

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

B5'S TRANSFORMATIVE MISSION FOR REFUGEES & IMMIGRANTS

by Cherami Freeman



In a world where refugees and immigrants face immense challenges in adapting to new communities, organizations like B5 shine as beacons of hope, offering transformative opportunities and support for newcomers in the Tri-Cities.

B5, formerly the Family Learning Center, aids in the assimilation of refugees and immigrants in the Tri-Cities. Since 2009, Executive Director Theresa Roosendaal and her team have helped more than 2,000 refugees learn English, practice for their citizenship tests, and find a sense of belonging in our community. What started as volunteer efforts through Theresa's church have blossomed into a grassroots effort with global consequences that is growing by leaps and bounds.

Each year, more than 200 refugees settle in the Tri-Cities, although that number has increased to 300 recently with an influx of refugees from war-torn countries. World Relief Tri-Cities, the local resettlement agency, helps new arrivals secure housing, acquire social security cards, undergo medical screenings, obtain initial employment, and enroll children five and older in school.

"The goal is for families to be self-sufficient in six months, but we know that's impossible," Theresa says. B5 continues educational and relational support beyond that time. "I saw a need and started doing it because that's what Jesus calls us to do. It's got to go beyond just me," Theresa says. "What we are today is way different than what we were in the beginning. We can't be a little church ministry." Through strategic partnerships, innovative programs, and unwavering commitment, B5 is redefining what's possible for refugees and immigrants in the Tri-Cities, and fostering an inclusive society along the way.



THE FAMILY LEARNING CENTER LEGACY

A small, two-bedroom apartment in the Central Park Apartments located in East Kennewick houses the organization's office, after-school program space, meeting space, and computer lab. For 11 years, it's been in Building B, Apartment #5.

Back when the organization was known as the "Family Learning Center," if a neighbor asked where you were going, the answer was always "To B5," thus inspiring the organization's rebrand.

B5 outgrew its current space pre-pandemic, and is now ready to provide a sufficient, dignified space on a plot of land adjacent to the Boys and Girls Club Kennewick Clubhouse – Eerkes Family Branch. Through a sizable donation from Family of Faith Church when it closed its doors for good, as well as via a quiet capital campaign, B5 has already raised most of its \$2.1 million goal, and the organization broke ground on the planned facility in July, 2023. "This is going to be an amazing legacy for everyone in that church," says John McCoy, B5's Capital Campaign Chairman and champion for the cause. "I can't think of a better way for the church to leave a legacy than what they've done. First of all, they've launched this non-profit. And then, they are really the foundation for this community learning center coming to fruition."

A substantial grant from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, a generous donation from the Broetje Family Trust, and "A plethora of gifts at the \$10,000 to \$25,000 level have raised most of this quiet capital campaign's \$2.1 million goal," McCoy says. "Every little bit helps!"



LEFT TO RIGHT:
BOARD MEMBERS JOHN MCCOY, THERESA ROOSENDAL, MARISA ROOSENDAL, CHARLES HENAGER, JR.

HELPING UNMET NEEDS IN EDUCATION

More than half of the refugees served by B5 are children, many of whom were born in or lived most of their lives in refugee camps. Most start school with limited or no proficiency in written and spoken English. "The unmet need we stepped into was the whole education piece. We helped kids with their homework after school because their parents couldn't."

Nesreen Al Muzayn is the Kennewick School District (KSD) Immigrant and Refugee Coordinator. She says that Westgate Elementary has twenty-one languages spoken by students. "If you go to the playground, you would be amazed, hearing Bosnian, Burmese, Karen, Arabic, Mandarin, all of those

languages." Nesreen helps newcomers learn about B5 in a partnership to help bridge language and educational gaps, and is jointly funded by a federal grant from the Refugee School Impact Program.

B5 helps families register children 0-5 into the Ready! For Kindergarten program supported by the Tri-Cities Reading Foundation workshops which help children and parents prepare for primary school. In collaboration with KSD, B5 assists middle school and high school students with English, tutoring, digital literacy, cultural awareness, and soft skills for school and future employment.





HELEN & EDWARD NZINGA

TRANSFORMATIVE RESULTS

Edward Nzinga was three years old and the second youngest of six children when his father was killed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the Congo). "My father was serving in the military there. From what I've heard from family stories, the people who killed my father were looking for us." His mother decided to cross the border into Uganda to seek refuge with her six children.

The family settled in Kennewick in 2016. "We had just moved there over the weekend, and a strange lady {Theresa Roosendaal} came in. She was super friendly, she was welcoming, and she just started asking questions. She was focused on me, my older sister, and my younger brother. She was trying to figure out what grades we should be in," Edward says.

Since Edward was fourteen, he was old enough for high school, but Theresa suggested Edward start middle school so he could learn more before high school. "Freshman year was when I started going to B5 a lot, 'cause as far as school, I was always good. English wasn't that bad for me, but I struggled in math a lot," says Edward. "I would go to B5 for homework, and even for stuff I didn't understand. I needed deeper understanding." Instead of raising his hand in class and consistently asking questions, Edward knew he could go to B5 for more help. "That really helped me out a lot in high school. After school, I would go there. It's like a second parent that kids who move here really need. It was vital to my graduation. I feel like it's good for the community, especially for the kids who are brand new and don't know what to do. My American friends would come to B5 with me. It's good for the community as a whole," Edward adds.



EDWARD ON THE STEPS OF COLUMBIA BASIN COLLEGE

In 2005, at the age of seventeen, Naw “SuSu” Moses escaped the genocide of her Karen people in Myanmar, and fled to Malaysia by herself. At twenty-two, she was granted entry to the United States and moved into apartment B1. “So B5 was my neighbor. I finished tenth grade in my country, so I knew some English,” she says.

SuSu quit school to work, married a fellow Karen man, and then got pregnant right away. “With the little one, I couldn’t go back to school. I didn’t want to quit my learning. [B5] let me go to English classes, and I met other mothers with little ones. We held our babies while we learned. Every day I got new words.”

SuSu went back to CBC for one quarter before COVID. “It was good for me to take online classes at home. I finished my high school diploma at CBC, then pursued an Early Childhood Education degree.”



LANGUAGE CLASS AT BOYS & GIRLS CLUB

A NEW PLACE TO CALL HOME

The future home of B5 will share the parking lot of the Boys and Girls Club in the neighborhood where it is most needed. It will feature large classrooms, onsite childcare, a kitchen for cooking classes and food-sharing events, a large gathering space, a computer lab and study room, and office space. Suitable furniture, classroom equipment, and storage space will help provide a dignified space for B5 to call home.

“If you don’t have B5 here, you’re taking it away from the very population they’re intending to serve,” says Brian Ace, Executive Director of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Benton and Franklin Counties (BGC). “B5 was one of our first partners in this space in the fall of 2019, right when we opened. Originally it was just English classes and citizenship classes, and now they’ve added [digital literacy] computer training programs.” Brian adds, “We just got lucky with B5 that they are a great partner in the space, and that they need it when we don’t.”





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COMMUNITY PARTNERS

B5 recognizes that successful integration requires a strong foundation of support. The organization actively collaborates with World Relief, community organizations, and volunteers to create a robust network of assistance for refugees and immigrants. By forging partnerships, B5 ensures comprehensive support in areas such as language acquisition, cultural orientation, housing, employment, and access to essential services. This collaborative approach allows B5 to address the multifaceted needs of displaced individuals and provide them with the tools to thrive in their new homes.

The partnerships that support B5 are one of the reasons for its continued success: KSD, Kennewick Police Department, Soroptimists, The Islamic Center, Boys and Girls Club, Boy Scouts, Skyline Adventures at Ski Bluewood, Community Health, United Way, Tyson, WSU Master Gardeners, doctors and lawyers who help teach B5 families, and many others.

"If you're alone, you're not strong. You always need connection," Nesreen says. "It does not matter what you believe, and what your vision is, in the end, we have one goal: to serve people."

"The community effort to support refugees and immigrants is a bigger reflection of the experience we're trying to give these people," Nesreen points out. "All they need are open arms for them, and somebody who can listen to them and guide them. They are talented! Whoever survived and got through everything before they arrived, I am sure they are able to do a lot here in the United States."

By recognizing the immense potential of displaced individuals, B5 is cultivating a society that values diversity, embraces inclusivity, and thrives on the strength of its collective experiences. "You can always learn and grow, and you don't have to change your culture to appreciate someone else's culture," McCoy adds.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

B5's vision is: In the future, we will create a community of open hearts, helping hands, and supportive systems where strangers become friends and we all thrive.

"We, as the people who have been here, and have grown up here, and have been blessed by this community... what is our responsibility to these new people? And are we willing to share this blessing, to open the door to them and share those positions of power and influence?" Roosendaal asks.

"It's happening in bigger cities. Are we going to let it happen here? Are we going to encourage it? Are we going to walk alongside these people so they can live well here? Or do we really want to see them stay marginalized?"

B5's capital campaign says "The key to their empowerment is education and a supportive community. Invest now, in our – your – community's future."

"Funding as a non-profit is always a thing. It's always hard because people don't realize how much money it actually takes. A few years ago, we were operating on a \$111K budget," Roosendaal reminisces. Today, that's closer to \$400K due to new opportunities and many new arrivals.

"Donate if you can. Volunteer if it's right for you. Encourage your employers to hire refugees. Give in a way that honors people," Roosendaal encourages us all.

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WE'VE ONLY SCRATCHED THE SURFACE! Read the unabridged story on the *TLM* blog.

