

REFUGEE MINISTRY REFLECTION

Jean and Tony Fitzgerald
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On a very hot summer evening, we received a phone call at 10:00 pm. In an African English dialect, a father said to me, “My children are crying and sweating and cannot sleep.” Being recently invited to mentor a refugee family from Uganda, Jean and I took the call. Victor and Raziki and their two children lived in a two-bedroom second-floor apartment with no air conditioning or fans.

We had met our refugee family for the first time the day before when they arrived in Cleveland. We introduced them to their new apartment. We took them food shopping for basics. We spent a few hours orienting them to their new home and upon leaving, gave them our contact information, encouraging them to call if they needed anything.

Jean and I retired in 2017, and in the early stages of our retirement, discerned our mutual interest in working with resettled refugees. We contacted Catholic Charities of Cleveland and received brief training on the basic steps for meeting and mentoring newly arrived families.

We met our first family from Afghanistan at their home: Navid Raheen, the father, Naizy, the mom, and two preschool daughters. Naizy set up a beautiful table, offering us nuts, fruit, and tea. A social worker from Catholic Charities facilitated the discussion. Navid is a former translator for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan whose life was in danger. He had applied for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), which he received after three years. The family packed up necessities and moved to America, leaving behind his mother, father, three brothers, and a sister.

Navid and Naizy are in a marriage arranged by their families. They didn’t meet each other until the date of their wedding. They had two daughters while living in Afghanistan. During their four years here in the U.S., they had a third child, a son.

Naizy left behind a mother, father, and eight siblings, currently isolated in their home in Afghanistan. Naizy, the oldest, has a high school education, is an exceptional cook, and is a loving and good mother.

Our experience with the Raheen family has been a joy. They live in a two-family home in Lakewood, Ohio. Lakewood has an Afghan community of over 100 families who socialize and support each other daily, especially in good weather. They meet at the local park in good weather and share dinner and lots of conversation while the children play. The conversation is in Dari, their native tongue. Both Navid and Naizy and the children awaken at 11:00pm or midnight to phone their parents and family, so even the children can talk with their grandparents.

Tony has mentored Navid, who has had some higher education, in job searching. His entrepreneurial spirit led him to want to open a store. Navid spent two years working in a specialty grocery, clothing and kitchenware store which served a diverse community of migrant families. He has recently ventured out and invested his savings in opening his own general store, partnering with his cousin.

Jean has worked with Naizy on learning English and vocabulary. They have met approximately once a week for three years. Jean has taught Naizy to drive so she can now take



her children to regular doctor appointments and school as needed. Jean enjoys the children and their mom very much. Jean is working together on Naizy's citizenship exam.

We were invited in the spring of 2018 to mentor another family from Uganda simultaneously. Victor and Riziki were originally from the Congo in Africa and came to a refugee camp in Uganda twenty years earlier. They lived an impoverished life in the refugee camp parenting two children, a girl Lilian, and a boy Clovis, with minimal means. Victor was an elementary school teacher. Riziki was a mother and gardener who cooked on a charcoal stove and lived in a modest refugee home with dirt floors. She raised the children, cooked, and braided the hair of local women.

Working with Victor and Raziki has also been a joy. Victor speaks six languages. It took four months of paperwork with the Cleveland school system, trying to talk to someone in person for Victor to get hired as a translator. We helped them secure medical services, doctors, midwives, and dentists. Tony taught Victor how to drive, helped him purchase his first car (not with money but by negotiating), his first home, and helped him negotiate the maze of bank loans and paperwork. We have helped them move residences twice and get settled. And we have had many fun outings with the children and family.



Tony and I have learned so much about beautiful cultures which are very community oriented. Part of our training from Catholic Charities included always being open-minded about cultures which are different from our own. We have dined together both at the homes of our refugee friends and at our house, and at local restaurants. We have shared outings like festivals at the Cleveland Zoo, exploring parks, kite flying, swimming in Lake Erie for the first time, and seeing the sights of Northern Ohio. Both families have become part of our own family.

We have slowly built trust, confidence, and friendship. We have helped them work through the maze of applying for jobs, schools, and social services. We helped Victor and Riziki find a car and work through purchasing their own home. We have learned to respect their strong faiths, the Raheen's being Muslim and Victor and Riziki being Jehovah's Witnesses. We have shared some American culture (holidays) and norms while preserving and respecting their own cultures. We have learned to listen, to be patient while they learn English and may not have the right words. We have learned about male and female roles in marriage in both cultures.

Tony is currently teaching Riziki how to drive. We enjoy gifting multicultural and diverse books that the parents can read to their children. Although both families speak their native languages, Dari and Swahili, in their homes, the children excel at English from their experience in school and preschool.

We have given time (1-3 hours plus or minus) per week. We have introduced them to our families (children and grandchildren), and we continue to be present during holidays as appropriate. We have been advocates for them when needed and have taught and encouraged them to be advocates for themselves.

We pray for them often, and we know they pray for us. We learned that our world is a smaller place and that we're all called to care for each other.

Jean continues to visit Naizy and read and talk with the children. She stays in touch with Riziki as Riziki now expects her third child. We look forward to sharing holiday light displays with their children and sled riding and winter fun.

We have been invited by Catholic Charities to consider mentoring a third family from the newly arriving Afghan families. We are discerning that decision.

We have shared their stories, experiences, and journeys with our Marianist community and continue to receive their support and encouragement. We see this as a response, in Mary's words, "Do whatever he tells you." The journey has been a joy and wonderment for both of us. We are humbled and honored to walk this journey and earn these new friendships.