



# Resilience & Resettlement

Stories of Refugees  
in Nova Scotia



## Resilience & Resettlement

Stories of Refugees  
in Nova Scotia

---

THANK YOU

This collection is just a sample of stories from the many refugees that have come to settle in Nova Scotia. We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this book - with special thanks to the individuals and families who shared their stories. We also want to thank Valerie Mansour and Riley Smith, our writer and photographer, for their beautiful work.

---

FUNDED BY

FINANCÉ PAR



Immigration, Refugees  
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés  
et Citoyenneté Canada

©2015 Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS)

We've all watched television and have seen the shocking and moving images of refugees fleeing civil war, living in desperate refugee camps. Have you ever wondered how they got there, and where they ended up? Did you know that thousands of these individuals now call Nova Scotia home? They may be your neighbour, colleague, your child's teacher or the firefighter who responds to your 911 call.

ISANS is proud and honoured to introduce you to a few of these amazing people. This collection of stories showcases their resilience and efforts to build a new life for themselves and their families. These are stories of loss, struggle and hardship faced on the journey to Nova Scotia, and during settlement. Despite their experiences, these incredible individuals found the courage to move on and build a new life; they are giving back to their new community and enriching all of our lives.

## Who is a refugee?

No one is a refugee by choice. Refugees can be rich or poor; male or female; doctor or farmer. A refugee is a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside of their country of origin and due to that fear is unable or unwilling to return. (*United Nations High Commission for Refugees - UNHCR*)

At the end of 2014, there were 38.2 million forcibly displaced people including 19.5 million refugees throughout the world. (*UNHCR, 2015*)

Canada has a strong tradition of protecting refugees. In keeping with our commitment to the 1951 Geneva Convention, Canada has provided protection to thousands of convention refugees through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), Private Refugee Sponsorship and Inland Refugee Protection programs.

All refugees in the world have one thing in common - they cannot live peacefully, in safety and dignity in their home country. Many refugees flee their countries because of war or persecution. Many live in refugee camps, or similar difficult circumstances, for up to 20 years before coming to Canada.

Resettlement is used in specific instances to provide protection and a durable solution for those who cannot remain in their country of asylum. Of the 73,008 refugees who were resettled globally in 2014, Canada accepted 7,233 refugees, more than Australia (6,162) and behind the United States (48,911) (*UNHCR, 2015*).

It is common for refugees to have family members and friends living in other resettlement countries, still in refugee camps, or internally displaced in their home countries. Sadly, it is also very common to have missing or dead relatives and friends. Resettled refugees often feel a sense of responsibility for their family members left behind and try to support them financially or through Private Refugee Sponsorship programs.

## What supports and services do refugees receive?

Resettled refugees are permanent residents; they have access to all government services and programs, and they have the right to work. During their first year in Canada, Government Assisted Refugees are provided with immediate and essential supports for their most basic needs through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). The government contracts settlement agencies like ISANS to provide orientation and settlement support. These services include: greeting at the airport, temporary housing, help finding permanent housing, help registering for mandatory federal and provincial programs, support with budgeting, banking and using debit and credit cards, basic urban living orientation for high needs clients, referrals to other programs and services and orientation to the community.

Canada provides income support under the RAP to eligible refugees and includes a one-time household start-up allowance, and monthly income support payment. The level of financial support is based on the provincial social assistance rates. Financial support can last up to one year after a refugee arrives, or until they can support themselves, whichever occurs first.

Government Assisted Refugees usually access the Immigration Loans Program (ILP) which helps them cover the cost of their trip to Canada and related expenses. Government Assisted

Refugees are required to begin to pay back this loan upon arrival to Canada and they are charged interest.

ISANS delivers the Resettlement Assistance Program together with a broad range of settlement services to enhance the resettlement of these new residents of Nova Scotia. In addition, ISANS continues to advocate for the needs of Government Assisted Refugees with regard to accessing appropriate, comprehensive and culturally sensitive services and programs in the community to support their integration.

## What is the history of refugees in Nova Scotia?

From 2008 to 2014, Nova Scotia welcomed 1,434 refugees, averaging almost 200 per year. This represents 8.8 percent of all immigrants coming to Nova Scotia.

Over the last 35 years settlement organizations have been on the forefront of refugee protection and support. Since 1980, ISANS has helped to settle approximately 6500 refugees from 40 different countries, including Afghanistan, former Yugoslavia, Bhutan, Colombia, former Soviet Union republics, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Somalia and Vietnam.

Get to know some of the refugees who now call Nova Scotia home and listen to their stories...



## BEDRIJE REXHEPI

In 1999 Bedrije Rexhepi left war-torn Kosovo, with her husband and six children aged 8 to 18, to come to Canada for just a few months. She's still here, operating a hair salon and doting over her grandchildren.

A brutal civil war pushed them from their homes to a refugee camp in Macedonia and then to Nova Scotia. "I felt so sad leaving my home, but on the other side I saw people with welcoming arms. It made me feel good." Bedrije was impressed by the number of people involved in working with the Kosovo refugees -- from government to the Red Cross to ISANS. "You have to have a good heart to do that kind of job." The family lived for six weeks at the Windsor Park military base, 10 people to a room. They then settled in Clayton Park and eventually Dartmouth.

Learning to communicate was challenging. "I would have no clue what people were talking about. The rules, culture, everything was different." But a private sponsor group of local citizens assisted Bedrije and her family. "They took turns coming to help us learn English. We started to do potlucks. I didn't know what that was! They were a beautiful group; they would make us laugh and tell us stories."

As well as studying English, she took business courses at ISANS. Her first job was "just a job" at Burger King. Soon First Choice

Haircutters offered her a position. She had impressed management with her skills, mastered as a hairdresser in Kosovo. After just one year she took a bold step and established her own business -- Hair by Bea, a small salon on Windsor Street. She has many regulars, steady clients who walk in off the street hoping she has time for them. Working independently has suited Bedrije. "When you have kids it's easier; my kids are my priority." Her husband, a set designer who has painted beautiful murals admired throughout the city, has also done well here.

Bedrije and her family have returned to Kosovo a few times as their home has been renovated after being damaged during the war. "That's the place the children were born and raised and they have friends. We can't erase that." The first days in Canada were difficult for them. Bedrije recalls being called to school as her youngest was having trouble. "I told her I believed in her and that she was a strong girl and would have to work hard." This confidence and determination built a foundation of success in all the children. She is now an actress in Toronto while the oldest is an architect. In between there is a graphic designer, a lab technician, a music producer and a journalism student. "They work hard to achieve what they want to do," says a proud Bedrije. Five are married and there are 13 grandchildren.

"It's been good so far; we're making a living, putting food on the table and educating our kids. My life has been good."



## ABDEL KARIM MUSA

Abdel Karim Musa came to Canada as a refugee and now offers advice to other refugees as the Private Refugee Sponsorship Program Assistant at ISANS. "I tell them, don't give up. Nothing is free here, but their lives will change eventually."

Musa is a native of the Darfour region of the Sudan, an area that suffered years of famine. He fled to Egypt, and after four years he and his wife, Fatima, were permitted to come to Canada. A good student of history and geography, he knew about Canada but hadn't heard of Halifax. Seven years later, Musa is happy here. "I love it; I can bike and walk. People are nice. If you are lost and ask for help, they will do so. It is a good place for us."

He studied English in Sudan, so he started at an intermediate level here and mastered the language quickly. He then studied for his adult high school diploma and enrolled in aviation at the Nova Scotia Community College. He studied full time for a while but then chose to work and study part time; he graduated in 2013.

ISANS isn't his only job -- Musa works with Capital Health doing housekeeping. He also does tailoring for friends and clothes design at home. "I grew up with these skills," he explains. His background is in business as he ran a small general store in Sudan and sold goods in a market in Egypt.

Fatima is equally engaged in studies. After learning English, she went to NSCC to earn her high school diploma and then became a Continuing Care Assistant. She upgraded her physics and science skills and has applied to study nursing, architecture or engineering at Dalhousie. Fatima and Musa have two children, daughter, Amal, eight, and son, Ameer, six. The children are involved in swimming, soccer and African music and dance. Amal and Ameer are in French immersion and both are learning Arabic, as well as their native language, Massaliet.

Musa is active in the Sudanese Association of the Maritimes, an organization for local Sudanese to gather and celebrate their culture. Since they couldn't visit family while in Egypt, they are anxious to return to Sudan to visit. "When you have family in a devastated place, it's hard to forget them. We're all trying to help," he says, explaining that they financially assist their family. His goal is to finish schooling and find an engineering job. He and Fatima want to buy a house rather than continue to live in public housing. "I'd like to give the government a break so they can help other people!"

Musa knows that settling in a new country is not easy and that language is always the biggest obstacle. "There are challenges here. But we have peace and we're free to work and do what we want to do. In seven years we have accomplished a lot. But when you first come here it's like you're just born."

DID YOU KNOW?

Over the past 30 years, 86 ISANS staff have come to Canada as refugees.



## JOMEH & MAH GOL FAZELI

Refugee in Canada has worked out well for Jomeh Khan Fazeli, his wife Mah Gol, and their family. "This is a good country," says Jomeh. "We are happy here."

Life before Canada was difficult. Because of war in his native Afghanistan, Jomeh fled to Pakistan on foot. "I was 16 years old and for 13 days I walked to Pakistan because I didn't want to fight." His parents and brother soon followed, staying in Pakistan for a year before moving to Iran where they lived for 25 years. During that time Jomeh married Mah Gol and they had five children.

"Life in Iran was hard," says Jomeh, explaining that the system worked well for those with money and that corruption was common. He sold automotive supplies at a store at a gas station.

The Fazelis came to Canada as refugees in 2008, and soon after had their youngest child, Yasaman, who was born the same day Jomeh started a job. "I took the bus to work and soon asked for time off as my baby was born," he recalls with a chuckle. Jomeh works the evening shift at Staff of Life Bakery making bread and samosas. Mah Gol, who made carpets when younger, sometimes helps with the bread. For several months he managed a small store, selling groceries and carpets.

Jomeh and Mah Gol, who speak Farsi and Uzbek, knew little English when they arrived. They are learning the language and

have taken English classes at ISANS. Their children are doing well. The younger ones are in school, while three of their oldest are in university - their son studies computer science and two daughters study science and business.

The Fazelis gather with family and others from Afghanistan several times throughout the year to celebrate festive occasions. Mah Gol has a special Canadian friend as well and, while she finds Canadian people friendly, she notices that they are busy with their own lives. "My neighbours are nice but we just say hello, how are you."

They returned to Iran a few years ago to visit family. As well as Jomeh's relatives, Mah Gol's father lives there while the rest of her family - her mother, three brothers and their families - lives in Australia. Thanks to Skype, they stay in touch.

The Fazeli family became Canadian citizens in 2014. Jomeh and Mah Gol feel welcomed in Canada and appreciate that taxes take care of health care as well as basic jobs such as snow removal. The weather has never been a major concern, as they have lived in cold climates. But in the summer they do enjoy the outdoors with their family.

The likeable couple speaks highly of ISANS and recalls how staff helped them access services and showed them around. As Jomeh says, "It was very difficult in the beginning, but because of their help, life soon became easier."



## MOSTAFA RASHIDI

Mostafa Rashidi reminds us that being a refugee in Canada is not always easy. It takes resilience, imagination and a determination to overcome the challenges.

Mostafa left his homeland of Iran and spent 2 ½ years in Turkey, arriving in Canada in 2002 with two children, aged one and eight. He didn't speak English and knew nothing about Canada. He lived in temporary lodgings for a month and then rented a house. "It was so cold, everything was new and it was very hard to take care of my kids," he says.

As a single father it's difficult to socialize, especially in the Iranian community. He says it takes a long time to build up the trust where a married couple, for instance, will welcome him to their home.

Because he had experience in Iran working as a welder and plumber, Mostafa enrolled in a course at the Nova Scotia Community College. He got a job as a welder at the Halifax shipyards, one of only two from his graduating class to be hired. After six years there he opened his own business, Diyar Debris Removal, providing services such as construction clean-up, trash removal and property maintenance. Mostafa says business is good, but it is still new and he would like it to grow. He hires one or two helpers, depending on how much work he has.



Life is still challenging, but Mostafa reminds himself of why Canada is the right place for him and his family. "I am here for my kids. It's a good place for education." His daughter is studying dentistry at Dalhousie University, while his son is in school and plays soccer when he can. Both speak several languages.

Since receiving his Canadian citizenship Mostafa is able to return to Iran almost every year to visit his parents and other family members.

He is still in touch with ISANS where he has found great support. "I said to myself, one day if I get everything – a job, a good life – I'm going to help new people to come to Canada. I told ISANS if new people need help with shopping, or moving stuff, or going around the city, if I can help, call me anytime."

Mostafa has had several personal incidents that have made him uncomfortable with Canadian police and his acceptance in the community. In a dispute over possession of a bicycle, a police officer said to him: "You're not from Canada. This bike is not yours. You're not from here." He also felt intimidated by police in another argument about service in a tire shop.

He says now, however, he is beginning to understand the Canadian system and knows his rights. With a laugh he says he should write a book. "If I tell you all my stories, your hair would be on ends."

### DID YOU KNOW?

Canada is one of only a few countries to operate a resettlement program out of Turkey. The majority of these refugees are referred by the UNHCR for resettlement to Canada.



## JENAN HABBEH

Jenan Habbeb's story is one of tragedy and sadness, yet also courage and hope. This spirited Iraqi woman lives with the memory of the execution of her husband, a three-star military officer, by his own soldiers, as ordered by Saddam Hussein. They had a young son and she was pregnant at the time. Her daughter arrived prematurely two months later. Jenan's husband, while imprisoned, had urged her to flee Iraq for safety, so nine months after his death her parents accompanied her to Jordan where a brother lived. Jenan worked for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees there, as her English was good, and in 2002 came to Canada. She had nothing, having left her home, job and finances behind. Jenan was suffering, but thankful to be accepted to Canada.

Today she is a hard-working single mom of teenagers, Ali, 17, and Fatma, 16. "I have built a good future for my children," she says proudly. Jenan was raised in an educated family, along with six brothers, and taught ESL in a private high school. She now happily works at the Care & Fun Child Care Centre. "I love it."

Starting over wasn't easy. "This is a new story here – different country, different culture, different situation. ISANS gave me a lot of help. ISANS stood beside me." Jenan found an apartment in a building owned by a Lebanese man who hired her as building supervisor. "They called me the brave woman," she says with a chuckle. She worked in a Lebanese bakery at night to reimburse the government for her travel costs. She volunteered at her children's

daycare and then became a substitute worker there. When her children went on to school she worked as a teacher's assistant. She also works part time at the Fairview Family Resource Centre, and as a Life Skill Worker at ISANS, assisting new arrivals. She worked for three years as a home English teacher for immigrants.

Having worked hard to support her family and instill confidence in her children, Jenan is moving forward. "It's time to take care of myself." She obtained her education certificates from Iraq, allowing her to enroll in the Early Childhood Education certificate program in 2010. She began with three online courses, while continuing to work. "I am very proud to work here and I prayed to God to give me a full-time job!"

Jenan's family lives throughout the world. After 10 years here she traveled to Dubai, Syria and Jordan to visit, but had no desire to return to Iraq. She became a Canadian citizen in 2004 and has many Canadian friends. "Canada has made me happy." Jenan hopes to bring her mother, brother and his family here. She encourages other refugees to stay in Halifax, a place she has come to love. "The first week I was scared, but we have to look forward."

Her children are now in grade 11 and 10 and her son wants to be an engineer like his father. "Hopefully my children will be happy and do things that make me proud in the future. I came to Canada because of them."

### DID YOU KNOW?

From 2010 - 2015, Nova Scotia welcomed over 1,000 refugees, averaging about 200 per year. That's 8.3% of all immigrants to Nova Scotia.



## FLORALBA MOSQUERA

After three years in Canada Floralba Mosquera was looking forward to a trip to her native Colombia. But tragedy struck when her husband Olmedo, a cabdriver, died in a car accident. "It's been four years, but I'm still grieving," she says, adding that in time she will go back to visit.

Olmedo's death made life more difficult for Floralba, but she credits ISANS for guiding her through the hard times. And soon after the accident she became a grandmother. "That baby really helped me; it's amazing."

Because of the dangerous political situation in Colombia, Floralba and her husband, both teachers, fled in 2007 with three children, now 28, 25 and 19. "The only thing I knew about Canada was that it was the best country to welcome everybody and that it was good for human rights. I knew this was the place I had to be."

At home she had studied math and physics and taught school – from elementary to high school. When she arrived here she was homesick and felt a great culture shock. "It's hard to work in the field you worked in at home. And it was challenging for me as I didn't have the language. I had to start from zero." Her husband spoke English and, as well, ISANS often provided an interpreter. But Floralba worked hard on her English, taking classes – both in person and online – and practicing with a tutor. She also joined a YMCA

immigrant women's group and sold empanadas, tortillas and tamales at the farmers' market. "It was helpful for me to be involved in the community, practice my English and learn more about Canadian culture."

Floralba substituted at a daycare and now has a full-time job at the YMCA Purdy's Wharf Child Care Centre. "I love working with children. It's in my heart." She continues to take courses toward her Certificate in Early Childhood Education.

Floralba feels part of the community and is active in her church. "ISANS helped me to interact. They became family to me." Overcoming cultural differences has been challenging. "My husband was stressed out looking for a place to dance," she says laughing. "So sometimes we danced at home." Son John works in sales; another son, Jonathan studied business; daughter Wendy studies nutrition at Mount St. Vincent. "She's my friend. We call each other and we shop together, go out for dinner." They speak Spanish at home, an opportunity for her daughter to practice.

Floralba has seven sisters and one brother, all in Colombia. She contacts them often, but remains here. "This is the country God chose for me. Canada opened the door for us. It's for a reason." Floralba has become a Canadian citizen. "For me it was a huge thing. I realized that now Canada is really my home. People I've met here are my family. I don't feel like a stranger anymore."



## NOOR AL-ANBAGI

Noor Al-Anbagi often tells herself to stay positive. She has faced challenges since arriving as a refugee from Iraq, via Egypt, in 2009 with her parents and three younger sisters. Not only has she

had to learn English, she cannot hear. To help her connect with the Deaf community, ISANS hired an interpreter through the Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians. Alice Mailman still works with Noor and assisted with her interview for this story. They share a laugh when Noor declares: "I'm better than my teacher!"

Noor says she was afraid when she first came to Canada. "But now it's much better. People are friendly and I feel more comfortable." She was worried life would be difficult here, but her parents are allowing her the freedom to find her place, while offering needed support.

Noor studied English and sign language at ISANS and was a good student. As an ISANS volunteer she practices sign language with other students, helps them read, encourages them to meet other signers, shows them YouTube signing videos and even helps them learn the bus routes. Noor has taught signs to people at the YMCA and Good Life Fitness where she attends regularly. She is an active member of the Deaf community and worked on a grant application for a project to help bring the hearing and Deaf communities together. She was thrilled to go to Toronto with a youth exchange. "I would like to see more places. I wish I could be a bird and fly!"

Communicating with hearing people, however, does cause frustration. "It's hard to communicate how I feel and to

understand what they're saying. I try to read lips, ask them to speak slowly and teach them a little sign language."

Noor has tried the Canadian Citizenship exam, but finds it difficult. Her mother suggests designing the exam differently. "Why not a separate test in front of the judge for deaf people?" she asks. Noor is passionate about becoming Canadian. "I don't want to return to where there is war."

Noor and her family returned once to their homeland to visit family they hadn't seen in years, but it saddened them as conditions there are dangerous. They work at keeping connections strong, talking frequently to family members on Skype.

Noor works part-time as a seamstress, but dreams of becoming an interior designer. She has been studying to get her Driver's License and recently passed the Beginners test with great excitement. She has a happy home life in a new spacious apartment with her parents and sisters, Zahraa, 16, Miryam, 16 and Rahma, 8. She is teaching sign language to Miryam who in turn teaches her friends. Noor's mother learned sign language as her own brother and sister are deaf.

"It's home now," says Noor's mother. "Good place, good people, good school. My children are happy." Says Noor: "I didn't go to school in Iraq. I just sewed and cooked, and my father kept saying it's too dangerous to go out." For Noor, Canada has opened the door to a new life.

Noor's goal is to support Deaf refugees, and she hopes that her Deaf uncle and friends will one day come to Canada.



## HENRIETTE ATANDJO

Life often unfolds differently than planned. Henriette Atandjo married at 16 in her native Congo and had a happy family, including a husband with a good job in business that took him to other countries. Then war changed everything.

Henriette, her three children, her husband's three, and his mother, left their possessions behind and fled the Congo for Tanzania where they spent 4 ½ years in a refugee camp. "You can't go anywhere outside the camp. You need a paper to show the police so they don't put you in jail. It was difficult."

It wasn't safe to return to the Congo so they were told Canada would be their home. Henriette was worried. "I have no family there; I have no language to start a new life. Is it safe? Will anyone abuse me? Too much thinking!" They arrived in March 2006. "Oh, my goodness it was cold. I wondered how are we going to live in this country?" ISANS provided an interpreter and helped them settle into their home and into English classes.

There was still someone missing – Henriette's husband, Jean, who was away when they fled. "We didn't know if he had died or was alive. All the years in the refugee camp we didn't know where he was." After three years here they received word from the camp that someone was asking for her. They connected by phone. "I couldn't believe it was him. I was crying. He was crying."

ISANS helped her reunite the family – it was an exciting time as Jean hadn't seen his seven-year-old since she was a baby. Henriette and Jean are working, she as a housekeeper at Atlantica Hotel, and he as the caretaker at Ecole Beaubassin. Henriette studied English for over two years but stopped to work. Jean studied briefly but left for a job where he speaks French.

Henriette speaks six languages, including Swahili. Sometimes she works with ISANS as an interpreter for new arrivals. "I try to give them examples of my life. They always ask if one day they will know English. I never thought I would learn, but I did." She is happy her children speak their native tongue in hopes of visiting Congo one day. Her daughters, Martha, 17, and Neema, 14, are doing well in school and enjoy life here. Her oldest daughter is married and lives in Montreal. And Henriette is now delighted to be a grandmother. Jean's 91-year-old mother lives with them; she has dementia and receives homecare.

Henriette is content, enjoys her home and neighbours. "It's a very nice place to live. It's safe. It was hard in the beginning. You start at zero." Her sister in Montreal encourages her to move there. "To start life again is not easy. We won't move."

The family has good friends from Africa including a Rwandan family from the same refugee camp. "I don't want to remember bad things in the past. My only hope for the future is that my kids finish school and get a good job."



## MOHAMED YAFFA

Mohamed Yaffa couldn't have predicted he would be Coordinator of Diversity and Social Inclusion at Capital Health in Halifax. Having studied in university in Malta, he hoped to work at the Foreign Office of Sierra Leone. But instead, Mohamed, his pregnant wife Fatima, and three-year-old son, fled his country's brutal civil war for Canada in 2000. "You run for your life. I tried to look out for everyone and find a durable solution."

He knew little about his new home except the historic connections between Nova Scotia and Freetown. But from the moment of their arrival at the Halifax airport, it seemed that things might go well. Their cab driver, sent by ISANS, wanted to stop at the Mosque for Friday prayers, so they went along. "It was a nice way to be first introduced to my religious community and start feeling at home in my host country," he recalls.

The family's first days were spent at the Mount St. Vincent University Mother House where the religious Sisters brought them rice, a traditional staple. Even the security guard showed them around. "I was very lucky; God paved the way for me."

Mohamed speaks English, Arabic, Urdu, several African languages and conversational French, and became a volunteer interpreter at ISANS where both he and Fatima took courses. He soon joined the Dartmouth Literacy Network Board of Directors and studied to teach English at the TESL Centre at Saint Mary's University. He worked as a settlement worker at ISANS and then for six years was coordinator for the Family Violence and Cultural Awareness program, educating

new arrivals about domestic violence and parenting. "I grew into it and learned a lot." He now facilitates access to health care for vulnerable populations, and deals with cultural awareness among employees. "I love this job because I see results. It is about social justice. We do supportive work in the community."

Mohamed and his wife now have four children. Raising children here is challenging as in Sierra Leone everyone – neighbours, friends and extended family – looks after all the children. Weather is another issue. "We try not to complain," chuckles Mohamed. But the most serious difficulty is the lack of trust. "Once people know you, they welcome you. But why not see me as a good person first? The feeling of being watched while shopping, for example, is not a good feeling."

Despite challenges, they are at home. Fatima works as a Continuing Care Assistant and the children do well at school and enjoy soccer and Tae Kwon Do and basketball. Mohamed earned an Islamic Studies degree and is now the Imam at the Centre for Islamic Development. They have visited Sierra Leone, but feel their connection to their homeland has evolved. "You go back and you're not fully the person you were in terms of ethnicity and culture," Mohamed explains. "We're never quite totally at home there, or here. You keep getting reminded that you are not 100% accepted here as a Black person, an immigrant or a Muslim."

But Mohamed recognizes that Canada saved their lives. "It was a jubilant time for me to come here. Everyone in the world is looking for justice and this is a just country."

DID YOU KNOW?

Vietnamese refugees were the first large Asian refugee group to arrive in the province. MISA was established as a result and became the first settlement organization in Nova Scotia.



## ZRINKA SELES-VRANJES

Zrinka Seles-Vranjes shares a touching story of her first Canadian winter. Near Christmas, she was pregnant and alone, as her husband was working at sea.

An elderly neighbour in her apartment building arrived with a plate of cookies and a small needlework white angel. “I was speechless. I was stunned. Thank you, thank you, I kept saying. She said thank you for choosing Canada.” But refugees seldom have a choice.

The long and painful conflict in the former Yugoslavia led Zrinka, from Croatia, and her Bosnian-born husband to Halifax in 1996. “You just want to leave; you just want order in your life somehow. That’s the best that I can describe it.” He left for Germany, she followed and they made their way to Canada.

They were greeted with comforting words. “Our cab driver said, don’t worry. People came here 300 to 400 years ago and they survived. You will survive.” He took them to a hotel on Chocolate Lake where they were welcomed by representatives from the immigration department.

“Our first moments here were phenomenal,” she says. “I felt like I was in a movie; it was so peaceful and quiet. People were wonderful, so kind. We walked and walked and wondered where the city was. Twice people stopped and asked if we needed a hand. We weren’t used to that.”

With degrees in teaching and pedagogy, Zrinka had been a high school language teacher. She also had a “phenomenal job” as director

of cultural activities, organizing theatre and dance events. Her husband was a seaman, a job he continues as captain of a private container ship.

Zrinka went to language school for three months but didn’t return to the workforce until her daughter, Tara, was a year old. “In the beginning here I didn’t know about stores, didn’t know where to find familiar things. I still remember everything tasted different – chocolate not so sweet, the milk didn’t have the same flavour.”

Tara speaks Croatian and Serbian and has strong ties to her parents’ homeland, where she has visited several times. “I like the food and the lifestyle; when we go back there, everyone does stuff more like what we do.” This was a revelation to Zrinka. “She felt alone here and suddenly was overwhelmed with discovery that she had an extended family. How happy she was and I didn’t realize she was missing that.”

The family’s settlement was smooth. “We were university educated and we came from a society that was different, but not so different. It was still Europe, so for us we have culture shock but not as much as for other people.”

Zrinka and Tara love to ride horses and Zrinka is on the board of directors of the Bengal Lancers. Her husband is a member of the Metro Karate Club. Zrinka also helped a Palestinian family settle here as part of a private sponsorship group called Neighbours for Refugees. Her day job is Program Assistant for Health Interpretation Services at ISANS – giving back to a community that has given her so much.



## ALI DUALE

When Ali Duale arrived in Halifax in 1997, the Somalia native opened his hotel room dresser drawer to find toiletries, a letter in Somali and a \$100 cheque. “That shocked me. Two days ago I was living in cardboard in a refugee

camp. Now I’m in a nice hotel and someone tells me we brought you this and here’s a cheque to cash. That hit my heart and will remain with me the rest of my life.”

Ali and his wife, Sudi, and three children, aged 2, 3 and 4, fled a brutal civil war. They lived as refugees in Kenya for seven years and could have chosen the U.S. as their future home. “Quite honest one of my biggest reasons I chose Canada was the social services as I was concerned about my children.” He knew nothing about Nova Scotia. “Someone from Canada told me it’s a small fishing community. I said I think I could handle that.”

His first impression was shock. “When we were landing I could see nothing but snow. I thought we must be going to Siberia.” Fears weren’t abated during the cab ride along the highway. “I was waving my hands and asking, city, city, city? But I reached the decision that wherever he takes me, I’m ready.”

An Immigration representative helped the family settle and ISANS provided language studies. “I give credit to my lovely wife; she made the decision to stay here. This is a friendly, family place. And it’s an educational destination.” As the family grew to eight children, Ali and Sudi alternated working and studying. Sudi returned to high

school and then studied nursing on a student loan. She is a part-time IWK assistant nurse and continues her studies at Dalhousie. Ali went to adult high school, then received a loan to study auto mechanics at the Nova Scotia Community College while working nights as a janitor at Purdy’s Wharf. “Only one year did we take social assistance.”

After one year of mechanical engineering at Saint Mary’s, Ali became a firefighter in 2004. “I am blessed. When I go to someone’s home to help them, it makes my day.” He still hopes to complete his degree. He is proud of his family and fondly recalls his son Mohamed’s emotional high school graduation valedictory address where he spoke admiringly of his parents. Mohamed now studies political science at Dalhousie while two sisters are at Saint Mary’s. The younger siblings are at school and home.

Ali believes in giving back. He always votes, a right he never had. He is active in the Somali community, on the Maritime Muslim Academy Board and helped to plan the new mosque. As a member of a private sponsorship group, he is working to bring two siblings to Canada from their refugee camp in Kenya. And he organized a swimming program at the Canada Games Centre and a free basketball program for immigrant boys at St. Andrews Community Centre. The family also plays recreational basketball.

Despite their success, Ali recognizes reality. “Refugees are the lowest category of immigrants; most are uneducated and not wealthy. Refugees have seen terrible things and need sympathy; it’s a great challenge for refugees in every aspect of life.”

### DID YOU KNOW?

Globally, one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. If this were the population of a country, it would be the world’s 24th largest.



## SAMSON ZEREMARIAM

In one of Samson Zeremariam's first phone calls home to Eritrea, his father declared Canada must be colder than his own freezer.

Samson laughs now, but he didn't find it funny then. While language is the major barrier for most refugees, for him it has always been the weather.

Samson was born in Eritrea, but lived in Sudan during the war for independence. He returned to Eritrea for university psychology studies. "It makes you understand people and makes it easy to see different ways people see things." He intended to work as a social worker or in a children's hospital, but escaped Eritrea for Sudan in fear that his obligatory 18-month national service would be extended.

Samson's English was good and he became an interpreter with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. But one night he and his wife, Almaz, were kidnapped, presumably because the Sudanese government thought he was a spy. He was held for three days and Almaz for 43 days. They quickly fled to Canada for safety. "We didn't have time to know anything about anything," says Samson. "It was very scary there. We couldn't do anything on our own."

Arriving here with Almaz – pregnant with their first child – was a great relief. ISANS provided help including English for Business classes. Samson worked as an office cleaner and a hotel dish washer. "It's a choice. I didn't expect to sit in an office when I don't know the

system here." He studied to be a machinist at the Nova Scotia Community College and received a work term followed by full-time jobs with Pratt and Whitney and Advanced Precision. When he was laid off in 2008, he became a cab driver. He anticipates being hired at the Irving Shipyard.

Canada is home now. "When you move to a new country, it's your job to learn everything," says Samson. "Keep your traditions if you want, but learn the culture and language around you." Almaz cares for their three girls – Elellta, 11, Elim, 9 and Naomi, 7 – and sometimes works for ISANS as an interpreter and a Life Skills Worker for new arrivals from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Middle East. Samson also helps new arrivals at ISANS. "I can see the relief to have someone speak your own language and show you around. I tell them to work hard and if you don't have an education, get educated. You have to depend on yourself."

Samson is a member of a private refugee sponsorship group working toward bringing new arrivals here from Israel, Sudan and Uganda. Until recently he was chair of the Eritrean/Canadian Association, a group focused on teaching their native language to their children. The family enjoys swimming and has friends from various countries. Samson's parents are still in Eritrea – he visited them once in Sudan – while his siblings are spread throughout the world.

Samson became a citizen in 2006. "Wherever I go I have a Canadian passport. And I just really wanted to vote so my voice would go somewhere. Life here is good. There's no fear. It is peaceful."



## MICHAEL & HANNAH KAMARA

The Kamara family won't ever forget that first shock of cold air when they arrived in Canada on a January day in 2007, but thankfully the warmth of Nova Scotians made up for it. Michael

and Hannah came here with their three-year-old daughter and a nephew. They've since had a son, now six. The family had lived in a refugee camp in their native Sierra Leone, a country that suffered 11 years of a brutal civil war. Michael, like many victims of that war, lost his leg and didn't even have a prosthesis until he came to Canada. "I didn't know what Canada looked like; it was different but we were excited to have the opportunity to live here."

In his homeland he was a tailor and his wife sold clothes. She now works as a housekeeper at a downtown hotel. Michael worked as a hospital attendant and then decided to drive a cab – a job that provides him the flexibility to pick up his son from school and care for him until his wife comes home from work.

They participated in the formation of a Sierra Leone/Canada Association that meets monthly. "We speak our language; we eat our meals; we make fun and laugh. Our children know each other. Even if they're born here, they know they are part of something else." And they fundraise to help people suffering in Sierra Leone, especially those who have lost a limb to war. Michael saved \$50

a month toward travel to his homeland to visit family and find ways to assist. He provided school supplies, such as books and pens, and helped a young man receive necessary surgery. He is now collecting school supplies to fill a container. "Canada changed my life. Now I ask how I can change other people's lives."

Language has been a major challenge. Hannah studied at ISANS and practices her English at work. "My teacher said not to be shy and I'm not shy to talk to guests." Michael appreciates the opportunity to tell people about Sierra Leone. "People in my cab want to know who I am and where I'm from so I like to educate them."

They are comfortable in their home; their daughter plays soccer and they enjoy family outings. "You miss your food, your language, your culture – how you interact with other people – but you're still happy to be here," says Michael. Hannah notes that at home extended family and neighbours take care of each other's children. "But I am happy here – happy to have an opportunity to have education and a job and have rights as a woman."

Michael finished adult high school here and still has plans to go to college and study business. They hope one day to operate a business together. "I had to stop school because I struggled so much," he says. "I don't want my children to follow in the same footsteps. I want them to get the best education and to satisfy themselves for the future."



## ADHIKARI FAMILY

The Adhikari family is a very long way from their homeland of Bhutan. Father Madhu, mother Padma, sons Sudarsan and Ganga, and the youngest, daughter Nisha, came to Canada in 2009 after 18 years in a refugee camp in Nepal. That voyage, made with four other families, was their first time flying.

“We had no choice but to come to Canada,” says Sudarsan, explaining that they had only two weeks’ notice to learn about the country. They spent their first night at a hotel. “We slept that night hungry,” Ganga says, recalling that they didn’t understand a bag outside the door was food for them. After a few weeks, ISANS helped them settle into an apartment.

Six years later the amiable family is content in their new home country. Learning English is a challenge for Madhu and his wife, both of whom had very little schooling. Padma still studies while Madhu works as a cleaner. Both sons are Dalhousie University students studying industrial engineering. Sudarsan is sponsored by WUSC (World University Service of Canada), while Ganga has a student loan. They often work with ISANS, Sudarsan as an interpreter and Ganga as a Life Skills Worker helping new arrivals settle.

Nisha is in high school with dreams of becoming a nurse. She has many friends and loves science. She also enjoys swimming and diving. The boys play soccer and, typically, they all enjoy the

mall and movies – especially Bollywood movies. “We like almost everything in Canada except the cold and snow,” says Sudarsan. But that’s nothing compared to earlier hardships. They were forced to leave Bhutan, where they farmed for a living, before leaving for Nepal where they lived in a refugee camp of about 25,000 people. “It was a miserable time,” says Madhu, who worked as a Nepali language teacher. Houses were fire hazards – some with a plastic roof and others made of bamboo and thatch. Sudarsan was only two when they arrived in Nepal while his siblings were born there.

They miss their extended family. While Madhu’s family is in Bhutan and the US, Padma has family in Quebec they’ve been able to visit. They sometimes get together with other local Bhutanese, especially during festivals such as Dashara and Deepawali. They attend the local Hindu temple although only some family members understand Hindi well.

Acceptance here hasn’t come easily and they feel watched and discussed when they venture out in traditional clothes. But they do belong – their sense of responsibility resulted in saving enough money in just three years to pay back their immigration loan. They are thankful to those who have helped them during the resettlement process and they have a strong sense of themselves. “We are permanent residents now. We were called refugees for a long time,” says Ganga. Concur his brother: “We came here to get rid of that word.”

The Adhikari’s have applied for citizenship and look forward to becoming Canadians soon.



## ELENA LALABEKOVA

Each day on her way to work, Elena Lalabekova passes by the cemetery where her father is buried. She takes a minute to thank him for bringing her to Canada. “He said: ‘I did it; I brought you here.’ He loved this country.”

Elena and her family arrived in 2005 after tumultuous years following their flight from Azerbaijan. She and her parents left their war-torn country in 1988 for Armenia and later moved on to Turkmenistan. “We lived there in hopes of finding a home,” she explains. But their situation was unstable and she wasn’t even allowed to enter college. “My father wrote letters, one after another after another, to get documents so I could go to school.” Her parents worked hard so she could study office management and bookkeeping at a private college. Adept at English, Elena worked at an import/export company and taught English in a daycare.

Eventually the government encouraged refugees to leave, and several families came to Halifax. Elena was now married with an 18 month-old daughter, and pregnant with another. “It was a new culture, new people and no extended family. I had to give up a lot, but it was better for me and for my kids.”

Her family and her parents all settled in the same building, in two apartments. “I am so grateful to ISANS. They were a huge support.” Elena’s husband, Gennady, did not speak English and found the first days difficult. He and Elena’s parents studied English at ISANS.

“Language is a huge challenge, as is simply getting around and finding your way.” Elena found the culture different, but not in a negative way. “It is better here, different values, and friendlier.” Gennady wasn’t content as quickly, but after visits of a week in Toronto, and later three weeks in his homeland, he realized Halifax would work out. He began to paint houses, work that he continues today.

In 2007 ISANS invited Elena to an information session with the Royal Bank of Canada, soon leading to a job as a Customer Service Representative. After working in several branches, she is now happily ensconced in Burnside. She was asked to join an employees’ resource group, called RBC Mosaic, which helps foster an inclusive culture within the bank community.

Four years ago the family purchased a home, about the same time they became Canadian citizens. “Now we celebrate both!” Elena’s mother lives nearby and helps out with daughters, Elona, now 12, and Victoria, 10. That assistance became particularly important because of the sudden death of Elena’s father in 2012. The family enjoys Russian movies and books, allowing the children to maintain their language. Elena is a member of the Russian Society of the Maritimes and receives support for events from RBC. She is also happy to help new arrivals settle in Canada.

Elena is thankful for her life here. She says she doesn’t understand families that don’t get along as she has family back home she never sees. “They should appreciate what they have.”

**isans** | Immigrant Services  
Association of Nova Scotia

CELEBRATING **35** YEARS  
1980 2015

6960 Mumford Road • Suite 2120  
Halifax • Nova Scotia • Canada • B3L 4P1  
Phone: 902.423.3607 • Fax: 902.423.3154  
[www.isans.ca](http://www.isans.ca)