

## “WE WERE TWO FAMILIES, AND NOW WE’RE ONE” SYRIAN REFUGEES GRATEFUL TO CO-SPONSORING FAMILY

In 2012, as the civil war spiraled into its second year, there was a giant explosion in Damascus near the school attended by Tadzhdin’s children. More than 100 people were killed or injured in the blast, including seven children who died, Tadzhdin learned after he rushed to the scene. Luckily his own were alive. “I found my children hiding, crying and trembling with other children,” he said.

As conditions continued to deteriorate and food grew scarce, Tadzhdin and his family fled for the far north of Syria. There they stayed for eight months until he, his brother-in-law, and his nephew were arbitrarily arrested and accused of being part of the opposition by masked Syrian government forces, who have been accused of widespread human rights violations. After days of being subjected to electric shock torture, Tadzhdin and his two relatives managed to buy their freedom with gold and other valuables. It was then they decided to leave Syria.

“We fled at three in the morning, walking about sixteen hours, avoiding the regime’s barricades until we reached the border with Turkey,” he said. It was June 2013. The youngest of Tadzhdin’s four children, his daughter, had to be carried on the journey, having recently celebrated her first birthday. Meanwhile, Tadzhdin’s wife,

Toria, was seven months pregnant with their second daughter.

More than two and a half years later, Tadzhdin, Toria, and their children finally arrived in Chicago on January 11, 2016, after obtaining refugee status and being selected for resettlement in America through a rigorous and lengthy screening process. Thus ended a long journey that for Tadzhdin began in his native

Tajikistan, a country he left as a university student to study Arabic.

Tadzhdin knew only the barest of information about Chicago when, ten days before leaving Turkey, he was informed of his family’s final destination. He quickly began reading about the city on the Internet. He learned that Chicago was an ethnically diverse city famous for its architecture.

Tadzhdin and his family are among roughly 4.8 million refugees who have fled the Syrian civil war, an

outpouring that has helped push the global number of forcibly displaced people to the highest number ever recorded. President Obama has announced a plan to resettle at least 10,000 Syrians in the U.S. in 2016. While the Congress’s response remains uncertain, RefugeeOne and its community of supporters remain prepared to welcome new arrivals and help them rebuild their lives.



Tadzhdin, Toria, and their children are greeted at O’Hare by RefugeeOne and their cosponsors, the Carlsons.

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# WANT TO CO-SPONSOR A REFUGEE?



**A co-sponsorship pairs a group (often a congregation, school, neighborhood or alumni association) with a refugee family. Your financial support and friendship will change a refugee family's lives – and yours. How do you help?**

1. Raise funds (\$4,000 to \$8,000) to help pay for the family's first three months of rent, basic living expenses, and emergencies.
2. Welcome the refugees with us at O'Hare Airport with a sign, balloons, or flowers and help us transport them to their new home.
3. Provide their first meal and stock their pantry with foods that are familiar and comforting. We'll provide a grocery list and menu suggestions.
4. Visit during their first six months to help them orient to their neighborhood, practice English, and discover Chicago. (This is a great activity to "job-share" with 2-4 families or individuals.)
5. Use your contacts to find job opportunities in partnership with RefugeeOne's job developers.

**For more information, visit [refugeeone.org/co-sponsor](http://refugeeone.org/co-sponsor)**



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RefugeeOne greeted Tadzhdin, Toria and their children at O'Hare with Randi and Paul Carlson and their two children. Randi, a member of Impact 100 Chicago (a women's philanthropic organization), had been looking for a family volunteer opportunity when she learned about RefugeeOne at Impact 100's event for finalists. Soon, the Carlsons signed on to co-sponsor a family, and were thrilled to be matched with Tadzhdin, Toria and their children. When Randi met Tadzhdin at the airport, his warmth made an immediate impression on her. Tadzhdin requested that the Carlsons join them to pose for a photograph. Through an interpreter, he told the Carlsons, "We were two families, and now we're one."

Tadzhdin said his family's concerns dissipated at the airport. "Our anxiety and fear changed to happiness when we met this family and the people around us were so nice," he said. He added that he wanted to thank the U.S. government and everyone else who had helped him and his family begin a new life in America, by providing a furnished apartment and assisting with tasks such as registering his children at school. Tadzhdin is on track to progress to the top level of RefugeeOne's English program and is already looking for a job with the help of RefugeeOne's job developers.



Mohammed and Badaia play a board game with Bailey and Ryan Carlson.

"We couldn't do anything without your help," he said, mentioning the U.S. government, RefugeeOne and the Carlsons. "My hope and my aim is to be a good U.S. citizen to share in the development and building of this country."

The Carlsons visit Tadzhdin and his family about every week. They have taken trips to

Chicago landmarks such as Maggie Daley Park, communicating through the family's improving English, Google Translate and, when necessary, charades. "We're just really happy to be in each other's lives," Randi said.

She is confident he and his family will have no trouble adjusting to American society. "I know that they're going to thrive here in the U.S.," she said. "You can just see it."

A group of families supported the Carlson's co-sponsorship. Randi estimated that 60 families contributed financially or donated items to furnish Tadzhdin and Toria's new apartment, including a china set that they now use to serve tea to guests.

"When you get families together, the individual effort is so little," she said. "It was such a minimal effort and it made a world of difference."

Come meet Tadzhdin, our keynote speaker, at our April 2 gala!  
Visit [refugeeone.org/events](http://refugeeone.org/events) for more info and tickets.

# VOLUNTEERS “JOB-SHARE” TO SUPPORT A REFUGEE FAMILY

In October 2014, Agnes and her five children arrived at Chicago O’Hare Airport. This Rwandan family had been living in Mozambique for nearly twenty years. Like many refugees, they did not speak English and would need support to become self-sufficient and acclimate to American culture.

Meanwhile, Sherman Hicks had recently retired from a long career in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and was looking for ways to contribute. After seeing fellow church members at Resurrection Lutheran step up to resettle a newly arrived refugee family, Sherman was inspired to make a regular commitment to help.

Sherman and his new friend, Juliana Strawn, a young woman who was also interested in working with refugees, paired up to visit the family weekly.

Alternating visits, but often going together, the pair began by helping the family learn the alphabet. By the end of their first visit, Agnes and the three oldest children could recite every letter of the alphabet, except H (a tricky one).

But Sherman and Juliana (who has since moved away) did not work alone. Anne Roberts, Sherman’s fellow church member, is a critical part of the team.

Although Anne has mobility issues that make it difficult for her to climb the three flights of stairs to the family’s apartment, that doesn’t stop her from moving mountains for them. She buys food and school supplies for the family, hosts an annual Christmas celebration with them, and even organized a photo shoot with a professional studio photographer so the family would have photos of their new life to treasure.

Working as a team has been very helpful. As Sherman explains, “It’s been good to have others involved. It gives me friends to talk to who also have experience working with the family. We bounce ideas off each other, share concerns, and get advice.”



Sherman practices the ABCs with Agnes’ son, Emmanuel.

However, the process has not come without its challenges. As Sherman explains, “When they arrived, all of the kids were placed in grades based on their age, even though they didn’t know English. One of them was supposed to read a book about the Civil War for school. It was very hard.”

Fortunately, with the support of Sherman, Juliana and Anne, along with RefugeeOne’s after-school program, the children have made great progress.

He adds that he feels the family appreciates having an African-American male adult figure in their lives, particularly one who likes to joke around with them.

“I think they think I’m a little crazy,” Sherman says with a laugh. “It’s surprising for them to see a 69-year-old man act foolishly at times. They smile and laugh.”

When asked what he finds most rewarding about his mentoring experience, Sherman says it’s the fact that he’s able to help people get settled during a time when they need help.

“Since I’m retired, there are some days when I don’t feel like leaving the house,” he says. “But after I visit Agnes and the kids, I’m so glad I went to see them. I leave thinking, ‘My day has been fulfilled!’”

## RECRUITING OFFICE VOLUNTEERS AGES 18 TO 80+

Want to spend time helping refugees apply for jobs, learn to navigate CTA, and become U.S. citizens? Maybe you are interested in assisting at our lively summer camp for young refugees from around the world? Or you could bring your skills to our administration, housing, or fundraising teams! We are looking for energetic, hard-working, and responsible people, ages 18 to 80+, for summer internships.

Visit [refugeeone.org/intern](http://refugeeone.org/intern) to see current openings, then apply online. Internships are unpaid but flexible, from 8 – 35 hours per week during office hours, with flexible start and end dates.



## “WHY MY COMPANY HELPS REFUGEES”

Steven Dyme, CEO of Flowers for Dreams (a local flower delivery store, started with support from RefugeeOne’s late board member Jay Michael), wanted to honor the legacy of his grandparents, refugees who came to the U.S. after surviving the Holocaust. Steven dedicated a quarter of January profits to RefugeeOne and was at the airport with bouquets when Tadzhidin and his family (featured on the cover) arrived. Later, his company provided job training and hired refugees to help out with Valentine’s Day orders. Read his *Chicago Sun-Times* op-ed titled “Why My Company Helps Refugees” at [refugeeone.org](http://refugeeone.org).

## Letter from the Executive Director, Melineh Kano

Dear friends,

Since 1982, RefugeeOne has welcomed refugees fleeing countless countries in crisis, from Cambodia to Rwanda, Bosnia to the former Soviet Union, Iraq to Sudan.

Today, during the worst refugee crisis in recent history, we are grateful to you for building a welcoming community for Syrians and others fleeing war, terror, and persecution.

After passing rigorous screening and security checks, these brave individuals come to Chicago to learn English, find jobs, and help their children attain brighter futures.

Thanks to friends like you and the amazing people in this newsletter – a family who co-sponsored Syrian refugees, a business owner who risked losing customers by standing up for refugees, and three volunteers mentoring a Rwandan family – the refugees we serve will integrate into American society and build healthy, hopeful lives.

Speaking of remarkable people, this January, RefugeeOne lost a board member who made a huge impact in his 34 years of life. Jay Michael brought vitality and vision to everything he did, especially his volunteer work with RefugeeOne. Jay provided affordable housing to countless refugees, hired our clients, and co-chaired RefugeeOne's most successful gala in April 2015. His energy and heart live on in our work and the people he loved.

Please join us for our April 2 gala to celebrate incredible people like Jay, the people featured in these pages, and supporters like you. Together, we build welcoming communities.



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refugeeONE

MANY VOICES.  
ONE VISION.

REFUGEEONE'S ANNUAL GALA  
SATURDAY, APRIL 2, 2016

RADISSON BLU AQUA HOTEL, CHICAGO

**BUILDING A WELCOMING COMMUNITY**

**FOR TICKETS AND INFORMATION VISIT [REFUGEEONE.ORG/EVENTS](http://REFUGEEONE.ORG/EVENTS)**