

WTB Minutes - Sunday, September 27, 2015 *InterFaith Works, 1010 James Street*

About 30 women gathered in the Room of Common Ground at Interfaith Works for a program entitled "Sharing our Refugee Stories." President Betty Lamb welcomed us all at 3:05 PM. After our Mission Statement and Safe Place Declaration were read, Betty welcomed our guest speakers, Melissa Alphonse and Jalia Kasule, and thanked Penny Hart and Daryl Files for planning this meeting. We enjoyed some refreshments prior to the start of the panel discussion.

Daryl began by telling us a bit about the refugee resettlement program in Syracuse. There have been 95 arrivals this month. The USA has agreed to take up to 85,000 this fiscal year 2016 starting October 1st including refugees from Syria. Numbers from Burma and Bhutan are declining because refugee camps there are emptying. InterFaith Works helps with school supplies, housing, clothing, food, and overall support for new Americans.

Penny Hart, moderator of the discussion, introduced our panelists: Melissa Alphonse from Rawanda and Jalia Kasule from Uganda. Penny began by asking each when, how, and why they came here. Melissa, an intern at CYN works, came here with her twin sister two years ago after her mom's death. Her mother was pregnant with twins when she fled the war in Rawanda. Melissa and her twin sister were born in Kenya, where their mom learned Swahili and worked as a translator. After their mother's death in 2012, the girls stayed in safe houses in Kenya with a priest and their mom's good friend. These people helped the girls fight to stay together during relocation. The UNHCR resettled Melissa and her sister in Syracuse through the CYO. The teenaged sisters have no relatives in the USA; they live independently and are both students at LeMoyne College. Jalia, mother of six children and a skilled photographer and designer, was married to an army officer in Uganda. Her husband was arrested because he found to be a member of the Resistance. When he escaped to Kenya, Jalia was arrested in his place and detained, questioned and tortured in a "safe house" on three occasions. When the authorities learned she was still in contact with her husband, she was again arrested, tortured and this time raped. She eventually managed to escape to a refugee camp in Kenya where she endured a difficult life for five years. She did work with victims of domestic abuse during that time. When she was able to come here two years ago with four of her children, she found that she was welcomed with dignity and helped to recover. She is grateful for the freedom expression and movement she has in this country. Both Jalia and Melissa stressed how much IFW helped them adjust to life in Syracuse.

Penny pointed out the difference between coming here as an immigrant (a person in search of a better life opportunities) and a refugee (a person fleeing from physical danger).

How did you learn English? A priest helped Melissa and her sister learn English; they studied in a refugee assistance program. Jalia said English was her first language in school in Uganda; students were punished there for speaking their native tongue.

An open question period lasted most of the meeting and yielded many interesting details and insights. Both women are using their skills in new ways. Jalia got a camera and computer when she came here and was able to do her photography again for the first time in 5 years. She took a counseling course

while in the camp, now works in Cicero with the elderly, and hopes to become an RN. Melissa works for CNY Works as a Swahili translator for their International Recovery Group for Drugs and Alcohol; she also helps new Americans fill out government forms and takes them to medical appointments. Her dream is to be a child psychologist so she can help children deal with traumas such as those she has faced.

What do you miss most? The food!! What surprised you most? The culture!! Jalia noted that it was hard to get used to cultural differences such as not kneeling down when greeting her husband. Several women in the room commiserated and spoke of having similar feelings when they arrived in the USA years ago.

Do they plan to share their difficult experiences as refugees with their children? Both said they believe children should know the details of their own history. Jalia has told her children the truth so they will know where they are from, where they are now, and where they are going. Melissa wants any children she may have to know about their culture in Africa as well as here.

Not surprisingly, the cold climate in Syracuse took a bit of getting used to. Neither woman had seen snow except in the movies. Jalia's children, however, love the snow!

What would you like to tell the people of Syracuse? Jalia said that when you face hardship you have to believe in yourself and keep hope. She had to stay strong for her children and let go of what had happened to her. Her faith in Allah kept her hopeful and determined. Melissa said to know there is always God in any situation. Her chance to come here with her sister was a miracle; we all need to thank God each and every day for what He provides.

Before closing, each of us in the room shared a bit about herself; many of us had connections with our panelists through profession, personal/family immigration stories, and interests. We all thanked Melissa and Jalia for openly sharing their experiences with us.

Daryl said IFW could use donations of school supplies, clean winter coats in good condition, household items, furniture, and checks for the "Unmet Needs" fund.

Announcements: Book Club will meet tomorrow, 7 PM, home of Saro Kumar. Our next WTB meeting will be at IFW, Oct 18th, 3-5PM on the subject of Human Trafficking.

Reflecting on the visit of the Pope to our country and the recent holy season in the Jewish faith, Betty closed the meeting with a lovely prayer thanking God for the blessings of our country and the privilege of welcoming others to our shores.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Bova (Sunday Secretary)