Letter from the Executive Director - Drocella Mugorewera

The Year 2017 was challenging in the history of the refugee resettlement program in our country, and we are grateful our brave community partners and leaders did not give up on supporting our clients and our agency. Our unwavering staff continued to be committed to assisting refugees and managed the situation well.

We are extending our gratitude to the board members, the Mayor of Knoxville, the Mayor of Knox County, the Mayor of Chattanooga and Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Mayor of Hamilton County, leaders of the Knox and Hamilton County Departments of Education, Cherokee Health Systems, Health Department, numerous faith-based organizations, businesses, volunteers, researchers, students, interns and all individuals who supported our mission, invested their time and made financial and in-kind donations.

We want to express our special gratitude to our first corporate sponsor Pilot Flying J. We believe that public and private partnership is the engine of the sustainability of the services we provide to our clients. We were able to use their generous donation as seed money to bring more private funds to our organization that will support variety of projects focusing on integration and self-sufficiency of refugees.

This year has been the best year ever for my family. My daughter who was twelve years old when I fled my native country graduated from the University of Tennessee and started to work for Amazon one month after her graduation. My son graduated from the MBA/Supply Chain, one of the best MBA programs in the nation, at the same University, and one of my nieces got married. It takes a village to raise children. Thanks to all who helped me to raise/guide my amazing children in America. They are now giving forward and inspiring many. The journey to get to those results was very painful, but the harvest is consoling.

I remember the first call I had with my children one year after a forced separation; they asked me which school they would attend if they had a chance to reunite with the parents. I replied that there are plenty of great schools in Tennessee. (Go Vols!)

Currently, many refugees who arrived in our country are not sure about being reunited with the family members they left behind. They need moral support and more advocates. It is our hope that America will become again the world leader in protecting the most vulnerable including refugees.

One clear sign for successful cities is to remain open. Thanks to the City of Knoxville and Chattanooga for being welcoming cities, where refugees and welcoming communities thrive together.
Susan Speraw, PhD, RN (Chair), Retired Research Professor, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and founding Director, Global Disaster Nursing Graduate Programs. Dr. Speraw's career bridged two disciplines: nursing and clinical psychology. For over 45 years, she provided direct health care services to vulnerable families. This included decades serving migrant populations, including Vietnamese, Thai, and Laotian refugees; women and children fleeing guerrilla warfare in Central America; and undocumented migrant farm workers from Mexico. She has been involved with Bridge for seven years, on the board for five years, and assumed the role of Chair in spring 2015. She resides in Signal Mountain, just outside Chattanooga.

Daphne Kirksey (Vice-Chair), with special expertise in community relations and communications, has served on the Bridge board for a decade. During that time she has worked extensively in government, and government relations, as a staff member in the office of a member of the United States Congress. She now works in municipal services, on the staff of Tennessee American Water. She lives and works in the Chattanooga area.

Leah Berry (Secretary), has served on the Bridge board of directors for five years. She is Division Manager for Business Services at Strata-G, LLC. In addition to participation in Strata-G’s community outreach supporting Knox Area Rescue Ministries, Ms. Berry is Past President of the Farragut Rotary Club, Rotary District 6780 International Grants Coordinator, and a supporter and former guardian for World War II veterans on Knoxville’s Honor Air Flights to Washington, D.C. She holds a degree in Marketing from the University of Tennessee. She resides in Knoxville.

Sonal Modi, CPA (Treasurer), is Business Operations Manager and Financial Analyst at Tennessee American Water. With over twenty years of experience in auditing, finance, and taxation, in both Mumbai, India and the United States, she brings a wealth of expertise in financial management to the Bridge board. She is licensed as a Certified Public Accountant in Tennessee. Her education includes an undergraduate degree and advanced graduate studies in Commerce, all from the University of Mumbai, India. She resides in Chattanooga.

Carrie DiMemmo, is a professional grant-writer, and has worked in Europe and the United States, guiding fundraising and development for major foundations and philanthropic groups. She was one of the original volunteers at Bridge Refugee Services, and has been a faithful supporter for decades. She lives with her family in Chattanooga.

Martin Lester, J.D., holds a law degree from Yale University School of Law, and specializes in immigration law and criminal defense. During his career, he has served as public defender and has maintained private practice in Virginia, Florida and Tennessee. Mr. Lester resides in Chattanooga.

Lauren Oppizzi, MSN, RN, holds a master’s degree in Global Disaster Nursing from the University of Tennessee College of Nursing in Knoxville, and is currently pursuing nursing doctoral studies there, specializing in delivery of healthcare to refugees and vulnerable, displaced groups who have survived forced migration. She is a certified cardiovascular nurse, and a stroke specialist. She has been the recipient of numerous awards for clinical excellence, academic scholarship and professional promise. She lives in Knoxville.

Margaret Scobey, recently retired from the U.S. Foreign Service after a 32-year career. She served as U.S. Ambassador to the Arab Republic of Egypt from 2008 until July 2011, having previously served as the U.S. Ambassador to Syria. During her career, Ambassador Scobey served as Political Counselor in Baghdad, 2006-2007, and Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from September 2001 through November 2003, and Deputy Chief of Mission in Sanaa, Yemen. Ambassador Scobey is recipient of the U.S. Department of State award for Distinguished Service and a Presidential Award. She lives in Knoxville.

Rev. Nathan Tarr, MDiv, MTH, is Pastor, Christ Church Knoxville, where he has served since 2005. He is also Instructor in Humanities at Paideia Academy in Knoxville. During his years of ministry, Rev. Tarr and his family have engaged in mission work in Africa, South America and across Europe. Through his leadership, the Romanian Pastor’s College was launched in Romania, and training for pastors ministering to the marginalized Roma people was achieved. He has been honored for his academic achievements, and published and presented worldwide on topics related to spirituality.

Erik J. Zilen, an entrepreneur, involved in business start-ups since 2006, and the Owner and Operator of Niedlov’s Breadworks in Chattanooga since 2012. Beginning in 2008, he was employed by Bridge for three years as a Case Manager. He has maintained his connection to Bridge and serves as an advocate for refugees, seeking ways to increase refugee employment opportunities. He is a graduate of Eastern University in PA.
Volunteer Story
Notre Dame Alumni Club

In 2016, the University of Notre Dame appealed to their alumni clubs across the nation to lend a hand in refugee and immigrant services. The Chattanooga chapter found their way quickly to Bridge, since one of the members, Tom McGrath, had just donated some of his mother’s old furniture to Bridge.

Leader Steve Chardos arranged a time to find out what else they could do. In this meeting, Marina stated that they were looking for “a dream team”. Steve stopped her there: “I don’t know what follows, but we want to be the dream team.”

And so they have been. Steve and Tom, along with Fos Goodwin, Mike Lilienthal, Bill Balsis, and John Behrmann make up the Notre Dame Dream Team: Movers Extraordinaire. They are willing to set an apartment at extremely short notice, showing up with trucks and smiles, ready to do everything from haul beds out of storage to vacuum the floors of the new home. They love the hands-on work and making a significant difference for arriving refugees.

For Steve, the home is not complete until stuffed animals are nestled on the bed for a child: “Some kid who has been living in a tent is going to walk through that door in a few days and pick up that little teddy bear – I think that’s the coolest thing ever!” The alumni club did not just produce the Dream Team, though.

Another need expressed in that initial meeting was IT help, and the club came through on that as well. Steve asked fellow alumnus Tim Monahan if he would be willing to contribute his expertise, and Tim gladly accepted. For two years now, Tim has been lending his services, pulling Bridge technology into the 21st Century and coming to fix whatever Bridge staff breaks. He and the Dream Team have offered their time, skills, and hearts, and Bridge is incredibly grateful.

Donor Story
Pilot Flying J

“At Pilot Flying J, we are committed to fueling our communities by supporting causes that drive us to improve the quality of life for people at home and on the road. We are proud to support Bridge Refugee Services in their mission to connect people with opportunities to rebuild their lives.”

Thank you to Pilot Flying J for supporting our case management and development programs, as well as helping us meet the transportation needs of our clients. We go further when we go together.
How to Donate

Online
Donate at bridgerefugees.org via our Stripe account. It’s safe, reliable, and used by businesses everywhere.

Cash or Check
Please mail cash or check donations to either our Knoxville or Chattanooga offices.

In-kind
Contact us by phone or email to see what in-kind donation items are needed to welcome clients.

Connect with us!
Faihaa’s house in Damascus, Syria, was large and beautiful, with a garden full of fruit trees. “Now, everything is broken,” she says, “but it’s ok because my children, my family is fine.”

In 2013, Faihaa and her husband left Syria with their four children, trying to escape the war. They fled to Jordan where they spent three days in Za’atari Camp to register with the UN Refugee Agency. The camp had no electricity and little running water. Faihaa was grateful when they could move on to the city of Amman, where her mother and sister were already living. But they had few work and education options there.

Three years later, the family received notification that their case had been chosen for resettlement to the United States, and they came to Chattanooga to join friends living here. Both Faihaa and her husband have found employment, with her husband continuing his career as a carpenter and Faihaa sharing Syrian cooking at a local restaurant, The Olive Branch.

When they arrived, the children spoke the best English in the family. For Faihaa and her husband, learning English has been hard work. But she was determined to learn. It frustrated her that she couldn’t have conversations with the people around her, so she attended five English classes a week. Still today, she insists that the family speak an hour of English a day at home.

Refugee Story
Faihaa - Syria

Everything is different here, but Faihaa focuses beyond the difficulties of the adjustment: “It’s so hard, but I can do it for my children. I need my children to study here, because here they have a good future.”
Thank you to our partners & sponsors

Tennessee Office for Refugees

“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”
Thank YOU for your support of what we do.
If you are interested in receiving our monthly email newsletter, please email Nicole at vista@bridgerefugees.org

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