

Ekram Ahmed's story

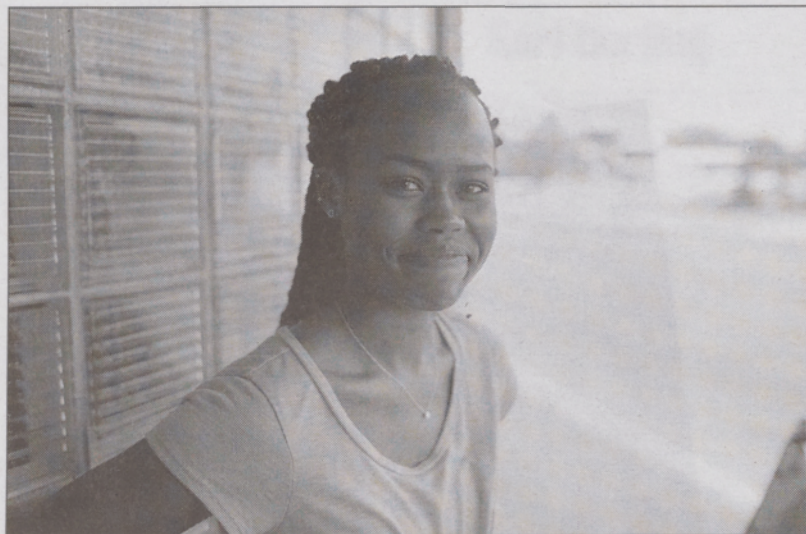


PHOTO BY CELESTE NOCHE

Ontario, Ore., resident Ekram Ahmed is the Libyan-born daughter of refugees from Sudan.

How a refugee in Ontario helps others get the aid they need

BY EMILLY PRADO
STAFF WRITER

Ekram Ahmed spent many years living in fear and with a ferocious sense of self.

Her parents lived in Sudan before she was born, but a military coup led by Omar al-Bashir in 1989 led to severe political unrest that intensified in 1993 when al-Bashir deemed himself the self-appointed president of Sudan. Her parents fled to Libya, where her father was able to find work, and Ahmed was born there in 1995.

Her family lived there mostly peacefully for over a decade, but in 2011, the eruption of the Libyan Civil War uprooted her family and forced them to leave home again.

"We got the chance to leave the country, so we went to Tunisia because we heard there was an airplane over there that could get refugee people to Sudan," she said. "The camp wasn't even good quality, but it was a really fast move. They said they could get us all there — we are five kids and our mom and dad."

In Sudan, they lived in a house her dad commissioned in advance of their move. They stayed there for seven months, with her dad attempting to provide for the family as a bus driver.

"(It) was just too hard," she said. "He kept forgiving the high school students who couldn't pay. My dad did a great job, but we started losing money."

In addition to financial struggles, violence was escalating in Sudan at the same time, so her family had to leave the country once more, in spite of uncertain safety.

They packed up again and headed to a refugee camp on the border of Libya in Salloum, Egypt, where they waited for a year and a half during the refugee resettlement process. After a few nights in Germany en route to the United States, they momentarily landed in New York, where Ahmed first tried her hand at

About this series

These articles are part of Street Roots' Housing Rural Oregon series. Street Roots received funding from Meyer Memorial Trust's Affordable Housing Initiative to develop dedicated reporting on rural housing issues. Read previous articles from the series at news.streetroots.org/ruralhousing

translating for others. Two days later, they were in Twin Falls, Idaho.

"I turned 18 on the flight," Ahmed said.

Since arriving to the United States as a refugee in the summer of 2013, Ahmed has continued embracing a life of independence in the face of adversity and wants to help others do the same.

As a Workforce Specialist at the Four Rivers Welcome Center, Ahmed focuses on making the transition to Ontario easier for other refugees by accompanying them to doctor's appointments for in-person translation, walking prospective employees through job application processes, and helping with a multitude of other scenarios that may arise.

Her empathy and passion for advocacy stem from her own experiences of receiving vital support when she was transitioning into life in the United States.

While her family struggled immensely to survive in Libya, Sudan and Egypt, it was after she was living in the United States that they faced one of the toughest, most heartbreaking hurdles yet.

After spending more than a year on her own in Utah to finish up her high school degree, Ahmed rejoined her family in Boise, Idaho, then very shortly after followed to Ontario, where they moved for Section 8.

Money was tight, but everything was

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Housing Rural Oregon



PHOTOS BY CELESTE NOCHE

Melad Jarjees is a refugee from Iraq. Jarjees, who is Catholic, says one thing he likes about living in the U.S. is the freedom to be open about his religion.

In search of home

A Section 8 pit stop turned long-term stay

BY EMILLY PRADO
STAFF WRITER

Ontario, Ore., was never really supposed to be home — at least not for many of the city's recently established refugees who have settled here in increasing numbers since 2017. Most refugees say they were drawn to Malheur County temporarily, by the promise of a notably short Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher waitlist, with intentions of porting, or transferring, their vouchers and moving back later to the bigger cities where they had lived before.

The current regulations, last updated by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in September 2015, allow Section 8 rental assistance recipients the ability to move anywhere in the U.S. with their voucher living for a full year in the county where they were awarded the voucher. That county absorbs any increase in cost for up to one year after the move, and then the case is fully transferred and funded by the new housing authority. For people willing to move away from counties with longer waitlists for a while, it offers the chance to receive Section 8 benefits much sooner. But when the Housing Authority of Malheur and Harney Counties fell into a budgetary deficit in May 2018 and temporarily halted the waitlist, a sense of home for many refugee families became,

ONTARIO

Living in poverty: 38 percent

MALHEUR COUNTY

Living in poverty: 25 percent

Renters paying more than half their income in rent: 1 out of 3

once again, fleeting and in limbo.

Melad Jarjees, 30, lived in Ontario for almost two years before he moved back to California's San Diego County earlier this month. Jarjees grew up in Mosul, Iraq, but like many refugees worldwide, he faced religious persecution in his hometown and had no other option but to flee for his safety. Through the U.S. Refugee Admission Program, his family awaited

Abdikadir Abdi's story

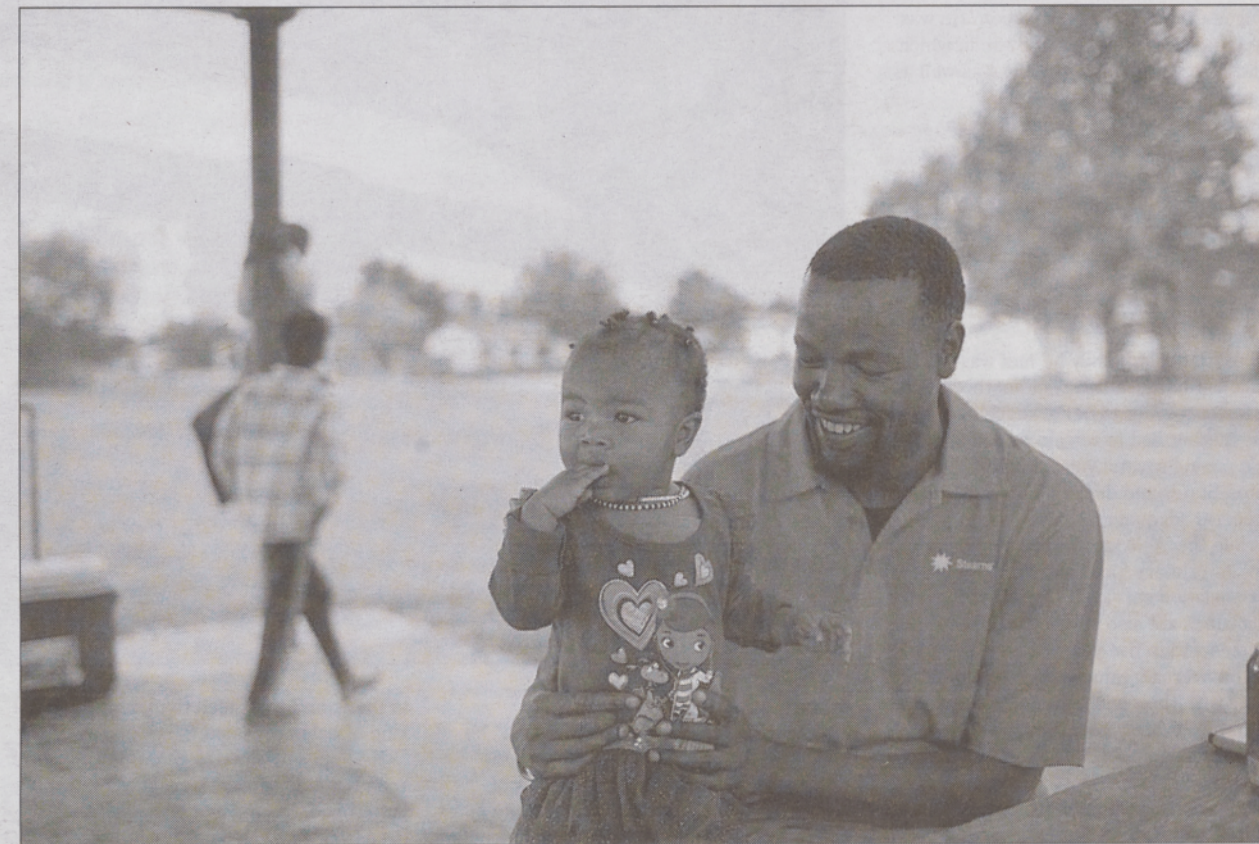


PHOTO BY CELESTE NOCHE

Somali refugee Abdikadir Abdi spends time with his daughter. Abdi is a student and the owner of a taxi company in Boise, Idaho.

His childhood needs for support inspired his path

BY EMILLY PRADO
STAFF WRITER

Abdikadir Abdi's childhood looked strikingly different from what his own children and the Somali refugee community's children experience in the Pacific Northwest today.

Abdi was born in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, sometime around 1988 at the onset of the ongoing Somali Civil War. His family is from a tribe of farmers, coined the Somali Bantu by humanitarian aid agencies in the early 1990s. After losing its ancestral lands over two centuries ago, the tribe faced severe persecution and violence, and its members were sometimes forced to join armed Somali rebel militias.

"We come from Somalia, but we don't have land," he said. "We (couldn't) because there was a tribe problem. So, we ran away and suffered a lot. Not us as much as our parents, but people would come into your house and would fire. My older brother died when we were (running away) on the road. He got shot in his chest and was bloody, and then animals ate him."

Abdi was about 4 when he saw his older brother get killed. His brother was about 12 years old. Because his family was always fleeing, its members don't know their exact birthdates; many of them, including Abdi, share the same birthday of Jan. 1. His mother and father took their remaining five children to a refugee camp in Kenya, where he lived for several years.

Then, in 1999, the United States announced a plan to resettle Somali Bantu within their borders, which was formalized in 2001. Abdi and his family packed up and

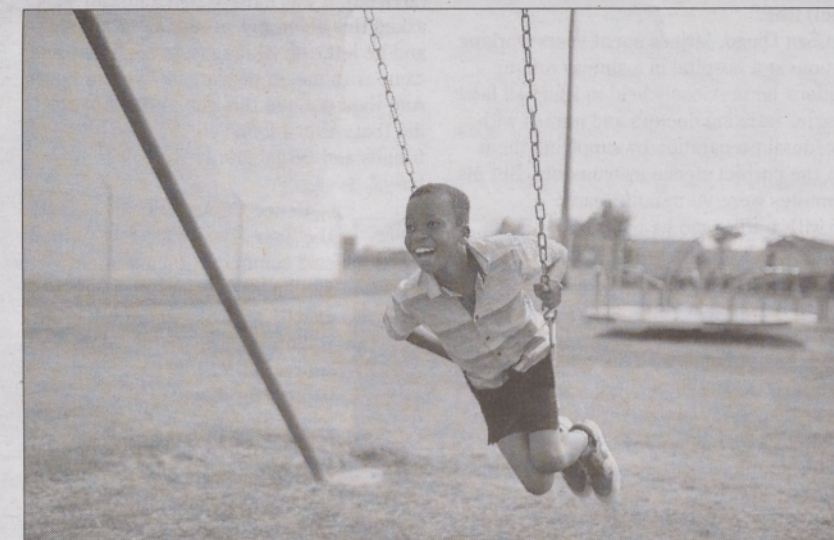


PHOTO BY CELESTE NOCHE

Mudey, age 10, swings outside the Welcome Center.

headed to Kakuma, their new refugee-camp home. The process, which was significantly slowed by the Sept. 11 attacks, took seven years to complete. He was 14 when his family arrived in Boise, Idaho.

"I had depression from back home," said Abdi, who recalled that his parents couldn't do much to help. "They don't read or write, and they (didn't) understand what we were learning."

What they needed most was some additional support.

"We didn't have that kind of help, and

still people's children don't have help when they go home," he said. "That's what my mom and dad had to do, but I won't do the same for my children. I want to change my life and my children's and a lot of people's. That's my dream. Not even getting paid."

Living through immense struggles and seeing his own family's need for assistance sparked Abdi's desire to dedicate himself to helping those around him wholeheartedly. He spent part of his summer this year offering translation services through the Four Rivers Welcome Center as an employee of the Immigrant

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