

Plight of African refugees moves islander to start non-profit

By Eileen M. Daly

Islander Sarah Tammelleo found herself so deeply moved by her sister Nicole's work on a photography documentary about African refugees relocating to America that she not only started a non-profit organization to help them, but also has come to consider many of these refugees part of her "extended family."

The odyssey began in 2008, when Nicole Tammelleo began to work on a photography documentary that followed African refugees as they relocated to America.

"These people are afraid and confused and they need help. Most of them have never even lived indoors so things we do everyday in our homes are foreign to them," Sarah Tammelleo said. "When they arrive in the U.S., they are automatically in debt, as they are required to pay for their travel to the U.S. The family I am closest to had a \$10,000 debt upon arrival. They are a family of 10 and only the father is employed. He makes \$22,000 a year."

It wasn't long before she had the whole Tammelleo family involved in helping.

Her father, Bill Tammelleo, his friend, Jan Salsich, and Sarah's mother, Maureen Reilly, have all been great supporters, as have many others, she said.

A history of violence

Although the difficulties the refugees face here in America are substantial, they are nowhere near the horrific experiences they once faced in Africa.

"The refugees we directly support are from the Great Lakes regions of Central Africa, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad, and the Central African Republic," she said. "I am most familiar with the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, as most of the families I work with are from those two countries."

Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed since the early 1990s alone, Tammelleo said. In 1994, she added, in just a matter of weeks, 150,000 Burundians were killed. That same year, figures have shown that more than 500,000 people in Rwanda were slaughtered, she said.



Sarah Tammelleo, back row at left, and her mother, Maureen Reilly, enjoyed the North End parade in July with Nwerina, 8, Revokata, 17, Sophia, 5 and Nangwida, 15.

Photo courtesy of Nicole Tammelleo

Fortunately, Tammelleo said, with the help of the United Nations, these countries have been mostly peaceful since the early 2000s.

"Refugees who had been in camps since 1972 began returning to their countries in 2002 and an estimated 430,000 have returned to Burundi. However, they have returned to even worse conditions than they fled from," she said.

In 2006, the U.S. agreed to allow 13,000 refugees from camps in Tanzania to resettle in the U.S. through a lottery, Tammelleo said.

"These families went through an interview process and were chosen only if they were not self-sufficient while in the camps, had been displaced more than once or had been in camps since 1972, had spent all their lives in exile and had no option

for integration back to their country because their land had been confiscated," she said.

Although they are offered an opportunity to start a new life here in America, the challenges they face are fierce, she said.

"They are provided apartments in some of the worst areas of Providence and therefore become exposed to violence, drugs and alcohol, gangs, teen pregnancy and overall unhealthy conditions," she said.

'Most problems can be solved'

Despite all of that, however, Tammelleo is convinced that with enough help and support, these families "can survive these challenges and become excellent members of the community."

In fact, she said, she has seen many of these families do just that.

"Most of the problems they have can be solved, it just takes financial resources, time and dedication to combat these issues," she said.

Tammelleo speaks of her involvement with refugee families as a rewarding experience in many ways.

"I have a good life according to most American standards. I can't explain how much better my life is now that I am surrounded by these people. I have interacted with all sorts of wonderful individuals in Providence and am amazed at how much I was missing before I got involved in this cause to help refugee families. The refugees and all those who help are amazing," she said.

Anyone who would like to get directly involved with one of these families, sponsor a particular child or make a financial donation or a donation of clothing, furniture or housewares may contact Tammelleo at stammelleo@live.com or by phone at 423-1301.

Since the non-profit organization is in the process of being established, anyone who would like to make a tax-deductible donation may do so through St. Michael's Church in Providence.

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