees to help them build new lives here. Her sister and brother, who had married an Italian woman, later moved separately to the U.S.

The experience taught Kano how swiftly life can change. "In our wildest dream, we didn't think this would happen," she said. "My father was a civil engineer. We came from a certain background. Overnight we lost everything."

In January 1985, three months after arriving in the U.S., Kano had a choice of working in a bank or for RefugeeOne. She took the RefugeeOne position and has been there ever since, becoming executive director in 2013. Kano, 51, is

married and lives in West Rogers Park. Following is an edited transcript of our conversation.

**Q: What is RefugeeOne's mission?**

A: RefugeeOne is a refugee resettlement organization. In a nutshell, what it means is that we welcome refugees who have been approved by the U.S. authorities to come to the U.S. Our job is to help them integrate successfully to life in the U.S. and become financially self-sufficient. Obviously it's a complex mechanism to process them when they are overseas. They have to prove to the American authorities their well-founded fear of persecution and (that) they can no longer go back to their country of origin. Once that is established, they have to go through a long series of background checks. Since 9/11 the nature of this program has drastically changed. (The Department of) Homeland Security screens very thoroughly every single refugee who enters this country. They also have to go through medical checks to make sure they don't have any contagious illnesses (and present) no public health hazards. Once this is all done, they are assisted to come here.

**Q: Where are refugees coming from currently?**

A: Iraq, some religious minorities from Iran, Africans from Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea. The biggest group of Africans are from the Congo. We are waiting for the Syrians. There is a trickle right now; we have already resettled a few families. There are a few coming, but obviously we're waiting, hoping for a much bigger wave. One of the reasons why we are only seeing a trickle (is because of) how rigorous the security checks have to be to make sure terrorists don't find their way into the program.

**Q: How many people do you help annually?**

A: On an annual basis we serve 2,500 people. We also have a large immigration program to help people apply for green cards and citizenship. Every year we have about 500 new arrivals. Illinois receives about 3,000 refugees a year.

**Q: How many refugees does the U.S. take in annually?**

A: Of about the 120,000 refugees globally who are resettled, the U.S. takes in 70,000. The U.S. does the lion's share to keep it going. The U.S., Canada and Australia are the top three countries that resettle refugees.

**Q: What about Chicago surprises refugees when they arrive?**

A: The refugees arriving during the winter months are surprised — more like shocked — about the cold temperatures, the wind, the snow — especially the blizzards. They are also surprised that they have so many choices about everything: food, clothing, toiletry, cleaning supplies, cellphone plans. That everything is on a larger scale here — the streets, the city, food portions, buildings, living space in general.

And one more thing, often refugees are surprised about people doing things on their own — living on their own, seeing so many cars with just one person in it, eating at a restaurant on their own. Refugees are used to crowds; they live with immediate and extended family members. They are always in company of friends and relatives for errands, eating out, recreation.

**Q: On many levels, you have a rewarding but very challenging, job. How do you deal with workplace stress?**

A: I have a calm nature, and I am a firm believer that there is a solution to every problem. I think one has to maintain a flexible nature. What I set my day to be is not often what it ends up being. Sometimes I need to sit back and do some deep breathing and reorganize my thoughts (to) take time and think and come up with the best solution.

**Q: How do you and the staff set boundaries between work and home?**

A: We talk about it a lot. At least once or twice a year, we try to have in-service (training) for staff to deal with setting boundaries and self-care. But it is kind of a double-edged sword because we hire staff from communities representing refugees — we want to have connections to those communities. That means they're going to see their clients on Sundays in the grocery store; sometimes they live in the same building as clients. It's a challenge to keep work life separate from home life.

We talk to our clients about it as well — that if sometimes a cellphone is off when (they) have a question at 9 p.m., (they) shouldn't take it personally. But we have to have a lot of self-discipline to create that space for ourselves. It's especially (difficult) for clients who are coming here and

are not joining relatives or have big communities. They have no one else to go to (for support). We're it.

**Q: RefugeeOne has 400 volunteers to supplement its staff of 44. If people want to volunteer at a nonprofit, what are some tips on how to make sure it's a good fit?**

A: I can only speak for us, but we have job descriptions for the volunteers. We do an orientation. We certainly don't sugarcoat anything because you don't want to mislead people. If you're not kept busy, then probably the organization doesn't need you or is not organized enough to use your talents and skills. Time is of value.

Different people have different callings. Some people come here and just want administrative work, while others want direct contact with refugees. Volunteering should be a two-way street where everyone — the volunteer and the organization — gets something rewarding out of it.

**Q: Do you have any hobbies?**

A: Mostly reading. I like novels, biographies. I just read a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. I love walking as well, so I go for long walks in the forest preserves.

**Q: Do you have any favorite restaurants?**

A: Ethnic restaurants! I love to try food from different parts of the world. I will not name any because I will get in trouble from others!

*Debbie Carlson is a freelance reporter.*