



Refugee Ministry Reflection

Jean and Tony Fitzgerald

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On a hot summer evening, 95 humid degrees, we received a phone call at 10:00 pm. In an African English dialect, a father says to me, “my children are crying and sweating and cannot sleep.” Being recently invited to mentor a refugee family from Uganda, Jean and I took the call.

Victor and Raziki and their two children lived in a two-bedroom second-floor apartment with no Air conditioning or fans.

We had met our refugee family for the first time the day before when they arrived in Cleveland. We introduced them to their new home and apartment. We took them food shopping for basics. We spent a few hours orientating them to their new home, and upon leaving, we gave them our phone number and information that if they needed anything, not to hesitate to call.

Jean and I formally retired in 2017, and in the early stages of our retirement, we discerned our mutual interest in working with resettled refugees. Jean’s parish and diocesan work allowed her to reach out to Sr. Rita Mary Harwood, then Diocesan Director of Parish Life. Sr. Rita connected us to one of the local refugee receiving agencies in our area, Catholic Charities of Cleveland, with contact information for the individuals who shared basic steps for meeting and mentoring newly-arrived individuals and families.

After brief training as mentors (which included receiving background checks and basic cultural information), we met our first family from Afghanistan at their home along with the Catholic charity’s counselor.

Navid, the father, Naizy, the mom, and two preschool daughters. We met at their home; Naizy set up a beautiful table, offering us nuts, fruit, and tea. The social worker from Catholic Charities facilitated the discussion. She introduced us; Navid was a former translator for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, whose life was in danger. He had applied for an SIV visa and was granted that visa after three years. The family packed up necessities and moved to America, leaving behind his mother, father, three brothers, and a sister.

Navid's mother, who also had worked for the U.S. Army, has also applied for a family SIV (visa), and the family has been waiting to hear from the U.S. Govt. how they can make plans to relocate from Afghanistan soon. Navid and Naizy are in a marriage arranged by their families. They didn't meet each other until the date of their wedding. They had two daughters while living in Afghanistan. During their four years here in the U.S., they now have had a third child, a son.

Naizy left behind a mother, father, and eight siblings, currently isolated in their home in Afghanistan. Naizy, the oldest, had a high school education, is an exceptional cook, and is a loving and good mother.



Naizy, the education, is an exceptional cook,

We were invited in the spring of 2018 to mentor another family from Uganda simultaneously. Victor and Riziki were originally from the Congo in Africa and came to a refugee camp in Uganda twenty years earlier. They lived an impoverished life in a refugee camp parenting two children, a girl Lilian, and a boy Clovis, with minimal means. Victor was an elementary school teacher. Riziki was a mother and gardener who cooked on a charcoal stove and lived in a modest refugee home with dirt floors. She raised the children, cooked, and braided the hair of local women.

Our experience with the Raheen family has been a Joy; they live in a two-family home in Lakewood, Ohio. Lakewood has an Afghan community of over 100 families who socialize and support each other daily, especially in good weather. They meet at the local park in good

weather and share dinner and lots of conversation while the children play. The conversation is in Dari, their native tongue. Both Navid and Naizy and the children awaken at eleven pm or midnight to phone their parents and family, so even children can talk with their grandparents.

Tony had mentored Navid in job searching. Navid has had some higher education. His entrepreneurial spirit led him to want to open a store. Navid spent two years working in a specialty grocery, clothing kitchenware store which served a diverse community of migrant families. He has recently ventured out and invested his savings in opening his general store, partnering with his cousin.

Jean has worked with Naizy on learning English and vocabulary. They have met approximately once a week for three years. Jean has taught Naizy to drive. Naizy can now take her children to regular doctor appointments and school as needed. Jean enjoys the children and their mom very much. Jean is working together on Naizy's citizenship exam.

Working with Victor and Raziki has also been a Joy. It took four months of paperwork, applying with the Cleveland School system, trying to talk to someone in person for Victor to get hired as a translator. Victor speaks six languages. We helped them secure medical services, doctors, midwives, and dentists. Tony taught Victor how to drive, helped him purchase his first car (not with money but negotiating), his first home, and the maze of bank loans and paperwork. (After being here for three years). We have helped them move residents twice and get settled. And we have had many fun outings with the children and family.



Tony and I have learned so much about beautiful cultures, which are very community-oriented. Part of our training from Catholic Charities included always being open-minded about cultures, which are different from our own. We have dined together both at the homes of our refugee

friends and at our house and local restaurants. We have shared local outings like festivals at the Cleveland Zoo and exploring parks. Activities such as Kite flying, swimming in Lake Erie for the first time, and seeing the sights of Northern Ohio. Both families have become part of our own family.

We have slowly built trust, confidence, and friendship. We have helped all work through the maze of applying for jobs and schools, and social services. We helped one family find a car, and we have done so for Victor and Riziki; we have helped them work through purchasing their own home. We have learned to respect their strong faiths, the Raheen's being Muslim and Victor and Riziki being Jehovah's Witnesses. We have shared some American culture (holidays) and norms while preserving and respecting their own cultures. We have learned to listen, to be patient while they learn English, and may not have the right words; we have learned about male and female roles in marriage in both cultures.

Tony is currently teaching Riziki how to drive. We enjoy gifting multicultural and diverse books that parents can read to their children. Although both families speak their native languages in their homes, Dari and Swahili, the children learn to excel at English from their experience in school and preschool.

We have given time (1-3 hours) plus or minus per week. We have introduced them to our families (children and grandchildren), and we continue to be present during holidays as appropriate. We have been advocates for them when needed and have taught and encouraged them to be advocates for themselves.

We pray for them often, and we know they pray for us. We learned that our world is a smaller place and that we're all called to care for each other.

Jean continues to visit Naizy and read and talk with the children. She stays in touch with Riziki as Riziki now expects her third child. We look forward to sharing holiday light displays with their children and sled riding and winter fun.

We have been invited by Catholic Charities to consider mentoring a third family from the new arriving Afghan families to Cleveland. We are discerning that decision.

We have shared their stories, experiences, and journeys with our Marianist community and continue to receive their support and encouragement.

We see this as a response, in Mary's words, "Do whatever he tells you." The journey has been a Joy and wonderment for both of us. We are humbled and honored to walk this journey and earn these new friendships.



















