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Refugee Perspective: Resettling in Albany, New York

Capital Region Refugee Roundtable

RESETTLING IN ALBANY

A refugee is someone who flees their native country because of fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion. They may have been living in the middle of war, political oppression, torture or famine, and forced to leave their homes. They may have witnessed terrible violence and lost friends and family.

The Capital Region Refugee Roundtable worked with the Albany City School District's Art and ESL (English as a Second Language) Departments to create an exhibition of refugee student art and a program of refugee stories. Refugee students were asked to share their impressions of resettling in Albany, New York. Their parents were interviewed so that they could also share their observations. The following are excerpts from their responses.

Resettlement in another country is often the only way refugees have a chance to rebuild their lives. Since 2005, over 2500 refugees from a number of different countries have been resettled in Albany, New York.

When refugees arrive in Albany, they have very few possessions. That is when the Albany Field Office of the **U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)** steps in. From the moment refugees arrive at the Albany Airport, USCRI is there to guide them toward becoming self-sufficient, contributing members of their new community. USCRI helps newly arrived refugee families find and furnish their first apartments, master the public transportation system, enroll their children in school, find a doctor, learn English, and obtain employment.

Before resettlement, refugees have been through extensive security and healthcare screenings. They are expected to become self-sufficient within the first year of their arrival in the United States.

USCRI has a unique opportunity to engage the **Capital Region Refugee Roundtable** in assisting refugees. Established by USCRI Albany, the Refugee Roundtable consists of over 200 volunteers from the Capital Region who provide resources and support in the areas of healthcare, finances, education, employment, and community involvement. Members of the Refugee Roundtable are all ages and diverse backgrounds, with the mission to welcome refugee families to the Albany community.

Refugee Roundtable volunteers teach English, tutor children, mentor families, provide employment advice, and volunteer at community events. They meet with refugees to assist with financial management, college applications and other forms, healthcare appointments, teacher meetings, and other challenges of daily life. Some volunteers can spare an hour a month, while others meet regularly with refugee families.

If you are interested in welcoming refugees to the Capital Region, please contact Dahlia Herring, Chair of the Refugee Roundtable (dmazengia@nycap.rr.com). She'll help you match your time and interests to services that are needed. Contributions can be sent to: Capital Region Refugee Roundtable c/o Pioneer Savings Bank, 184 Delaware Avenue, Albany, New York 12054.

USCRI Albany accepts donations of household items for refugees to use in their new homes, such as tables, chairs, blankets, sheets, towels, etc., as well as gift cards to Price Chopper, Walmart or Target.

LIFE BEFORE . . .

When I was a small child, we did not have electricity and we used candles for light. Life was very simple.

When I was small, at the refugee camp when I was six, life was hard and full of worries. I moved to the camp because the Burma Army burned our land and our house. So we had to run from them. In our school at the camp we had to wear a blue and white uniform, but on Wednesday we wore a special Karen shirt. We got hit if we failed a test. We also had to pay for school but my grandparents were able to pay.

I call our life in Baghdad the Bad Situation. It was especially dangerous for my family because we are Christian and many were killed. Most of my school was destroyed in 2003.

I was born in Congo. The reason we went to live in a camp is because we wanted life. We were very poor and we could sleep without eating. We could get small things to eat and they would give us cloth. We came to America because we wanted more education and to live. We needed peace.

I lived in Amman, the capital city of Jordan. If you missed or skipped school, the police would come and take you to school even if you needed to work to help your family.

I was born in a refugee camp in Thailand. My father helped my mother give birth in our home. When I was a small child I went to school every day. It was made of bamboo, trees, and many leaves. We had six subjects: Thai, Karen language, Math, Geography, and Science. I was lucky to go to school because I needed and wanted an education. I played football with my friends, and I loved to study. When I was a small child I loved my family and my friends so much. My parents moved us to the United States. I wanted to live in Thailand, but we were lucky to live in the USA and I'm so happy with my family always.

My family moved from Bhutan because the king wanted our land and we had to go to seven camps. There were like a million people living in the camps. We sat on the floor in school and didn't have clean water to drink. I have many good experiences in Albany and thankfully no bad ones.

Only rich people could manage to go to school and there was always war. People could not rest. They were always scared. Teachers couldn't teach, workers couldn't go to work. They could stay in their homes, locking their doors. Many women and children were being killed and girls raped. Pregnant women could be beaten and fathers were being separated from the women and children.

My school in Nepal was big and beautiful and had a temple inside. We had classes with 1 to 7 students. We moved here to get a better life and have a future. I like it here very much. I am so happy we came here.

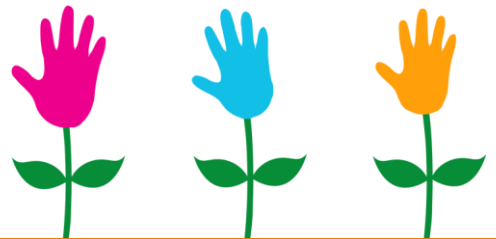
LIFE BEFORE . . .

I was born in Pakistan but I went to school far away from my home because sometimes there was fighting and I couldn't go to school. I got a better education but it was hard for me to stay in a boarding school and study. My mother forced me to go but I was scared because it was so far away from my home. Then I was 8 years old and I love to go to school because my dad was principal there. But then I couldn't go because my father passed and we couldn't afford the school fees. In the United States we do not have to pay for school and I am getting a higher education.

Back then in my school it was hard because some children have to sit on the floor to study because they didn't have a lot of money to buy chairs for us.

My family left because the government was not good to people and the government has people to hit people. My mother and father had to run away so they wouldn't have to go to jail.

Only my sister could go to school. My parents would take her and sit beside her. My parents could not rest. Especially my father was very worried about my mother because she was pregnant with the third child and children were being born at home. My mother was carrying my brother when the war started. Houses were being burned, cows were being killed, people were shouting at each other, and people started running. My father took us to his brother's and they planned for us how to escape.



We kept moving because there were so many wars. Life in Egypt was horrible. But in Libya the school was really good and cheap. But then there were a lot of violent protests against the president. My father traveled for work so me and my mom were alone in a house and never got out because people were fighting. We lived there without water or electricity and we didn't have a lot of food. But we did have fruit trees inside so we ate those every day. We would put on boy clothes and go to the rooftop and ask our neighbors for some water. I wore boy clothes because besides the war, they kidnap and rape girls and women. My neighbors didn't know I was a girl.

They told us at night we had to go far away. My mother was too tired for that so they looked for a bicycle which would carry her. My uncle had us in his hands, running at night alone. My father went back to save his parents. My mother took us in Rwanda when I was six years old. My brother was born when we were still walking. The picture of leaving our father and what happened in those days is vividly in my mind until now.

You could get beaten at my school if you didn't study or if your uniform is not clean. It was hard to keep clothes clean without any water so I stayed home.

I was born in my family's home at a refugee camp. My mom's friend came to help my mom have her third child. My dad made our house out of bamboo and trees. I lived there with my cousin. If I was at school I was so happy because I was with a lot of my friends. But the teacher slaps your hand with bamboo if you do not pass in class. You also have to run around the school if you don't pass. If you don't take the slaps or run, you have to give the teacher money. Sometimes you have to go clean the school. You have to give the school money. When I went back home I had to get water for cooking and cleaning. With the water I took a shower. My dream is to go back to the camp and I will see my friends and my cousin again.

My family moved to the United States because there was killing. We had no food to eat and no home to live in. We had to sleep in the forest, and if the soldiers came, we ran. Some people died. We moved to the United States for education and jobs, and we went to live together with our aunt in Albany. I would like to stay in Albany because it's perfect for my family and I love to go to Albany High School. I can't wait for 6th period lunch.

I was born in a camp for Burmese farmers. My dad was at work so my grandmother helped my mother. My brother said, "Where did you go get a baby?" and my mother laughed. When I was three years old I went to school. I had no friends, I felt so lonely. Some people were making fun of me but I didn't say anything back to them. I just walked away. My family lived in the refugee camp because Burma took away my country and land.

At my camp in Thailand we had a cat, dog, and rabbits.

When I went into the forest my dog went with me every time. Sometimes I skipped school and went to swim in the river.

My family and I moved to the United States because we were immigrants in Iran. My family and I were born there but we were immigrants from Afghanistan and we could not live easily in Iran. We could not go back to Afghanistan because Afghanistan was not secure. In Afghanistan there was not progress. We could not advance there. We came here to live easily.

I miss where I lived before because we played soccer and takrow. Takrow is a game like cane ball. I loved to swim in the river.

I was born in a Thailand refugee camp and all students wore white shirts, entered class when the bell rings, and begin learning. We learned some subjects in our native language such as History, Science, Geography, and Bible and other languages like Burmese, English, and Thai. Life was good when I was a child. My life was completely safe at the camp in Thailand, where it is safer than Burma. In Burma refugees often flee the Burmese troops. Women, children, and sick people have to run during bad situations. There are also Karen troops but they can't help us. If Thai police arrested refugees it cost a lot of money. UNHCR provided us with food such as rice, beans, oil, bread, fish paste chili, and clothes. I moved to the United State because my parents thought here is a more higher education, opportunities, jobs, and living a better life.

SEEKING EDUCATION...

I see some people at Albany High try hard. I'm thinking they have intentions for the future. Some students show being dedicated and polite. If you try hard you will get a better life.

English is hard to read because "red" and "read" are the same.

I like the way we have free education here. Education is very important for me, because if we have education, life will get better.

I'm from Iraq. In my life I went to school some days, and other days not because of the war. I didn't really enjoy my life when I was a small child. I went with my family to Egypt. After that my life was smiling on me when my family and I came to the United States. We came to the USA because it was better, there was a chance for a good education, a better life, and a good job. Many nice people are talking to me!

I speak three languages: Zomi Chin, Burmese, and English. I am learning Karen from my friends and I have to take Spanish.

I think English is hard for me but I can do it.

I like to do math. It's easy for me because I don't have to read.

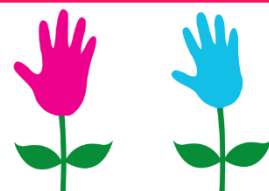
When my teacher talked to me I didn't understand so I nodded and shook my head and smiled.

In Yemen I didn't really attend school because after one year the school was rioted by students. Fights happened and a lot of people, not just me, stopped going. When I was a child my life was not a good one. It was a less than average life. It was just a lot of complications. I moved here with my family for better education and jobs. If you really want to know about Albany High, the school is great, don't get me wrong, just the stuff they teach us is out of our league for any ESL student, including myself.

I was born in a forest in Burma. When I was seven years old my parents asked me to go to my uncle's house to help take care of him and watch his cows. I lived with my uncle for two years and then my parents sent me to school. We lived in a refugee camp for 12 years. I loved it because I went to school every day and we could go swimming in the river. It was a small village. We didn't have enough food. We could get free food – 35 kilos of rice per person, bean oil, fish paste, and salt.

My school had 17 teachers and 1000 students. My class had 60 students. I learned Thai, English, Karen, Burmese, and Karen history. We had to clean the bathrooms if we did not pass our tests. My family moved to the United States because my parents wanted jobs and wanted their kids to go to school. I love to study and get a better education.

We came to the United States from Baghdad because we needed safety and jobs – and many people advised us to come here because of my brother's illness. I have some Arabic friends and I am going to pass all of my classes. That is my goal.



When I was a small child I lived in a beautiful village in Thailand. There were coconut trees all around our village and we were afraid of wind because if the wind came the coconuts might fall down out of the trees and hit our heads or break our houses. After we moved to a refugee camp my brother found new friends and did not love me like before. He didn't like me to follow him. The leader of the camp gave us food one month at a time: rice, oil, beans, fish-paste, and flour. My family moved to the United States because they wanted me and my sister and brother to have an education. They don't want us to work like them.

I think studying in the United States is better than back home because we have Regents and we have to study hard to pass.

I have trouble in Albany High because there are too many people. I skip a lot of classes because I hang out with the wrong people. I am trying to change that so that I can do better in school. I wish my brothers were not still in my country.

I had some school in Nepal and studied in Albany, but had a bad experience failing the Regents because they are very tough for us kids who don't know English. And I can talk in English the proper way.

I didn't know how to say my stomach was bad and I need a drink so I sat and looked around and smiled.

When I was a child my life was poor in Burma and Thailand. I lived in a refugee camp and our life was still poor. My family and I moved to the United States because there is not really good education for us because we are poor and we have to pay for school back home. At Albany High School it's good for me to learn but it's hard that I don't understand the English language. I like school and I really want to achieve my goal of getting more education because it's really important for me and my family.

We moved to America because there was a war in my country and my parents really wanted me to study abroad.

School may not be the best thing on earth, but I'd rather learn instead of not knowing anything.

I was lazy and not good at education. On days it was raining I didn't have good shoes. I went to school and I was falling the whole way. My body was so dirty and I was worried that my mom would yell at me. Now I am happy to learn English and have a good school. I see different people, hear different languages. The first time I felt really nervous. Sometimes I feel like I don't want to come to school because some people bother me and try to make a row with me. I just want to be nice to them, try to speak English, and try to be friends with them.

I came to the United States with one sister, two brothers, and my mom. My dad didn't want to come and he stayed back in Thailand. My mom wanted us to get an education and a better life. When I got here everything was different. There were a few Karen families like mine, but none of them were from the same refugee camp. The school was different. I didn't have to wear a uniform. The first few years were hard because I didn't speak English. In Albany every morning I take a school bus. There are Karen people, volunteers from Albany who help us. Whenever the volunteer comes to our house he brings a translator and it makes me feel much better. I like ESL because the teachers are helpful and don't talk as fast as the normal teacher.

COMING TO AMERICA...

The airplane ride was fun because it was my first time on an airplane. I watched TV, played games, and ate good food. They had my favorite cookies. But I still was going to miss my family.

My family moved to the United States because we didn't have freedom and didn't have enough food. My experience has been a good one at Albany High. I try to study hard.

When I came to Albany everything I saw was different from what I had seen before. Students were fighting and talking when the teacher teaches. It makes it hard for me to concentrate. Even though English is still hard for me, I need more help in learning because I need to help my family. Albany has helped me to improve my English.

Our family moved here because there are nice buildings and they give you everything you need to study. In America they have freedom of religion. They are good because they help you to come here. The United States has a great name in the world community because the USA has technology, buildings, and opportunity.

My parents left their country because the soldiers are not nice to people. The soldiers try to kill people and a lot of people die. The people ran away from the soldiers and moved to America. When we came here we worried about doing something wrong. The next week a new boy came to my classroom and he didn't speak English either. We were in the same ESL class and now I have one friend.

All I want to do is learn English and get my citizenship. Then I will be a happy one.

I'm called Sam here, but that is not my name.

When I first started school I didn't like it because some people bullied me and my friends because they don't like Asian people. I am happy now and never thought I would have a beautiful life like this.

My mother traveled here first and I lived with my grandmother which made my day brighter no matter what happened.

When I was a small child I lived in Thailand, but my sisters were far away in Myanmar. I didn't like my childhood because my father and mother worked in a factory and lived in the factory. They didn't have time to play with me. They found money for our family and I went to Burma to live with my sisters, but my sister died because the state didn't have a hospital. We moved to a camp far away from the city and there was nothing to have. No school, no friends. I cried a lot for a week because I was a young boy in a new place. It was horrible. I lived in the refugee camp for seven years without school, without the city, without money. That time was horrible in my life. My dream was to come to America. But now I've arrived in America without my father and sister. It's changed my life again. I hate it. It's my new horrible happening again.

We came to the United States because it is good for education, health, and living. There is no war in this country. But it's so difficult for us. It makes me sad. My mother is studying ESL at the library and I have friends now at school. Whatever happens, they help me. Now I love the United States and I don't want to go back to our country. God bless you America.

I was born in Iraq. Before the war happened my life was beautiful. I was like many other girls in the world – I had a normal life. I lived with my father, my sister, and three brothers. My father had a good job and my mother took care of us and our home. She was an elementary school teacher.

When the war started on March 17, 2003 my parents were scared for all of us to go to school. Most of the time they were closed, so we had to stay in our homes for weeks, sometimes more. We stayed home without electricity or water. We tried to get on with our lives, but it was hard. One day when my father was going to work a black car started following him so he had to try to lose them. About a month or so later he felt like someone was watching him. One day when we were home we woke up in the morning and saw a letter with a bullet inside the envelope. The letter said we had only one week to leave our home or they would kill us. It was at that moment that my father decided that we had to leave our house and our country.

We left immediately, leaving everything in Iraq, and went to Syria. Then we went to Egypt and stayed there for eight years. While in Egypt we found out that some of my father's family and my mother's brothers were tortured, kidnapped, and killed. It was a really hard year for my family. It took a long time to do the paperwork and get approved to go to the United States, but when I came here to Albany I felt so happy and excited to be free in a new country and culture. I have been here seven months and already have learned a lot of things – I'm even learning how to drive. I hope I can be successful in my life. I'd like to thank everyone who helped me and my family arrive to this wonderful point in our lives.

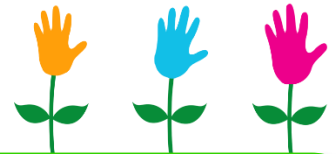
My life in the Democratic Republic of Congo was awesome until the genocide. We went to a camp, but my brother had an illness in his ears so we had to go to the United States. His American doctor is still fixing his ears, but my family's life is so much better now. My God took me to this country just to study and look for a new, better life.

We were very rich in Iraq before March 17, 2003 when the war started, with a big house, lots of cars, and two companies. We had to give it all away and leave it behind. We moved to the United States in July and it was the best day of my life. It is so clean and pretty here. I loved seeing New York City at night from our car as we drove to Albany. We came here for safety and better job opportunities. I want to go to Hudson Valley Community College and get a job at Microsoft.

My friends and I are from Thailand and everyone thinks we are Chinese. One person said, "I don't sit next to Chinese people."

I never saw a Smart Board in my school in Thailand. We have gym here. But I miss my friends.

I want to be a soccer player, an artist, and finally a rock star.



When I was a small child in a refugee camp in Thailand (I am Karenni, not Thai) everything was going well in my life because I didn't know how to worry or about suffering. I only thought of happy things and played with my friends in the jungle and swing from trees. The first day we came to Albany we felt very different and missed our lifestyle back home. We stayed home all day and night like people in jail. We would watch the leaves fall in the afternoon. Now I watch television and talk to people in other countries on my computer.

The things I worried about didn't happen to me, like going into the wrong bathroom and forgetting my lunch number.

I was born in Bhutan, but my earliest memories are from a refugee camp in eastern Nepal. We were driven from Bhutan for being a religion and ethnicity that was different than the king. We left everything in Bhutan, even our clothes. The camp was a city made of plastic and tin huts built with ever-present mud and bamboo stems. I spent 15 years of my life there. Our house was made of sun dried molded bricks and our bathroom was a hole in the ground outside the house. There was not much privacy. The house was not strong and it used to rain for months during the summer.

There were long lines to see a doctor and many people with fevers and other deadly diseases needed to wait for days before they could be seen by the doctor who was not really a doctor. We heard that we could apply to go to the United States and my parents jumped at the chance to have a better life. We knew very little and were a bit afraid. We heard terrible stories from people who had arrived in the US before us. When I got to the US I was scared – but now I don't know what I was scared of.

When I took an airplane to come here, I was got dizzy and slept. I could not eat my food. I only drank tea. It was the first time I'd ever been in an airplane. I didn't feel good for one week. After two weeks I felt better and I ate a lot of food but I didn't get fat.

We lived on a small farm in Burma and built a little hut there. One day soldiers were fighting robbers near our farm so we had to run away. My grandfather and grandmother died in that war. We all had to run in different directions. My mom's group and my dad's group met back at another small village, but I couldn't find them. I lived with my aunt for six years. We moved to the United States because it is the top country in the world with high standards and equality for all people.

My journey was long – very long. I had to visit four different countries. I was born in Iraq, but we had to get out because it wasn't safe. Then we moved to Jordan, then we lived in Syria, and then to America, Albany, Delaware Avenue.

A REFUGEE RAP

By: Pa Yo Du

Life can take you anywhere
you just gotta believe that
Everything will be the best for you
I used to live in a cage, but now I'm free
I fly high; see the world under me
I'm livin' a better life.
I don't know where I'm from,
but I know it was ghetto
I used to live in a refugee camp
where nobody knew,
I used to live in a place where nobody cared,
I used to live in a place called "Nowhere."
We have healthcare, we have education system
but life is still tough and I am a victim stuck in a
room that has no door
I tried to escape but my mind was poor
mommy work hard to feed me
At dinner dad work with his tears
to give me a future
He got fake ID so he would work
without getting caught
With his salary he bought food in port
After 13 years the opportunity came, filled out
immigration papers Everything changed
New sh*t, new world, new life,
and new hope to see the world
I never dream of - dope
I thank God that brought me here
I got no more nightmares and no more tears
My life transformed from the worst to the bestest
Thanks you mom and dad you're the greatest.

QUOTES FROM ADULT REFUGEES

WHAT SURPRISED YOU THE MOST?

Everyone said it would be cold here, but we did not know what cold felt like. I still don't believe it.

There is food everywhere. There are big stores full of food and little stores filled with food. Americans bring food to everything. They sell it in outdoor markets like we do, but any time you can buy food anywhere.

You have so many schools! We heard about the education here. It is wonderful!

In this country, the teachers want you to talk to them. They invite you to the schools. In my country, we were not supposed to talk to teachers.

There are so many people who help us. I cannot count them all. We are grateful because they do not make us feel bad about needing help.

WHAT HAVE YOU ENJOYED?

My son cannot stop talking about the free water. He flushes the toilet even when he doesn't use it. He takes very long showers. He makes me laugh!

People laugh a lot here. They are nice to us and help me to practice my English.

There are sidewalks. But I don't like shoveling the snow. We are ready to go to the beautiful park now that winter is over. (We are told this was a terrible winter. The next one won't be as bad.)

I like this thing that you have called a cupcake. A little cake?



WHAT HAS BEEN HARD?

I had heard that teenagers in America were not nice. I told my children to always be nice, but some children bully them.

My wife is still afraid of the stove. In my country the men do not cook, but I have done some cooking. I even wash dishes. It is not enjoyable (smile)!

I do not like it when people are afraid of me. I am here to help my family.

I told my son he should not steal the books from the school. He said they are free and he can bring them home. He knows more about his education than I do.

My family says every day that we are happy even if we feel alone.

I learned English in the camp. We have been here three years and I am still learning. English is a very hard language.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE PEOPLE IN ALBANY TO KNOW?

I am not proud of what our government is doing in my country and I will never go back. But I still miss my country.

My job search has been frustrating. I am an architect but I can't use my certifications here. I need a better job because I want my children to go to college.

We came for my children, for the education. I wanted my children to know that there are good people in America.

My family wishes we knew more about what is in Albany and how to get there. You have many good things that are free. We are afraid we will get on a bus that will take us too far away from Albany.

People ask about my country. They only know what is in the media. I want to tell them how many people are good there, but it makes me feel sad.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT ALBANY

In New York City, it is very noisy and night cars are always honking. Albany is very peaceful.

In Albany there are many different people and there are many languages that people speak.

I wish some of the children would respect the teachers more. They don't know what life can be like.

What is hard about living here? The snow!

It's very safe here. Washington Park is nice.

It was a surprise that everyone here speaks English.

I am Sudanese and people are curious about my culture and my hijab. The hardest thing about living in Albany is shoveling snow.

People made me feel welcome, but please show me what is in Albany (parks, museums, etc.)

I have many new friends here and even have a job. It is also bad because sometimes people make fun of me. But I still know that I am happy, and my family, too.

In Albany there are a lot of cars and trees. I would like people to know that they should not go to school to be bad, talk too much and looking for trouble. It is important to study and respect the teacher. It is nice to find nice people who live in Albany.

**Usually people realize
that we are all human.**

Bienvenido

歡迎

آمدی د خوش



THANKS!

Mayor Kathy M. Sheehan

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