

## Family Reunification is a Passion for Catholic Charities

By Melissa Meyers

When a person looks at a house that has been bombed, they see a remnant of what used to be, shattered glass, crumbled walls, and rubble. The tragedy is not the destroyed house, but the fact a family is always connected to a house. Just like the house that lies in fragments, often war and unrest cause families to be broken into pieces. This happens for different reasons. Maybe when fighting erupted, children were at Grandma and Grandpa's house, or the father of the family was employed in another city, or even as simple as the mother was out shopping at the market. Due to this, it is not uncommon for families to end up relocating in refugee camps in separate countries. The challenge then becomes how to get them together again.

There is no one in Southern Minnesota who knows the stories of separated families better than Fatema Giwa, Support Staff Coordinator, of Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement. Since 2004, she has worked on hundreds of reunification cases, working tirelessly to bring separated families together, to make them whole. Her impact on the community is evident as she often runs into former clients who she helped to reunite. She has many success stories about how finally she was able to reunite families. Some of them stand out to her, like the story of Kebede\* and Ibo\*.



After living in the refugee camps for some time, Kebede had met the man she wanted to marry, Ibo. She had been so happy the day they got their official marriage certificate from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office. Now, if they were chosen for resettlement they would have official documentation to go together. But all her happiness left the day she finally was interviewed for resettlement. Instead of a day of great joy, it was a day of great sadness, because Ibo had not been there.

They had not been notified that a US official was coming to interview her and her mother and father. Ibo had left early in the morning to visit a sick relative in a neighboring camp. When the official came to interview her and her family, he explained that to be considered for resettlement, Ibo must be there in person. She had tried to call him, but the cell phone towers were few and it was not uncommon for coverage to drop. Her mother and father pleaded with her to continue the interview. "What if it is your only chance?" When she felt the baby inside her move, she knew what she needed to do, and she hoped before she left Ibo would have his interview, too. This didn't happen though, and now she found herself without Ibo in a place called Minnesota, being helped through the resettlement process by Catholic Charities.

For the past four decades, Catholic Charities' refugee resettlement program has been there to welcome refugees to their new home in Southern Minnesota. Our mission is to meet the needs of newly arrived refugees by providing one on-one-case management to guide them on their new journey and empower them in their new life. Services include assistance in accessing stable and safe housing, food, clothing, employment services, and various other services that will lead to self-sufficiency and empowerment.

At Catholic Charities, Kebede met Fatema, a woman with kind eyes, who wanted to hear her story about her husband. As the interpreter told it in English to Fatema, Kebede saw she wrote down a lot of notes. At the end of the interview, Fatema asked her if she had the marriage certificate from the UNHCR. "Yes," she said. I have kept it safe. She listened as Fatema explained she had a good case because Ibo was an immediate family member and she had a proper marriage certificate.

Fatema told her to be patient because it takes a long time for the forms to go through the system. Sometimes, through an interpreter, Kebede would ask how things were going. Fatema would assure her everything was moving forward, but she needed to wait a little longer. The day finally came when she got a call. She could hear the smile in Fatema's voice as she told her the news. It had been a year, but her husband, Ibo, had finally been approved. He would soon be meeting his son for the first time.

Fatema shared this was one of her easier cases because everything came together. Otherwise, much of the family reunification process involves building a case by piecing evidence together through documents and records which are fragmented by unstable governments and having to move between refugee camps. Reunification cases can take anywhere from one to five years to get approved. These are years of birthdays, holiday celebrations, and special moments together, which are missed while separated families wait in refugee camps for their cases to be processed. Since she first took the job in 2004, Fatema's attention to detail has resulted in hundreds of families being reunited.

At Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement Program, they have a passion to see families made whole again. They know this isn't always possible, but what keeps staff, like Fatema, going after all these years is the fact she sees herself in these families. She wants to be that welcome for them, and as a devote Catholic she values the life-giving work that Catholic Charities is doing. "This is my call," she said.

\*Note that family names and some details have been changed for privacy.