

The Inspired and Inspiring Work of HEAL

Refugees Helping Refugees

by Hodan S. Isse

What is it like to be a refugee, suddenly finding yourself relocated to Buffalo, New York? Perhaps only other refugees can understand the difficult and dangerous transition you are making from one traumatic situation to another.

If you are a child arriving from a war-torn country, you need a lot of help, for you may well have seen one or both of your parents killed before your eyes. Already deeply traumatized, you now have to navigate another kind of war zone, the poverty-ridden, drug-ridden, crime-ridden streets of downtown Buffalo.

Though children like these may not speak English and may not have had any formal schooling, they will be placed in the Buffalo public schools at a grade level corresponding to their age, not their knowledge. Will they have any realistic chance of success, or will they simply slip into the gang culture surrounding them?



*Prof. Hodan S. Isse,
Board President of HEAL*

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If you are a single refugee mother, your husband missing or dead, your situation may be equally dire. HEAL, which stands for Helping Everyone Achieve Livelihood, tries to assist such women, many of whom are raising children alone with no clear road to employment. A number of these women had developed entrepreneurial skills back home, running small businesses out of their homes or selling craft items at markets, but now they are living in a strange culture where they don't speak the language, don't know the customs or business procedures, and can't see a way to earn a living. Will they and their children land in the welfare system, never to find their way out?

Unfortunately, this is the general pattern across America. Refugees are usually relocated into the poorest

parts of cities, then placed on welfare after initial resettlement money has run out. Many of their children, not receiving the help they need, drop out of school and drift into lives of crime.

Our organization is determined to alter this devastating process by seeking solutions right here in Buffalo. HEAL was founded by refugees to help more recent arrivals. Our most active program has been women's empowerment. We have sought to match refugee women with employment and to encourage those who wish to start their own businesses again. When women are empowered, whole families are lifted up.

The best results have been achieved by our youth empowerment program. For the last two summers, HEAL has run a youth academy in partnership with a major youth program. We had 30 to 35 kids who did some community work, and then they met every day for six weeks, for four to five hours of training each day.

HEAL brought in FBI and Homeland Security agents, bank personnel to teach financial literacy, university people to help the youngsters understand what they will need for college, and others to provide various

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kinds of personal development training. One city police lieutenant came quite often, and all of these people helped inspire the kids to seek better futures for themselves. Very importantly, the youth academy also taught the kids how to reclaim Islam from the radicals. These lessons were not just for Somalis or others from Africa, but for everyone.

One of the people who have worked most closely with young Muslim refugees, teaching them the true meaning of Islam, is Imam Yahye Omar, who is executive director of HEAL and chairman of the Imams' Council of Western New York. He understands well the needs

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of refugee children, for he himself comes from Somalia and has a number of children of his own. An experienced counselor, Imam Omar also leads mediation sessions to help refugees resolve family issues.

The past two years have been very exciting for HEAL in yet another way. Our organization put a contract on a house on West Ferry Street, near HEAL's current offices, and Christmas fundraising last year made it possible to purchase the building. HEAL plans to offer microcredit and training for women while hosting small businesses on the lower floor. We want to turn upper floors into community rooms for young people. I would like one of those rooms to be filled with computers.

But we need more money, about \$100,000. The building is not in a condition where it is usable now. We are seeking contributions from individuals and companies, so these children can become productive, contributing members of society.

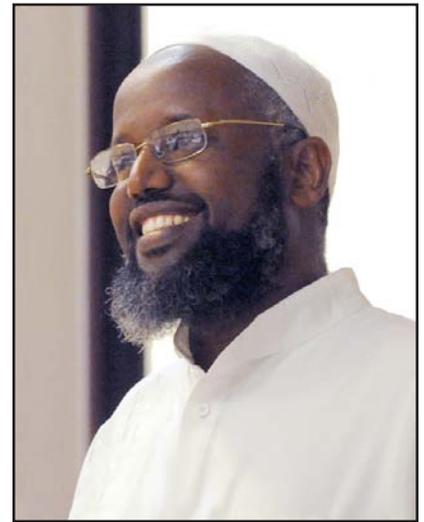
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These kids cannot succeed unless we help them, for their background is not normal. War, trauma, parents killed in front of their faces, you can't just throw them in a public school. They need a lot of inspiration, tiny bits of attention that can make all the difference.

It is the look in these children's eyes that gives me the energy, despite my own very busy life, to continue trying so hard to help them. The energy comes from them.



HEAL fundraising dinner, December, 2009.



*Imam Yahye Omar,
executive director of
HEAL.*

One day a youngster ran up to me, his face filled with excitement, to tell me he had signed up to take the SAT's!

I myself arrived in this country in 1985. I came as a student and later applied for asylum because of the political problems in Somalia. I'm now a US citizen. The people who helped me the most in my adjustment to American life were members of the Jewish community in Virginia and Washington, D.C. They encouraged me in my dreams and showed me the path to achieving them. I will be forever grateful to them.

But I knew that success in America ultimately depended on an individual's own efforts. So I worked hard at a number of jobs while my husband earned his Ph.D., and then it was my turn to go to graduate school. But even while studying full-time, I needed to continue working, sometimes several jobs at once, and we were also raising a family. In the end we both succeeded in earning our Ph.D.'s. We came to Buffalo in 2005, and I now teach finance and managerial economics at the University at Buffalo. HEAL wants refugee children to learn from people like me that they really can build good lives for themselves in America, if they are determined to do it.

Many wonderful volunteers have donated their time to help HEAL accomplish its work, and our organization hopes even more will join. We will be needing lots of people to help us refurbish the new building. It's going to take not only donations of money, but many people to offer their physical help. This will be a great community project. Everyone can participate, whether or not they've ever wielded a hammer or a paintbrush before.

If you would like to donate funds or learn more about HEAL's many projects, visit our organization's website at www.heal-international.org, or call 716-931-5778.