

NONPROFIT FOCUS

Guidance and inspiration

OVERCOMERS REFUGEE SERVICES: Program helps area's newest arrivals find their footing during critical time

Q&A

Anne Renner, president of the board of directors for Overcomers Refugee Services, shares what it is like to volunteer with the organization.

What types of roles do volunteers hold at Overcomers Refugee Services?

Volunteers are the lifeblood of Overcomers Refugee Services. Overcomers would not exist without volunteers and could not continue its work in the refugee community without them. Overcomers was created by a passionate volunteer who cared deeply about the well-being of new arrivals to the Concord community, having been one of them a few years before. He is now our executive director, Clement Kigugu. We have one other paid staff member who provides case management service. Everything else is done by volunteers.

Currently we have 19 volunteers in direct service with our refugee clients. Some have "adopted" a refugee family and help that family on a regular basis. We have dedicated volunteer drivers who take refugees to appointments. Some volunteers teach citizenship classes, others tutor one on one. Office volunteers provide administrative support to our staff and help clients who speak a little English. A business management consultant is helping us improve our organizational structure and advises our executive director.

We also have a dedicated board of directors, half from the refugee community and half from the established Concord community. I think board members are the invisible heroes of small non-profits. Our board members do the planning, budgeting, fund-raising and oversight. They also do anything else that is necessary: from setting up the tables for a fundraiser, doing the layout for a brochure or preparing the annual tax return. We do need more experienced professionals for our board.

We are focused on encouraging refugees to help each other. We have had refugee volunteers but they aren't able to continue once they get jobs. One of our current projects is to recruit and train teenagers and young adults from the refugee communities to become volunteer interpreters for older refugees.

What attributes are most critical for a volunteer?

Being a volunteer is much like having a job. To do a good job, you have to care. To do a good job when you aren't being paid for it, you have to really care about what you are doing. Our volunteers are people who care deeply and want to express that caring through action. They care for the individuals they work with (and it feels great to help others in an immediate, concrete way). Our volunteers care for our Concord community. By embracing its newest members, they help bring them into our community, which strengthens and enriches it. I think our volunteers also have a curiosity and openness about the bigger world. The members of our refugee communities are courageous and interesting people with fascinating and inspiring stories. It can take some work and time to get to know them but it's very worthwhile.

What do you find most meaningful about being part of the organization?

My work with Overcomers has satisfied three areas that are very important to me: making a difference, community building and inclusiveness. I need to feel that my efforts achieve something real. I think most people want to help, but we don't know how. So we stay on the sidelines. It can take a kick to jolt us into action. And even then, we can get frustrated when we feel our efforts aren't meaningful. Concord made me passionate about vibrant local communities – it is a great example of the positive power of strong communities. And I believe that communities benefit from embracing diversity.

I had struggled in the past to be of service to the Concord area refugees. I got my first kick into action in this area when I ran into a man from East Congo at the Storrs Street Salvation Army. He had arrived a few days before from a Mozambique refugee camp. He was trying to buy shoes for his children, who had only sandals to wear in the snow. In Africa, he had been a professor. In Concord, he only qualified for the least skilled jobs. His courage and optimism in the face of serious adversity inspired me to help. His family of seven was squeezed into a tiny apartment on Fisherville Road. I set out to find him a real home and eventually bought several buildings in South Concord with large apartments to provide homes for refugee families. I tried hard but I didn't know what my families needed to succeed in their new country. They needed much more than a place to live.

When Clement Kigugu approached me two years ago and asked me to help his new organization, then known as Overcomers Support Services, I saw the power in his approach. He understood from his own experience as an asylee from Rwanda the diverse challenges that refugees face. Overcomers helps refugees through people who speak their language and understand their culture of origin. Assimilation is not just finding a job, a house and learning a new language. Refugees need to learn the complex ways of a new culture while retaining pride in their native culture, and many need to address the pain of a traumatic past.

Clement Kigugu's wise and compassionate approach to refugee assimilation was my second kick. I wanted to be part of the solution he offered. So I joined his board of directors and then became its president. Overcomers' goal for refugees is to have them become successful, contributing members of the greater Concord area – for them to become New Americans and to share the richness of their country and culture of origin with their new society. Overcomers' vision is to build community within and between refugee groups and with long-term residents of Concord. Overcomers' is a service organization that is not about handing down, but about hands reaching across, new to old, old to new, to join in community.



Courtesy

Clement Kigugu has become a community fixture and a valued resource to help newcomers.

'They want to be engaged, educated and empowered'

By JESSICA LIVINGSTON

Imagine being forced to flee your home, leaving everything behind, because of war or persecution. You are now a refugee.

Having nowhere else to go, you may spend years in a United Nations camp. Then you are sent to a new country where everything is different from anything you know and almost no one speaks your language.

In the first six months, a government-funded agency helps you find a small apartment, a job, low-cost health care, enrolls your kids in schools and provides English lessons. But all too soon, barely speaking this new language, you are on your own. What then? You still need to heal from your losses, overcome the fear and pain, and learn to live among strangers. It can take years to adjust.

Overcomers Refugee Services was founded to help meet these needs.

Overcomers Refugee Services was inspired by the experience of its executive director, Clement Kigugu, who came to the U.S. from Rwanda in 2006 seeking asylum. He worked for several years as a caseworker for a New Hampshire resettlement agency, helping refugees who had recently arrived.

Members of the refugee communities came to know Kigugu as a source of support. When they no longer qualified for assistance from the resettlement agency, they began seeking his help and counseling outside of the organization.

Realizing the ongoing needs of refugees, Kigugu established



Overcomers Support Services in 2013.

"I started Overcomers because I saw a need in the new American (refugee) community. New Americans need assistance from people who speak their language and understand their culture, who also speak English and understand American culture. Most of all, they want to be engaged, educated and empowered to help themselves and others in their communities. I knew that I could help them in a more meaningful way through a structured nonprofit, so I started Overcomers."

Earlier this year, the organization's name was officially changed to Overcomers Refugee Services.

More than 800 refugees have been settled in Concord over the past five years, mostly from African and Southeast Asian countries. Overcomers consistently works with about 240 families each year, providing services and support related to cultural orientation, general social services, employment counseling, along with pro-

grams for women and youth.

Despite the drastic reduction in the number of refugees being resettled in the U.S., there is still a great need for refugee support.

Once resettled, refugees deserve the opportunity to achieve the American dream, not just survive. Refugees become New Americans. They have much to offer New Hampshire and Concord, both economically and culturally. In addition to the new ideas and rich heritages that they share with us, they fill needed jobs, open businesses, pay taxes, buy homes, start families, and contribute to the overall productive economy of our state.

Many New Americans just need a helping hand over the hurdles they meet as they acclimate to their new home and become part of our community. That's why Overcomers is committed to making the process of integration as short and as effective as possible.

To learn more about Overcomers Refugee Services or to get involved, visit OvercomersNH.org.

NEED TO KNOW

OVERCOMERS REFUGEE SERVICES

WHAT THEY DO

Educate: Overcomers educates newly resettled refugees by providing the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their new country.

Empower: By providing support and access to resources, they empower refugees to overcome their painful past and successfully adapt to American culture.

Engage: Provides opportunities for new and established Americans to engage in everyday activities so refugees can feel welcome in their new homes, and become a part of New Hampshire communities.

CONNECT

Mail: P.O. Box 2941
Concord, NH 03302

Address: 90 Airport Road,
Room 25, Concord, NH 03301

Email:
ckigugu.ossnh@gmail.com

Phone: (603) 715-0844

Website: overcomersnh.org

Facebook: facebook.com/OvercomersRefugeeServices/

GLOBAL CRISIS

Worldwide: Some 70.8 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes. Almost 26 million of that number are refugees, half of whom are under 18. These are the highest levels of displacement on record.

Why they become refugees: Often, it's because their home land has been torn apart by war. Or they are forced to leave because of religious, political or ethnic persecution. Sometimes natural disasters causing social collapse and famine drive people from their homes.

Time in limbo: Refugees typically spend months or years in temporary or quasi-permanent camps. They may eventually be permitted to relocate to a country where they can live without danger. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees assists refugees by recommending them for resettlement in developed countries as part of finding a durable solution to their needs. The United States accepts refugees after a lengthy clearance process overseen by the U.S. Department of State.

NEW HAMPSHIRE REFUGEES

Since the early 1980s, more than 7,500 refugees have been resettled in New Hampshire. New Hampshire refugees come from over 30 countries, but most are from the Democratic Republic of Congo, escaping from its deadly civil wars, and from Bhutan and Myanmar, forced out by "ethnic cleansing."

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