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Opinion Editorial
Refugee Awareness Month

by Manne Favor, Executive Director

THE GENEROSITY OF STRANGERS PROVIDES HOPE

In a world where violence forces thousands of families to flee for their lives each day, Refugee Awareness Month is the time to show that we, the global public, stand with refugees. During June we take a moment to honor the courage, strength and determination of women, men and children who have been forced to flee their homeland because of threat of persecution, war and violence.

Worldwide, the majority of refugees are woman and children. My team and I work with dozens of brave, strong and determined refugees each month. No matter how many stories we hear, the life events that bring our clients to the United States never get easier to hear. We hear horror stories of mothers fleeing in the night to protect children from execution for their father's political beliefs. We work with refugees who spent months walking in search of a safe place to stop after war took over their village. And, we work with others who can't return home because of a natural disaster.

The stories that lead most refugees to the United States are different but there are always common threads: Leaving with nothing but what you can carry, knowing you will never see friends and family again, having no idea what your future holds and how the generosity of strangers forever changed their lives.

No one wants to be a refugee yet every four seconds someone is forced from their home. There are over 65 million refugees in the world today. Sadly, most refugees wait an average of 17 years before they are resettled. Can you imagine being a parent knowing your child will never experience a normal childhood? Most refugees live on the streets, in parks or, if they are lucky, in a refugee camp.

A few lucky refugees are chosen to be part of resettlement programs. These refugees arrive in their new country with nothing. They have no money, no job and most don't speak English. Refugees being resettled don't even get to choose the country to which they are moved. If they are lucky enough to be part of a resettlement program in the U.S., they are normally provided a small apartment with the bare basics. No television, no computer, no internet, no microwave, no iron. Provisions are scarce. But the refugees we are blessed to work with don't complain. They are grateful to have running water, electricity, a safe place to sleep and most importantly, an opportunity to build a life.

Most refugees instantly begin searching for work. Most only have six-months to be totally self-sufficient and must begin repaying the plane fare they received through the program within eight months. Refugees are also required to apply for a Green Card within one year of arrival. Refugees are grateful to be part of a community and work hard to be stand-up citizens who value education, contributing to society and giving back.

Refugee resettlement has long been recognized as a win for the host country as well as the refugee. The global need to resettle refugees is up 17 percent. As a country built by immigrants and abundantly blessed, it shocks me the U.S. is backing away from refugee resettlement. This year the U.S. government has set the refugee admission ceiling at 30,000 - the lowest refugee resettlement ceiling in the nearly 40-year history of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

Refugees don't stand a chance without you. Will you join me in telling Congress and the Texas Legislature that you #StandWithRefugees by using the hashtag on your social media? Without you, refugees truly have no hope.

Editor's Note: Manne Favor is the Executive Director of Justice For Our Neighbors Houston (JFON Houston), a non-profit legal services organization dedicated to providing free and low-cost immigration legal services to refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants.