REFUGEE SUCCESS STORY

– Elias Kasongo –

Formal education isn’t the only way to success in the United States, but it definitely helps. What happens when a young person in the midst of their formal schooling, a person still trying to figure out what to do with their talents, is displaced from their homeland? Elias Kasongo, a Congolese refugee who RefugeeOne and the Congregational Church of Park Manor helped to resettle, has shown us that it’s possible to rebuild a life with education and rebuild an education with persistence.

Twenty-five years ago, Elias was a student of social studies in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). Political and idealistic, he became involved in nonviolent protests against the country’s brutal regime along with his fellow students. Unfortunately, these peaceful gatherings took a violent turn when government security forces invaded his university’s campus and executed many of the students. It was clear that the activism Elias practiced had come at a price: he could not continue to live in Congo.

In some ways, Elias was lucky. Though he had to cut ties with family and friends in the process, as well as with his still-unfinished schooling, he was able to flee to Zambia. Even though he had left the Congo, he was not safe. Living conditions in the refugee camps were extremely challenging, and worse, members of the regime he had protested infiltrated the camps to abduct escaped Congolese students. Elias moved between camps for four years, hoping to find a place to put down roots. Finally, after proving that he could not safely return to Congo, he received clearance to come to the United States for permanent resettlement.

RefugeeOne and representatives from Congregational Church of Park Manor were there to meet Elias when he arrived at Midway Airport. The church group had been preparing for his arrival for weeks. Because they knew Elias would come to Chicago with nothing more than he could carry, they pooled time, talent and treasure to ease his transition: they set up his apartment with furniture and groceries and raised money to buy him basic supplies. On their way from the airport to his new home, they took him out for pizza.

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The sense of transition that marked his years in refugee camps was gone, but permanent resettlement brought new responsibilities, including finding a job. Every refugee has lived a life before they get here, so no one truly starts over—they just learn to apply the experience they already have to a new environment. Refugees enter the United States with a range of work histories. Some left their homelands as doctors or well-known artists, while others have never been able to hold jobs legally as refugees in a foreign land. But for all those who are able to work, employment is an integral part of achieving self-sufficiency. Therefore, RefugeeOne’s employment program aims to ensure that new arrivals use their skills to get jobs and keep them. The program does more than connect job seekers with potential employers: it offers English language training, mock interviews, resume reviews, and workshops on American workplace norms in order to help refugees learn the skills they need to succeed in the professional world.

Like many recent arrivals, Elias started with an entry-level job: he began work on the cleaning crew at the Eli’s Cheesecake Company fewer than two months after his arrival. “To me, this was more than a workplace,” he says. “It became my new family.”

Though Eli’s was a safe workplace, Elias hadn’t left his thirst for education in Congo—it traveled with him. As he acclimated to life in the United States and at Eli’s, he made the choice to return to formal education, and a string of successes followed. He completed a Bachelor of Science degree in Business and Management at Northeastern University of Illinois, married, and continued to rise through the ranks at his job.

It has been almost twenty years since Elias entered the United States, and in that time he has taken on many new identities: Senior Buyer at the Eli’s Cheesecake Company, college graduate, husband, and father of three young children. He hopes to send his children to college, just as his father hoped for him.

Come meet Elias at our Many Voices. One Vision. Benefit on April 26, where he will be the keynote speaker! Visit refugeeone.org/events to find out more about the benefit.
In Memoriam –

JOAN HYNES, A MENTOR WHO MOVED MOUNTAINS (1958-2013)

RefugeeOne relies on the help of more than 200 volunteers who contribute to every aspect of the resettlement process. Volunteers act as teacher’s aides in English classes; interpret for therapists and refugees in the Wellness Program; and wrap presents for the children’s holiday party. One of the deepest commitments a volunteer can make is to act as a mentor to a recently arrived refugee. Mentors are asked to meet with their partners for two hours a week for six months, and, at these weekly meetings, to act as a bridge to the mainstream American community.

As a mentor, Joan Hynes always went the extra mile. She was the best kind of volunteer, fiercely devoted to her post and willing to put in extra work to make sure that Anisa,* the refugee Joan mentored, got everything she needed to get a second start in the United States. When Joan passed away in October, the void she left reminded us of how much of a difference a single volunteer can make in the life of a refugee.

Anisa fled Somalia for Yemen with her husband and three children in the aftermath of her home country’s civil war. In Yemen, Anisa’s husband abandoned the family, and she had no choice but to beg for food on the street. She and her children were accepted for resettlement to the United States in 2008, but her challenges were far from over: besides the language barriers and culture shock that every refugee must face, Anisa had become deaf in Yemen. RefugeeOne met Anisa and her family at the airport, where it was clear that besides the services provided to all of our clients, Anisa would benefit from the help of a mentor.

Joan and Anisa met and began working together in early 2009, a few months after Anisa’s arrival. The relationship between a mentor and refugee often starts a little awkwardly: the pair begins by meeting for two hours weekly, and if they don’t share a language, communication can be difficult at first. Still, as they continue to explore each other’s differences and uncover similarities between themselves, the meetings become easier. Often, a refugee will ask their mentor to practice English with them, which can be done a variety of ways—from games to flashcards to TV watching—and the relationship will solidify in that way. Anisa’s deafness made conversation difficult, but she and Joan grew closer as they practiced riding the CTA and shopping for groceries together. Anisa’s dream was to hear again, and Joan wanted to help, so she worked alongside RefugeeOne to find a solution.

“Joan moved mountains to get a hearing aid for Anisa,” remembers Helen Sweitzer, senior manager of RefugeeOne’s adjustment program. The process of applying for a free hearing aid is cumbersome, but Joan was able to navigate the complications. The day that Anisa got her hearing aid, Joan was there beside her. Later, she recalled the wonder that had showed on Anisa’s face as she heard the sound of her own voice for the first time in twenty years.

Joan and Anisa continued to meet for almost three years, and through that time, they continued to learn from each other. Anisa, whose life has taken her through so many changes, is still living in the Chicago area, as Joan did before her death. “Joan was one of those mentors I still remember, because of her dedication to her mentee,” Helen says. “Anisa had many obstacles to overcome, and Joan was a mentor in the true sense of the word: an advocate, a teacher, and most of all, a friend.”

RefugeeOne is honored to carry on Joan’s legacy and life’s work through the gifts we received in her memory.

*DID YOU KNOW?*

According to Refugees International, an estimated 80% of refugees waiting for resettlement are women and children who are under the age of 18.

*RefugeeOne is honored to carry on Joan’s legacy and life’s work through the gifts we received in her memory.*

*Name has been changed to protect the privacy of the client.*

**COMING UP @ REFUGEEONE**

**JUNE 2014**

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees marks World Refugee Day as June 20th, but we mark the occasion for the entire month of June with our **DO ONE THING** initiative. If everyone did one thing, imagine the impact we’d have together.

We encourage each person to **DO ONE THING** to help us collect the items needed to resettle ten refugee families—donate a bottle of dishwashing detergent, give a new bath towel, or make a cash donation to cover the cost of a household item. Check out refugeone.org for more details.

**DO ONE THING**
RefugeeOne’s 2013 Annual Report Available Online

Our story is about the people whom we serve, like Said, Hodan, and their children. Our story is about Thomas, a Burmese refugee who was persecuted for practicing his religion before being welcomed into the U.S. by RefugeeOne. Our story is about the 451 refugees who arrived in Fiscal Year 2013 and the thousands of other refugees we served during that time. And our story is about you, the donors and supporters who make our work possible.

Visit refugeeone.org/annual-report to read our annual report.