Bridge Refugee Services
2018 Annual Report
Letter from the Executive Director, Drocella Mugorewera

Dear friends of refugees,

The year 2018 was simply the best. I connected with 50 leaders through Leadership Knoxville Class, and my son's wedding brought remarkable joy to our family. He was one year old when the tragic genocide occurred in Rwanda. I had him on my back, walking miles and miles searching for safety in the Democratic Republic of Congo. When we went back home, I was hoping to be stable and invest for life in that country I cherished so much with so many broken hearts, physical wounds and environmental deteriorations. I never thought I would be a refugee a second time. But in 2008 I had to flee again, leaving that young man with my other children when he was 15 years old. Now he has a family of his own. Many of our American friends were excited to participate in the cultural and church weddings. It was good to see friends who attended my wedding travel from different countries to celebrate with us. Grandbabies are to come. I am extremely grateful that America facilitated our family reunification, and I would like to see that happen for the clients we serve along with many others around the country who have left behind their family members and are now waiting impatiently for that day.

In 2018, we launched our development department with the support of Pilot Flying J, and we reached out to other business partners and foundations to support Bridge. The organizational growth is tangible, and there is hope for big achievement with the help of our partners. The dedication of our donors; volunteers, including Board members; staff; local government institutions and community groups facilitates the exceptional provision of services.

With the support of the Haslam College of Business/ Learning by Giving program and the East Tennessee Alliance for Better Nonprofits, sixteen organizations supporting refugees in Knoxville developed a shared vision: "Knoxville reflects the true Volunteer spirit by embracing all refugees, supporting them as they achieve their dreams and celebrating their contributions to our shared community". Out of this effort, four priorities emerged: Housing, transportation, children and youth services, and jobs and entrepreneurship.

The participation in the quarterly community consultation meetings and in the annual World Refugee Day celebrations in Knoxville and Chattanooga are increasing, and refugee leaders are emerging and giving back to their communities. While celebrating together our wins, we have to remember that successful refugee integration takes time and not only requires financial but also emotional support. We serve many single parents, and they are in need of extra resources. Providing trauma-informed care at all levels and building on refugees' strengths are our goals. We welcome your feedback and thank you again for supporting the refugee life-saving program.

Sincerely,

Drocella Mugorewera
Executive Director
Program snapshot: Community partnership

Abdulwahhab Alabid, known as Wahab, came to America from Iraq determined to succeed. He went to work at Amazon. He started a catering business with his son, Ahmed, and wife, Jinan. He connected with a local family early on who helped him find the mobile home he bought and renovated. He and Jinan recently received U.S. citizenship.

“I came with big ambitions,” he says. But along the way, he realized succeeding in America went beyond the basic necessities of life. Friendship was required. “Normally, we are a very social people. We come here, and there is no one. If we don’t find people to interact with, this is when we feel more isolated.” It was Wahab’s friendship with a local Seventh-day Adventist family that helped him find community. That friendship blossomed into a larger effort to help Muslim refugee families feel welcomed, understood and equipped to start a new life in America—while embracing their values of faith and homeland.

Wahab is one of two Muslims and three Adventists on the five-member board of the Adventist Muslim Friendship Association. The organizations assists refugees with cultural integration in a ministry rooted in the groups’ shared faith and spirituality. (Wahab also serves on Bridge’s board of directors.) “We wanted to create a safe space where refugee families will feel at ease,” says Gabriela Phillips, called Gaby, who helped found the program in 2009 in Chattanooga. She now leads AMFA as it has expanded across the entire country. “The gift we give refugees is ourselves.” Gaby estimates the group has worked with about 50 families so far. Anyone involved in AMFA goes through a four-session training to better understand the Muslim faith and cultural values. AMFA members assist with English tutoring, help children with homework and provide other assistance in a way designed to build long-term friendships.

These relationships help Muslim families overcome differences in language, faith, and culture as well as the prejudice in the community. “We learned you don’t have to change yourself to be like Americans or change Americans to be like you,” says Jinan.

Refugees succeed best through public and private partnerships like these that actively involve the in the resettlement process. Bridge's relationship with churches and other partners has helped foster welcoming communities in challenging political times, and Bridge is seeing growing connectedness among such community groups and the refugees who call East Tennessee home. Such relationships are crucial to cultural integration and the long-term prosperity of our clients. It is through such partnerships that Bridge will continue to support refugees and celebrate their unique contribution to our community.
Rehema Mukeshimana beamed as she held up the skirt she made during the workshop, which she said she joined to learn a skill that will hopefully help her earn some money in the future. “I love how they teach us how to do something and I do it, and when I finish it and I see what I’ve made, that’s the best thing ever,” she says.

Bridge Case Manager Summer Awad says the program also brought together a population of women who often find themselves isolated after resettlement due to limited employment opportunities while they are learning English and adjusting to their new home.

Bridge approached Dr. Enkeshi El-Amin, a UT sociology lecturer who founded Sew It, Sell It, about launching the program. Enkeshi grew up in Guyana surrounded by a family of entrepreneurs, including a grandmother who made her living as a seamstress. “I want them to know they have options,” she says. Enkeshi taught the class with the help of interpreters, Bridge staff, volunteers, and Dr. Nicole Eggers, an assistant professor of history at UT who speaks Swahili and knows how to sew. “In addition to learning to sew, it was a real community-building experience,” she says. “When the first person finished a skirt she could try on, that was the most amazing experience. The entire room went up in cheers and applause and it was so beautiful.”

Summer says community support and the donation of sewing machines, fabric and other supplies made the inaugural workshop possible. The participants not only left with their completed projects, but each one got to take home a sewing machine, many of them new. Bridge hopes to offer more workshops in the future, but Summer says additional donations and fundraising efforts will be needed to make the program sustainable. “Eventually, the goal is to empower these women to sell their products for extra income at farmer’s markets or craft fairs,” she says.

Class participant Luhasa Mukanire says she would encourage its continued community support. “This program helps (people) like me,” she says. “I’m a single mommy. I don’t have a job, but if I (sew) something, maybe I can sell (it) and I can support myself and my family.”