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## GROWING ROOTS IN ROANOKE

MORE THAN 7,500 IMMIGRANTS AND

REFUGEES CALL ROANOKE HOME,

INCLUDING BURUNDI REFUGEE

EVELYNE NZIKOBANYANKA.

EVELYNE NZIKOBANYANKA shuffles into the children's room of the Raleigh Court Branch Library, her four-year-old daughter Amida Ramadhan bounding beside her.

She drops her bag, searches for a place to plug in her dying cell phone and settles on a child-sized ottoman.

"Nothing comes easy," she confesses in a sing-song lilt that confirms English is not her first language. "Sometimes you have to fight with your life to get what you need."

She would know. Nzikobanyanka is a refugee from Bujumbura, the capital of the central African nation of Burundi. She has fled war, survived with a young son in Tanzanian refugee camps, then built a new life in Roanoke — learning another language, switching careers to find a job, constructing a Habitat for Humanity home, becoming a US citizen and reuniting with her husband, lost to her for nine long years.

And yet, Nzikobanyanka is aware that she is one of the fortunate few. Only a sliver of those identified by the United Nations as refugees are given the chance to start over.

**"IT TAKES A LOT OF WORK, BUT YOU CAN DO IT. ANYONE CAN DO IT," SHE ASSURES.**

She stretches with a wince from her too-small seat. Hours on her feet are taking a toll on her back.

Nzikobanyanka works seven days a week. Weekdays, she is a Carilion Clinic interpreter. She speaks several languages: her native Kirundi, as well as French, Swahili, Kinyarwanda and English. She translates as needed for Commonwealth Catholic Charities, as well. Every Saturday and Sunday she feeds and bathes and moves and cheers the residents at Our Lady of the Valley as a Certified Nursing Assistant in two 17-hour shifts.

She has two children, Amida, who attends Head Start through Total Action for Progress, and Patrick Henry High School sophomore Ahmad Ramadhan, who plays varsity soccer and recently won citywide recognition for his science fair project.

She volunteers with Blue Ridge Literacy, giving back to an agency that helped her along the way. And she worships at Masjid An-Nur Islamic Center, Roanoke's mosque.

In short, she is a harried, working mother who adores her children, supports her community and prays for more hours in every day.



*Two-year-old Amida Ramadhani and her mother Evelyn Nzikohanyika visit Raleigh Court Branch Library on a recent afternoon. Evelyn arrived in Roanoke 10 years ago from a refugee camp in Tanzania.*

*from* WAR  
to a NEW LIFE

Nzikobanyanka was 10 when her parents escaped increasing violence in their Burundi homeland in 1995. They took shelter at a refugee camp in bordering Tanzania.

Nzikobanyanka grew up in makeshift huts and tents. She spent 13 years learning, marrying, finding employment as a social worker, all while living in a series of Tanzanian camps.

She's reluctant to talk about this time in her life. "I'm not going to lie," she says. "Sometimes it's hard to tell this story. When I tell it, I see pictures. I don't want to see those pictures anymore."

In June 2005, violence broke out in the Lukole camp where she was working. Her baby had come to work with her, supervised by a nanny, as was common. In a moment, she and her son and the people she was with all had to flee for their lives.

For weeks, they were on the run. They didn't know who they could trust or where to go. They had no food, no drink. When they finally found safety at another refugee camp, Nzikobanyanka had lost her husband, her parents, her siblings. She didn't know if she would ever see any of them again.

She tried desperately to locate her husband, Nsengiyumva Ramadhan. "People tried to help a lot," Nzikobanyanka remembers. "Nothing seemed like my husband had been able to survive." So, she accepted that he had likely died and she soldiered on.

She applied for refugee status and, in 2009, she and her son, Ahmad, landed in Roanoke. Her parents and younger siblings had come before her. They helped her find her way.

"It's scary, emotionally, losing my home, losing my job, thinking how to begin another life," she says.

Within months, Nzikobanyanka had found work in the kitchen at Our Lady of the Valley retirement community. She bought a car and moved into her own apartment. Her family lived just minutes away. They could care for Ahmad while she

was at her job.

She connected with an English tutor at Blue Ridge Literacy to improve her language skills. Soon she began a training program to become a nursing assistant. She set goals for herself: within five years she vowed to own a home and become a US citizen.

Then, in 2012, Evelyne received a phone call that changed everything. Nsengiyumva was on the line. He was alive.

Nzikobanyanka worked furiously to bring him to Roanoke. In early 2014, he arrived. Husband and wife were reunited after nine harrowing years. Nine months later, baby Amida was born.

*it takes*  
a VILLAGE

Six students, dressed in brightly colored head scarves and lime green flowing pants and layer upon layer of thrift store sweaters, smile at their teacher, Blue Ridge Literacy staff member Mary Lowder.

They've come to this corner classroom below the downtown public library to complete 40 hours of English-language instruction. This 10-week session focuses on health literacy. Students learn to read a prescription, choose nutritious food and where to go for free dental care.

Along with their purses and coats, these refugees bring their worries – a depressed spouse, an upcoming citizenship test, the bare shelves that haunt their kitchens. They have overcome so much to be here – taken



*Mary Lowder teaches English language learners. Immigrants from more than 80 nations have learned at BRL in its 34-year history.*

a bus or walked through the pouring rain or found a friend to watch young children. Not to mention the long odds of escaping their war-torn countries. In 2017, the United Nations identified 19.9 million refugees around the world; less than one percent of those were resettled that year.

At least in this class, no one speaks so quickly that the refugees cannot hope to keep up. Here, they can ask questions, practice their speaking and listening and writing. Here, they get phone numbers for services they might need. Twice a week when they settle under the fluorescent lights, surrounded by shelves of workbooks, they are a few steps closer to their dreams – meaningful work, better lives for their children, a feeling that they belong.

This day, English language learners hail from Afghanistan, Pakistan, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Nepal and Iran. In the 34 years that Blue Ridge Literacy has been teaching, immigrants from more than 80 nations have tested English's strange syllables in their mouths and in their minds.

Nzikobanyanka and Nsengiyumva both prepared to become US citizens and studied for GED exams at these white plastic tables and black folding chairs.

Nzikobanyanka has worked as an on-call resource for Blue Ridge Literacy, translating when needed, teaching a community class on Swahili a few summers ago. In 2018, she joined BRL's board of directors.

"She has been just a great advocate for Blue Ridge Literacy," says executive director Stephanie Holladay. "She's been wonderful in terms of her advice and her connections." And despite keeping up with her children, a work schedule in constant flux, and a husband who attends Virginia

Western Community College by day and works as a Clinical Associate at Carilion overnight, Nzikobanyanka has never missed a board meeting, Holladay says. "She has perfect attendance," Holladay declares with a warm smile.

Back in the classroom, Lowder speaks slowly, enunciating every word. "Please turn to page 47, four-seven. Who wants to read?"

Her students are quick to volunteer, eager to learn.

"Does anyone know this word: 'stress,'" Lowder asks. She holds up photos of people in difficult moments.

"Now, we're going to make a sentence," she explains. "The patient is stressed because she is sick." Lowder takes a break from her lesson plan and engages her students.

"It's stressful when you're at the doctor and you don't speak English and you don't have an interpreter, isn't it?" she asks.

"Like me," calls out a woman in the front row.

Recognition flashes across Lowder's face. "Yes! Your daughter was very sick! How is she feeling now?"

## W E L C O M I N G *refugees*

This is how refugees arrive in Roanoke:

Their journeys begin in a corner of the globe where violence has forced them to leave their countries and seek shelter in neighboring lands. Representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees meet with residents in refugee camps. Refugees must prove they cannot

return home for fear of persecution.

Today, refugees are most likely to have fled The Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Ukraine and Bhutan, according to UNHCR data.

The UNHCR then forwards names and files to one of the 37 countries who have agreed to resettle refugees. Until 2017, the United States resettled more refugees than all other nations, combined. But in the last two years, the US has slashed the number of refugees it is admitting. In 2016, the US resettled 84,994 refugees. In 2018, only 22,491, the lowest number in modern history.

Once assigned to the US, refugees are interviewed and screened multiple times by multiple agencies.

"Refugees are the most vetted population that enters this country," explains Amar Bhattarai, director of resettlement services in Roanoke's office of Commonwealth Catholic Charities.

Cases are then distributed among nine agencies who represent thousands of communities across the country. Commonwealth Catholic Charities resettles all refugees in Roanoke; they have been doing this work since 1975.

Based on Roanoke's population, its number of service providers, the level of available jobs and the population of existing refugees, the local CCC has determined that the region can successfully resettle roughly 200 refugees a year.

In 2016, the Roanoke Valley welcomed its largest refugee population ever – 282 people. In 2018, just 77 arrived, reflecting the dramatic drop at the national level.

Refugees are met at the airport, assigned a case manager and taken to a furnished apartment. For one month, they are immersed in language, life skills, financial

## REFUGEES IN ROANOKE, BY THE NUMBERS

### Refugees resettled in the US in Fiscal Year

2016: 84,994  
2017: 53,716  
2018: 22,491

SOURCE: UNHCR

### Refugees resettled in Roanoke in Fiscal Year

2016: 282  
2017: 221  
2018: 77

SOURCE: COMMONWEALTH CATHOLIC CHARITIES

### Top 10 countries of origin for refugees resettled in US in Fiscal Year 2018

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: 7,878  
BURMA: 3,555  
UKRAINE: 2,635  
BHUTAN: 2,228  
ERITREA: 1,269  
AFGHANISTAN: 805  
EL SALVADOR: 725  
PAKISTAN: 441  
RUSSIA: 437  
ETHIOPIA: 376

SOURCE: REFUGEE REPROCESSING CENTER

### Top 10 countries of origin for refugees resettled in Virginia in Fiscal Year 2017

AFGHANISTAN: 2,776  
IRAQ: 291  
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: 183  
SYRIA: 147  
CUBA: 133  
BHUTAN: 93  
IRAN: 88  
ETHIOPIA: 78  
PAKISTAN: 59  
ERITREA: 51

SOURCE: COMMONWEALTH CATHOLIC CHARITIES

Roanoke's population: 99,837  
Percentage of foreign-born  
residents in Roanoke: 7.57%

SOURCE: US CENSUS DATA, 2017

literacy and job training. They are connected to community resources, helped to apply for Social Security numbers. Many refugees quickly land jobs with companies that CCC has been in communication with for years.

"The goal is for them to become self-sufficient, financially independent and integrated into our community," says Bhattarai.

But the way forward can be hard after living with the level of uncertainty, chaos and violence that so many refugees have endured – often for decades.

"Being resettled in a new country itself is traumatic, but the amount of trauma refugees experienced before coming has an effect," explains Blue Ridge Literacy's Holladay. "The individuals we see are the most resilient."

For most, Roanoke is a welcoming community, Holladay says. Not so big as to be overwhelming, not so small as to be isolating. The cost of living is low. And the mountains can feel familiar to some of the largest groups of recent immigrants — Afghans, Pakistanis and Nepalis.

Despite having a population of only around 100,000, Roanoke boasts citizens from 106 different nationalities, says Bhattarai. "That's pretty good," he says. "That tells you who we are as a community."

## *finding* HOME

Nzikobanyanka points from her back porch to a corner of her yard. This will be her garden come summer, bursting with

tomatoes, peppers, eggplants. And there, that is where she will grow her flowers.

She walks through her tidy house and settles onto an over-stuffed chair. Amida watches SpongeBob SquarePants on a big-screen TV, while tapping newly blown balloons in the air.

2014 was the year she and her husband and son became a family again. It was also the year she moved into this house, bought with work hours and hard-earned pay. She welcomed her daughter into the world. And became a US citizen.

Now, five years later, Nzikobanyanka is even more connected to her community – watching Ahmad's soccer games at Patrick Henry High School, taking Amida to swim at the Kirk Family Y.

Though she desperately misses the beauty of Africa, the more laid-back life there, and the people she left behind, Nzikobanyanka knows her place is in America, in Roanoke, now.

"If I had peace in my country, I would not be here. But I don't have a choice," she says. "This is God's plan."

At 33, Evelyne Nzikobanyanka has different goals than she did when she arrived a decade ago, a single mother who spoke broken English and had no idea how to balance her bank account. In the next few years, she hopes to head back to school, to pay off her mortgage, to help Amida settle in at kindergarten and Ahmad go off to college.

What she doesn't have are any plans to move. She hopes she is never again forced to start from nothing, without even the words to communicate what she needs.

"I love Roanoke," she says, flashing her bright white teeth in a big smile. "I call here home now." ☆



### JOIN THE CONVERSATION

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