



Stories of Home

Kentucky Refugee
Ministries



I remember home

by Ongendangenda Welo, KRM Lexington Client

I remember being happy

I remember home

I remember my younger self.

Pietermaritz street, PMB, South Africa, 3201
is home.

Here is where I had my first involuntary kiss
stolen by a boy who fit my naive fairytale
about love.

Here is where I understood what hard work,
loyalty, betrayal, stupidity, joy, happiness,
unity, and confusion are.

Here is where my world lost meaning,
everything became vague and uncaring.

Here is where I discovered that I am a
bookworm, taking refuge on the rough
overgrown brown grass in the backyard for
hours just to linger in the joyous end of
"redeeming love".

Here is where I for the first time was
permitted to take down my mother's braids,
and wash and dry her hair.

Her hair smelled of sweat mixed with
dandruff brought upon by exhausting
manual labor, little rest, and constant rush.

Here is where my mother showed me that a
woman can do anything, work hard, and
reach her dream.

Here is where I learned from watching my
mom what true love is: that you can love
someone so much that their happiness
brings you joy and their tears equate to your
sorrow.

Yes, I was born in the Congo, the land of
gold diamonds, and silver, but my home
is.....

#momdearestyouremissed
#poetrybyRissa
#iseeyou
#icantwait
#memories
#workinprogress
#LLCEC2022
#findingongendangenda
#imissyourhugs



After fleeing the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ongendangenda Welo put herself through school in South Africa, working as a receptionist and hairdresser, to obtain her BA in Education. In 2022, she was resettled as a refugee through KRM Lexington. Ms. Welo became TEFL certified and currently works as a Special Education Paraeducator. She aspires to one day be an English Teacher.

Cover Photo by Megan Resch

Photo of Ms. Welo provided by Melissa Coulston

**"Here is where I learned from watching my mom
what true love is: that you can love someone so
much that their happiness brings you joy and their
tears equate to your sorrow."**



Photo by Megan Resch

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Not the End but a New Beginning

by Emily Warren, Special Projects Coordinator - KRM Lexington

***Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.**

"They didn't make it out." The words flashed across our work phones, interrupting a continuous montage of evacuation footage playing out on our televisions and computer screens. At the KRM office in Lexington, the staff had been watching the airlifts out of Kabul for the past few days, having received upcoming travel information for an Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holder and his family. It was the first SIV case in almost three years, as processing for Special Immigrant Visas had slowed during the previous administration.

Amid the chaos, our agency received information that Jawid Khan, his wife, and their three children had already made it safely to America. What a relief that was to hear as the disintegration of the Afghan government and the end of a 20-year U.S. mission in Afghanistan was playing out on TV.

"No. They are not coming. They are still in Afghanistan." Musa Pazir is the nephew of Jawid's wife, Nasrin, and was the Khan family's U.S. tie. When KRM representatives called to let him know that his family had escaped Kabul, they were met with the awful news: Jawid had messaged Musa that morning saying their flight had been canceled. An alert in English had come through on his phone.

"Due to the present security conditions, we are unfortunately unable to offer you relocation on this flight. Please DO NOT report to the airport. Continue to shelter in place."

But the Khans had already arrived at the airport. The Taliban had seized Kabul when

"...still hoping they could get to someone at the U.S. Embassy who might help them find passage..."

the Afghan president fled the capital and insurgents declared control over the fallen government. That was on August 15th, 2021. The Khans were scheduled to fly out the next day. Although the airport remained under U.S. military and NATO control to conduct the emergency airlifts, the evacuations were unstable and chaotic.

Amid the mayhem, the Khans lost all their money and most of their luggage. When it became clear they were not going to get out, Jawid called Musa pleading for guidance on what to do next. "They sent the message from the visa center that their flight was gone." Musa told us. "They were so worried. Nasrin had been injured. She was bleeding badly."

The Khans left the airport so Nasrin could recover, still hoping they could get to someone at the U.S. Embassy who might help them find passage. But the embassy was deserted. All U.S. officials in the country had already fled to the airport in order to secure a spot on one of the last flights out of the city.

After days of returning to the airport and scrambling through the throngs that had amassed around the gates, Jawid found a U.S. soldier who was checking for passengers with legitimate exit papers. He convinced the soldier to consider his visa.

Not the End but a New Beginning | Continued

"No one would hear me. Then I found a U.S. military man. I show him my papers, that I had visa, and he said "Yes, you can go. Get your family and go on this plane." Nearly two weeks after their original arrival date – and just under the wire – Jawid, Nasrin and their three children arrived safely at Blue Grass Airport. All evacuations ended three days later, and the U.S. military left Afghanistan.

The next day I go to Musa's house to check on the family. Inside the air hangs heavy and smells of good food, seemingly thick enough to gather up in your hands, but mine are full of the paperwork I need them to sign. Nasrin and her nephew's wife are busy preparing platters of nuts and dried fruits, composed and presented like a painting, like a gift.

Nasrin's son, Salar, drives a plastic yellow truck along the wrinkles of buckled carpet. For the family's arrival the night before, KRM invited veteran and longtime community partner, Logan Nance, to the airport to help welcome the family to Lexington. Logan had greeted the Khan children with new backpacks filled with toys and clothes. The euphoria of a new toy is all the little boy knows for the moment.

The Khan's daughters, Awa and Zari, sit in blue jeans and listen to their parents' conversations. Zari waves to me from the far side of the room, the silver sequined bow in her hair reflecting sunlight onto the wall behind her, adding luster to an otherwise regular gesture. These are the ordinary hours that follow extraordinary circumstances. They are tired, but they are fine," Musa assures me. "Afghans are strong people."

"My supervisor is a good man. He treats me well. And my work friends take me home at night..."



"Carrying Hope"

Artwork by Farzana, KRM Afghan Client

In March 2022, I asked Jawid if I could talk with his family a bit more now that they've lived in Lexington for most of a year. He agrees and invites me to their home on a frosty Saturday morning. Thanks to KRM job developers, he just became employed at a factory installing sunroofs into cars. "My supervisor is a good man. He treats me well. And my work friends take me home at night because the bus ride is two hours. They are refugees from Africa. I think from Congo."

At the house, the whole family greets me again. The children show off their rooms and where they like to play in the yard. Jawid wants me to know how careful he is to turn off lights, fill trash bags to the brim, and keep the heat turned down in order to stay in control of their expenses. Nasrin can't stop smiling, elated to welcome a guest into her home.

Not the End but a New Beginning | Continued

Later, we sit together in a room with low ceilings and crowd around a cellphone. A last-minute glitch keeps our in-person interpreter away, so we use a language line to help connect us with one another. Jawid and Nasrin speak in melodious cascades of Dari and use their hands to grasp at the air as if to summon the exact right words.

In Afghanistan, the Khan family lived in Pul-i-Alam, a province nestled beneath a bundle of mountains just outside Kabul. It was there that Jawid worked in the kitchen of a U.S. military base, preparing meals for soldiers and cleaning up around the camp. It was a good job for him. He is glad to remember the soldiers who were there and speaks gratefully of their kindness and humility.

“I like to make salads for the soldiers. We had high ranking officers at the camp, but they didn’t care. They still treat us well. Ranks didn’t matter to them. They were good to us.”

Jawid is lucky. Special Immigrant Visas are issued to Afghans who worked closely with the military after the Taliban fell in late 2001. Like other immigrants coming through the refugee resettlement program, SIVs are vetted and processed overseas for up to 18 months before their applications are approved. Jawid’s SIV status affords his family access to local benefits, the ability to work legally in the U.S., and the opportunity to become citizens after five years. Many of the Afghans evacuated during the airlifts were not as fortunate. Most are being processed through a temporary humanitarian parole program. Those Afghans who are not approved for permanent asylum could be sent back to Afghanistan.

Nasrin is still recovering from the injuries she sustained in Kabul. To reach the airlifts, evacuees had to pass through Taliban-controlled areas of the airport. The insurgents fired bullets into the air and pelted blunt objects into the crowds. Just below her left eye, Nasrin was struck with a metal water bottle. The bruises on her nose and cheek are gone, but pain from that day she carries still. “The doctor say my nose is not broken but it is hurting me always. My eyes are bad because of it.”

Shortly after the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, they promised amnesty to those who worked with the U.S. military. Such declarations have left many Afghans unconvinced.

Nasrin and Jawid also have lost family to the Taliban -- Nasrin’s uncle in 2012 and Jawid’s cousin one month before the fall of the Afghan government.

Overall, the Khans are doing fine. Like many parents, Nasrin and Jawid are grateful that their kids are thriving. All three children were born under a free Afghanistan and have only known a world in which education and futures full of opportunities were available to them. Now that they are here in Kentucky, Jawid and Nasrin are optimistic that a secure future is still possible.

Still, though, they think of loved ones left behind, those who narrowly missed a seat on a plane and who wait for emergency approval to come to the U.S. Their families back in Kabul are forced into a precarious existence, constantly relocating to different neighborhoods around the city in order to avoid a run-in with the Taliban. The threat is always looming.

“We are so happy for the U.S. to help us, and we hope they will help our families too,” says Jawid. In his throat, the words catch. “We are happy to be here, but it’s hard because they are there.”

**"Art is a universal key unlocking
doors to other cultures."**



Art by Yunier Ramirez

After Year One

by Daniela Gamez Salgado, Cuban-Haitian Caseworker - KRM Louisville

Meet Yilandy Ramirez Frometa

Yilandy Ramirez Frometa began practicing housing law in the colonial center of Havana in 1996, but found her passion through an entrepreneurship opportunity. Yilandy opened her first store named Octava Maravilla, also known as the Eighth Wonder. She knew she wanted to bring more joy to the lives of Cubans on the island and stocked the shelves with party supplies. Her store thrived through celebrating celebrations.

Yilandy focused on growing her businesses as the years passed. She was able to find a stable source of income to put food on the table for her and her staff. She did not dream of the United States. Not until she woke up to a call from her daughter on July 11, 2021. Her daughter asked if she had been on Facebook recently. She was referring to the videos circulating of protesters that filled the streets of San Antonio de los Baños, near Havana. COVID exacerbated the supply system problems and made navigating daily life more difficult and dangerous, especially since medical treatment was unreliable due to lack of supplies. But, Yilandy never expected a mass response by her fellow countrymen. She ate breakfast with her daughter, got dressed, and began marching through the streets with her neighbors. She felt fulfilled because she was doing something that she was never able to do. The videos of the protests Yilandy recorded that Sunday reminds her of the time the people of Cuba took a risk and expressed themselves singing Patria y Vida (Homeland and Life) to signal for change instead of chanting the traditional Cuban slogan Patria o Muerte (Homeland or Death).

In the months that followed the protests, the consequences for those who participated in the protests became more apparent as more people were imprisoned. Yilandy's businesses had been fined and the reasoning behind it was not justified. Her exit from Cuba was less prepared than she had anticipated, but she knew the fines and harassment were likely to continue. Yilandy had previously traveled to Mexico to continue her post-graduate education through a program offered for Cuban professionals. Luckily, the visa had not yet expired, and Yilandy had the money to book a plane ticket to Mexico. During the month of November 2021, she traveled alone to Mexico and presented herself at a port-of-entry to request asylum. She arrived in Louisville, Kentucky, in December 2021.

During her first year in the United States, she has experienced more good than bad while living in Louisville. "Kentucky Refugee Ministries walked by my side as I began learning English and began adapting to the climate and customs." During her eleventh month in the United States, Yilandy received her Employment Authorization Document (EAD) and Social Security Number that allows her to legally work in the United States. From there, her first instinct was to put her entrepreneurship experience to use. She decided she wanted to create a cleaning business and filed to form a Limited Liability Company (LLC). Her LLC is named 8M after her former businesses in Cuba, Octava Maravilla. She is in the early stages of forming her business, but she has passion and perseverance. Today, she is hopeful for the future and once again she is taking everything day by day.



Photo of Yilandy Ramirez Frometa by Daynier Adan

Meet the Pino-Morales Family

Jose Luis Pino Vallina and Yadira Morales Guerra met in Havana, Cuba when they were both studying dentistry. However once they began practicing dentistry without the proper equipment or supplies, they recognized how scarcity reached every inch of the island. These conditions led them to leave the dental profession.

They were drawn to La Iglesia de Nazareno in 2009. During this period, they had three children: Jose Daniel, Emily, and Angel David. Also, Jose Luis was invited to church conferences in Panama, Mexico, and the United States.

In 2017, Jose Luis met Yurian Santiesteban at one of those conferences. Although the conference was hosted in Indiana, Jose Luis had the opportunity to visit neighboring states, including Kentucky.

Kentucky caught Jose Luis's eye the most. Yurian let Jose Luis know that if he ever decided to move to the United States, he would have a home in Kentucky.

Jose Luis and Yadira decided at that moment to take the leap of faith and initially move to Uruguay. At the time, José Luis and Yadira's children were 7 years old, 8 years old, and 10 months old. In February 2020, they chose to move to the United States. They packed their bags with clothes, five Cuban passports, and diapers for Angel David. They moved through Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico as a family before reaching a port-of-entry to request asylum from the United States. They were one of the few large families with young children who had undertaken this harrowing journey, but Jose Luis and Yadira knew the outcome would be worth the risks.

Yurian kept his promise when Jose Luis's family officially arrived in the United States on April 18, 2021. Once they arrived in Louisville, Kentucky, Yurian had arranged for the family of five to have their own apartment furnished and ready to be lived in. They could unpack and sleep in peace knowing that they were in good hands and that they had a full refrigerator. Yurian connected the family with Kentucky Refugee Ministries to be enrolled in the Refugee Cash Assistance program and to receive further orientation regarding adjusting their immigration status, registering their children in school, taking adult ESL classes, and more.

"Life changed in an instant"

During the weekends, Jose Luis and Yadira would give their own testimonies and speak to the congregation in Yurian's church. They recognized that the first year in the United States would be one of the most difficult years, but they drew support from their faith, family, and community to be able to "take everything with patience and calmness," as Jose Luis says. Jose Daniel and Emily were more quick to adjust after starting school. Jose Luis proudly shared that his daughter is the secretary of the student council and his son is in band and the robotics club at school. He is especially proud to hear how his children's vocabulary has grown.

"Life changed in an instant," Jose Luis reminisces about when he and his wife received their work permits and Social Security Numbers in July 2022, nearly one year and three months after their date of arrival. Jose Luis and Yadira were enrolled in employment services at KRM and guided through the process of applying for a job.

After Year One - MMeet the Pino-Morales Family | Continued



The Pino-Morales Family


Today, Jose Luis works the night shift at Amazon, and Yadira works the day shift at UPS. Their daily schedule transformed into machine-like clockwork as the family shares one car and has five different schedules to juggle.

Although they became self-sufficient after receiving their EADs, Jose Luis does not want to attach himself to future plans yet until he has residency in the United States. The family has applied for asylum and stays in frequent contact with their immigration lawyer regarding updates with their application. They are not able to apply

directly for residency under the Cuban Adjustment Act because they were not paroled into the United States, but they maintain hope that changing immigration laws and class action lawsuits will be in their favor. Jose Luis maintains the same attitude that got him through his first year and reminds himself to continue with patience. "I can't complain. Above all we have liberty," Jose Luis concludes.

"Above all we have liberty"

Photo by Daniela Gamez Salgado



**"Home is where individual and collective
aspirations find expression
For those of us born elsewhere"**

Photo by Yunier Ramirez

A Heartwarming Welcome

by Kelsi Sievering, Refugee Cash Assistance Manager - KRM Northern Kentucky



Welcome Cards Created by Local Middle School Students

Evacuees from Afghanistan, Rahmatullah, and his wife and four children were resettled by KRM's Northern Kentucky (NKY) office in December 2021, just a month after the office opened. His first few months were not the easiest transition for his family. Finding a house for his family of six while we were building housing connections in the community proved difficult, so the family spent their initial month staying in temporary housing on the campus of the Benedictine Sisters' Monastery. Eventually, we managed to find their family a nice house in a Northern Kentucky suburb, albeit a bit out of the way of many of the area's bus routes.

Due to the distance from bus routes, Rahmatullah had difficulties getting around to perform basic tasks such as grocery shopping or getting to KRM without someone helping the family with transportation. Thankfully, an all-star co-sponsor team from Highland United Methodist Church (HUMC) in Ft. Thomas, KY, were of great assistance to the family in their first months.

They assisted with typical KRM services such as taking the family shopping for groceries, clothes and assisted with home maintenance. They also took the family for fun around NKY that they would not have been able to go to alone. They also assisted with gathering funds from the church to purchase the family a new washer and dryer for their home.

When the time came to start looking for a vehicle for Rahmatullah and his family, the community rallied support. With connections from St. Vincent de Paul, KRM was able to partner with HUMC and the Good Samaritan Car Clinic to collect the money needed for Rahmatullah to purchase a minivan for his family. Shortly after, Rahmatullah obtained his driver's license and was able to use his car to get to and from his new job at Amazon, shortening his commute by half. Since the family resettled in December, the children have started attending school, and the family is settling in nicely.

Photo by Alex Miniard

Snapshots of Hope

Bikes & Backpacks

by Kelsi Sievering, Refugee Cash Assistance Manager - KRM Northern Kentucky

In the Summer of 2022, KRM Northern Kentucky partnered with Temple Shalom to bring bikes and backpacks to our refugee families. Through months of planning, KRM and Temple Shalom worked together to gather over 100 bikes, helmets, baskets, locks, lights, and more for the event at the Covington Plaza Amphitheatre. We were joined by other cycling organizations in the area, including Montgomery Cyclery, MOBO, Major Taylor Cycling Club, Queen City Bike, and the Brain Injury Alliance of NKY.

We had balloon animals, games, snacks and even a shaved ice truck. The event was a huge hit amongst our clients and community members who showed up to help. We were able to serve all of our clients and offer bikes and backpacks to both children and adults who were interested, with supplies left over! We were thrilled to be able to offer clients both a fun day and access to necessary supplies through the support and partnership with Temple Shalom Cincinnati.



Scan the QR code to see what items you can donate!



Photos provided by Mike Puckett and KRM Office Staff

**"Home had many colors, many hopes
Many contradictions, many beliefs
Yet, it conveyed some stability
Until it was no longer home"**



Photo by Yunier Ramirez

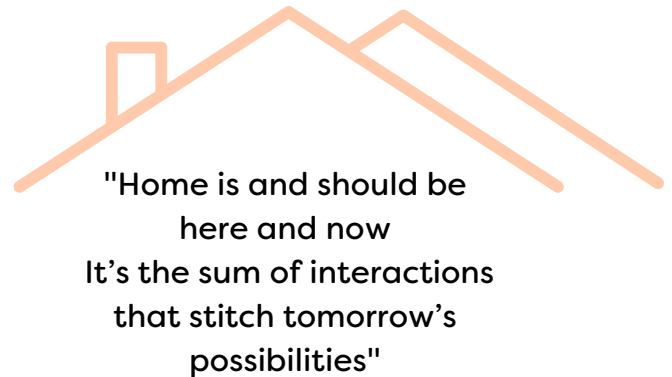
Where is home?

by Patrick B. Litanga, Professor & Former Case Manager - KRM Louisville

Home! Where my parents were born
Where I grew up, speaking other languages
Old traditions structured life
Livelihoods rooted in history
Family and ancestry guided choices
Social contradictions carried linguistic coherence
That home was Aleppo, Baghdad, or Kabul
Home was also Kinshasa, Goma, or Mogadishu

For most, home offered hopes and meanings
Festivities needed not translation
Recipes, spices, and celebrations congealed with places
Here there was a harvest song
Elsewhere, a prayer for naming a baby
Over there, an incantation for prosperity
And almost everywhere, a prayer for safe travel
Home had many colors, many hopes
Many contradictions, many beliefs
Yet, it conveyed some stability
Until it was no longer home
Political strife endangered hopes
Political expediency unleashed dissent
And political aspirations fueled armed struggles
Home became a place of repression and war
A place of hopelessness and uncertainties

But if home entails the warmth of friends and relatives
Where birthdays, graduations, and weddings are celebrated
Then home is and should be everywhere
The intimidating fast-paced streets of New York
The unforgiving bitter winters of Toronto
New Orleans and its endless festivals
Nashville's luring glittering nights
Denver's idyllic scenes
Louisville, KY's dazzling derbies
Or Washington D.C.'s unabashed cosmopolitan bent
These homes require flights
Long hour-drives
Surf-couching, Airbnb, or hotel rooms
They often involve foods, a lot of it
Songs carrying the memories of other homes
Clothes, spices, and sounds conveying melancholic warmth
These homes intimate that the past is never completely past



Where is home? | Continued

Then again if home is where one lives
Where one's livelihood finds sustenance
Home is and should be here and now
It's the sum of interactions that stitch tomorrow's possibilities
The social mold shaping one's becoming
Home is where individual and collective aspirations find expression
For those of us born elsewhere
This home is where Thanksgivings, Halloween, the Fourth of July
Black Friday, Juneteenth, and Memorial Day become meaningful
But home is also how America's historical fears are implanted in us
How social stratifications, classes, and casts
How racial representations and discontents shape our consciousness
How the complexities of gender and sexual preferences sip into our
interactions
Here, Apple products, Facebook, Amazon, and Google govern choices
Home is definitely here and now
It is the process by which you and I build tomorrow



Born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Patrick Litanga sought asylum in South Africa in 2000. Three years later he was resettled as a refugee by KRM Lexington office, where he worked as a Case Manager for seven years at KRM Louisville. In 2022, Patrick accepted a position as professor of Political Science at Eastern Kentucky University.

Photo of Dr. Patrick B. Litanga



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We thank you for your ongoing support of KRM

Acknowledgements

Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM) would like to thank those refugees, and former refugees, who shared their personal experiences of loss, journey and renewed hope for Stories of Home. We appreciate the support and advocacy of all the KRM partners—volunteers, donors, and service providers—who recognize the complex challenges refugees must overcome to rebuild their lives. It is the combination of their own determination and your support that has made Kentucky a place where refugees can—even in the face of memories both nostalgic and traumatic—reimagine home.

The stories of resilience, adaptation and success found in these pages are representative. They stand for the aspirations and achievements of the thousands of newcomers served by KRM during our organization's 34-year history. For those many refugees still overseas hoping for resettlement or asylum, and for those already here who still need encouragement and opportunity to find their place in our community, we hope these stories inspire you to continue to support them in their striving—and KRM's work of making Kentucky home for refugees.

John Koehlinger
Executive Director
Kentucky Refugee Ministries

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