

Paradise Valley Refugee Assimilation Project | BY WILL JAMES

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOCELYN FAY

Little did I know seven years ago, when I met Ephraim Bendantunguka, how much my life was going to change. I've grown from pastoring a good church to what is now a great church. My job description has changed dramatically as well. Not only that, but we have raised and spent more than \$1 million during the past four and a half years in ministry.

Ephraim was born in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, graduated from Mudende, a French-speaking Adventist university in Rwanda (destroyed during the genocide), and pastored a 5,000-member church in Kigali, Rwanda's capital city. In 1993 he went with his family to Germany to get his master's degree at Friedensau Adventist University.

When genocide broke out back home six months after their departure, Ephraim's family became refugees in Germany. After earning his systematic theology degree, Ephraim discovered that job opportunities for him were limited. He worked as an assistant nurse in a retirement home, then, with his wife Regine (*above right*), assisted immigrants and refugees, before coming to America to try to provide a better life for his family.

A friend from Rwanda urged Ephraim to come to San Diego. When he did, he began calling Adventist churches to ask for temporary housing. That Friday afternoon he finally reached a church secretary at Paradise Valley who was able to help him, and soon he and his family were camping in the Community Center of my church. This is where I met them when I returned from a trip to Manila. Ephraim has a call from God to be a pastor, yet has been frustrated in answering that call for many years.

The recession began about that same time, and I felt God impressing me that we should do something about the need for food in our community. I have been preaching for years, "If God shows you a need, it is because He wants you to meet that need, and if you will step out in faith to

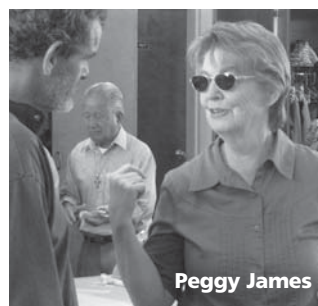


Ephraim and Regine

meet that need, God will supply the resources to do so." Little did I know how God was going to test my beliefs.

I advertised on Craigslist that we were looking for a walk-in cooler. The first to respond was a company that installed them. They said, "If you get a cooler, let us know and we will go and dismantle it, and install it on your property free of cost." The next week I got a call from a florist who was going out of business, saying she had a large walk-in cooler we could have.

The next year we collected and gave away more than 1,000 pounds of food each week and thought we were busy. But we had only just begun! This past year we gave away more than 10,000 pounds of food and more than 400 pieces of clothing to 500 or more families each week.



Peggy James

From that food ministry, directed by my wife, Peggy (*left*), we became aware of pockets of refugees in our community. A refugee is someone who has had to flee their homeland because of war, persecution, or dis-

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aster. The United Nations relocates them to a new home. They come as legal residents of the country they are assigned to, and usually have government financial support for a short time until they can get a job and begin to support themselves.

One of our local elders, Thongsouay Sakdarak, was a Buddhist monk of the highest order in Laos. During the Vietnam War he became a refugee and was converted to Adventist Christianity in his camp. God used him to help convert more than 1,000 Laotians to Christianity while still in the refugee camp. Here in San Diego, he was taking food to a group of Laotian refugees each week. In the same apartment complex were Bhutanese people who had lived in squalor in refugee camps in Nepal. They saw the food coming regularly and finally asked if Thongsouay would bring them some. He agreed, and soon he was delivering food to more than sixty families a week.

These refugees wanted to come to church, but we did not speak their language, and they did not speak ours. Besides, how would we get them to church? We borrowed a bus from the Sunday church that was renting our fellowship hall. We now own two buses and have a member

who owns a small bus, so we bring three busloads of refugees to church every Sabbath.

Ephraim, with his experience working with immigrants and refugees in Germany, became alive as these events were happening. He began telling me we needed to start a ministry to assimilate refugees into American society. I said, "How can we afford a new ministry?" He turned my words back on me: "If God shows you a need, it is because He wants you to do something about that need . . . remember, pastor?"

We began to think and pray about what God was showing us and what He wanted us to do.

Agreeing that before the refugees could get jobs they needed basic English language skills, we began to explore how we could teach English to our Bhutanese refugee friends. We soon learned that in order for them to get food stamps, housing allowance, and medical insurance they must attend language classes or volunteer to learn a job skill a minimum of thirty-five hours a week. We formulated a plan and submitted it to San Diego County. Soon the county certified us to offer the hours for ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and work experience. Our ministry to refugees had begun, with Ephraim as director and about twenty students he had recruited from





several apartment complexes.

It has been a series of stepping through doors as God has opened them. The face of our ministry, which comprised mostly Asian and African students the first year, changed the second year to include refugees from war-torn Middle Eastern countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Peter and Oksana Thomas moved their self-supporting ministry to Arabic-speaking people to San Diego from Washington State and joined forces with us. Peter, who was born in Iraq, immediately began visiting mosques and other gathering places of Arabic speakers and inviting them to classes. He also conducted health fairs in English and Arabic.

As we thought about opening a language school, we anticipated the need for someplace where the students could get work experience, so we opened a thrift store the same week we began ESL classes. For several years my wife and I had enjoyed going to estate sales in upscale communities. We rarely bought anything, but left our business card with the comment that if they needed a nonprofit charity to pick up unsold items, we would be willing to help them. We had been holding two rummage sales each year to generate income for our Community Services ministry. Estate sale and other donations have increased enough in recent years to keep our thrift store full of merchandise and still pile the tables high for our two annual rummage sales.

Our local community college has a work-study program that our refugee students participate in. Once they learn enough English to attend evening classes at the college, they get a job either at our thrift store or for another employer, and the state rebates seventy-five percent of

their salary back to the employer. Because the students don't lose any of their government aid, this helps them as well as us, as it only costs us \$2.50 an hour to pay them minimum wage for their work in the thrift store.

Many of the refugees struggle with depression. If you stop and think about what they have been through and what they have left behind—their family, their homeland, their security and all—and what they have met in this new land, it is no wonder that they are depressed. They have been told that America is a land of opportunity, but they can't speak the language or get a job. Everything is drastically different from anything they have ever known. Many of these refugees have never been to school a day in their life and have come from agrarian societies where they grew everything they needed. They have no idea what it means to work for someone else and get paid for it.

We asked God what we could ever do about their depression. We remembered a quotation we had read, something to the effect that getting one's hands into the soil is therapeutic to the mind and body, and we felt impressed to start a community garden. Encouraged and helped by Victory Gardens of San Diego and our local food bank, we leased some hillside property for \$1 from Paradise Valley Hospital, next door to us, and planted a garden. It has grown to cover well over two acres. As the students began working the soil and planting their seeds, a miracle occurred; their depression lifted. They

began to sing and converse as they worked the soil and were reminded of the good things from their homeland. We noticed that as their spirits lifted, they were able to study better.

We are forming partnerships with other agencies in our community as we continue to grow and minister to



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the families God is bringing to us. Azusa Pacific University sends nursing students to our Community Center and school every Tuesday morning. They do blood pressure checks during our weekly food distribution, then go to the fellowship hall to fix a good lunch for the students and teach them basic health and hygiene.

The Alliance for African Assistance is a resettlement agency in our community that began much like we did, with a garage where they had a garage sale each week to raise money to work with refugees. They have grown during the past thirty years to where they have industries and businesses that generate all the income they need for their refugee ministry. They have agreed to partner with us and help us find ways to grow and become a self-reliant ministry as well. As we are teaching the refugees to become self-sufficient, we need to model this principle and become self-sufficient ourselves. This is going to take us time and effort, but we feel compelled to move in this direction.

In addition to donations from individuals, generous appropriations from church entities,

such as the Southeastern California and Pacific Union conferences, gave us the capital we needed to launch our refugee project in 2011. We understand that we cannot depend on church funding sources forever, so we are exploring other sources and writing grant proposals. We also are looking for business opportunities that will work not only as training sites for our students but also as revenue streams. Last year our rummage sales and thrift store generated more than \$75,000 toward our ministry budget of \$350,000. Obviously we are not there yet, but that is close to a quarter of our budget, and we are certain God will continue to open doors for us.

We have taught and empowered close to one hundred families, helping them move on with college education or get employment and get off of the welfare system that supported them when they arrived in San Diego. We are working now with another ninety-five families in various stages of growth. Some are struggling with learning English, but many more are looking for job opportunities or growing through education to





Conslee with greens from the garden.

become plumbers, nurses, and caregivers.

What excites me almost as much as the impact we are having on the refugee community is the impact it is having on the members of my church. Today we are a vibrant, active congregation with close to 125 members involved in outreach ministries to our community. (This does not count the hundreds of others who are involved in the weekly services on Sabbath morning.) The love they share each week to our community of course bubbles over on Sabbath morning among the church family members. We have become the loving, caring, compassionate church that Jesus created us to be.

Last November we celebrated our fourth year of ministry to refugees with flags representing the sixty-two nationalities worshipping together at our church. We translate our services over FM headsets into Arabic, French, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Spanish, and sometimes Nepali and Lao.

God continues to bring us new church members. Without holding evangelistic meetings, we baptize between forty and fifty people a year into our congregation, which now

numbers 850. Many of these new members were volunteering in our ministries long before they became a member, so of course they continue doing what they have already been doing once they join the family. Others come from our refugee community.

My life as a pastor of the Paradise Valley church is very different from the life of the typical pastor. Most weeks find me out with our team picking up truckloads of donations from estate sales, working with employers trying to find jobs for some of our students, and writing grant requests, searching for sources of money to keep this ministry moving forward. My wife volunteers full-time to run the Community Services, keeping her team of more than one hundred volunteers organized and efficient. And Ephraim still directs our Refugee Assimilation Project.

Yes, during the past four years we have spent more than \$1 million in our ministry! God has opened the windows of heaven and supplied our needs. And yes, most of the time we have very little money in the bank, but that is not where He has told us to keep it. We are busy storing up treasures in heaven in the lives of the precious refugees He has called us to minister to.

For further information about the Refugee Assimilation Project; five videos produced for us by others are on our Web page: www.FriendshipsForHope.org. ■

Will James is the Senior Pastor of Paradise Valley Church.

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Making a New Life in the U.S.

Abbas

Abbas and his Sunni family lived peacefully in a Shiite area of Baghdad until the Iraq War began in 2003. After



After attending Advanced English classes, Abbas enrolled in college.

hostile militia killed a close relative, Abbas and his wife, Zinah, fled with their two sons to a safer section of Baghdad and then to Turkey. In December 2011 the United Nations flew them to San Diego. Abbas and Zinah learned about Paradise Valley church's food distribution and English classes from neighbors. "I knew that I could get a good job if I knew English," Abbas said, so he attended Refugee Assimilation Project's advanced English classes. Now he is studying toward a college degree that will enable him to do what he loves—work with his hands. Meanwhile, besides studying, he works full time driving cars for the Alamo car rental agency at the San Diego airport. Abbas's family now includes a daughter.

Charlin and Eugenie



Charlin and his wife, Eugenie, at their naturalization service with their children and friends.

As a Christian, Charlin felt that he could not join a rebel army that was forcing young men to join its revolt against the government of Chad. He and his wife, Eugenie, fled from that Central African country with their two children and came as refugees to America. Their new home was an apartment near Paradise Valley church.

Charlin and Eugenie joined the Refugee Assimilation Project's first ESL class, having been recruited by the director, Ephraim Bendantunguka. Charlin was one of the first two students to work at P.V. Thrift Store on a work-study

program, going to school half-days and working half-days. Now he has a full-time maintenance job at Paradise Valley Hospital. Eugenie is a caregiver at Cedars, an assisted living facility at nearby Paradise Village. A third child joined their family after their move to San Diego.

Basheija



Basheija, center, worships at Paradise Valley church with her children, including daughters Claudine, left, and Anita, right.

Basheija describes herself as having been "a very rich woman" when she and her family lived in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their large farm produced coffee beans, bananas, and other vegetables and fruits in abundance. But after ethnic hostilities in Rwanda spilled over into her country and her husband was murdered, she and her children fled from their home, winding up in a refugee camp in Rwanda. From there, she and her five younger children came to San Diego. Her oldest son remains in Rwanda with his family. Four children continue to live with her in San Diego, where they attend school, and one has moved to Texas.

While Basheija continues to take college English classes, she works half time at P.V. Thrift Store. She enjoys her job as cashier there so much that she would like to get full-time work as a shopkeeper someday. She likes people and has become friends with many customers, some of whom have asked her to pray for them.

Kap and Juliet

Because the government of Myanmar (Burma) would not allow them to work or to live their Christian faith, Kap and his wife, Juliet, fled as refugees to India. Juliet had been a seamstress and Kap a businessman in their home country. After sojourns in India and



Kap and Juliet relax at a Paradise Valley church picnic.

Malaysia, they were relocated to San Diego.

Kap and Juliet both work part time, she at P.V. Thrift store and he at Community Services. They both also attend college; Kap is taking the nursing course, while Juliet is studying toward a degree in clothing design. At church, Kap serves as a deacon and Juliet as a deaconess. Their two children attend elementary school at San Diego Academy.

"After two years here, we feel comfortable, like real family," Juliet said. "We don't have much money, but because God and people we don't know [donors] have helped us, we are happy."

Mu

Civil war forced 7-year-old Mu and her family from their home in Mon State, in southern Myanmar (Burma).

They spent seven years in a refugee camp in Thailand

before being relocated to the multi-ethnic City Heights area of San Diego.

Mu's father, who had been a school headmaster in Burma and taught English in the refugee camp, attended Refugee Assimilation Project English classes. Traveling to and from school on the church bus mornings and afternoons, he became acquainted with students at San Diego Academy and told Mu it was "a good school." Mu, eager for a good-quality education, decided she wanted to attend. Generous donors made that possible.

"Scared and nervous" when she arrived on campus, she soon made friends and studied hard to earn good grades. After graduating from SDA this spring, she hopes to attend college and eventually to achieve her dream of becoming a dentist. Although she and her family are not Christians, Mu frequently attends Paradise Valley church.



Mu's principal at San Diego Academy, Winston Morgan, gave her a guitar lesson last summer. She had dreamed for years of playing the guitar, and received one that was donated to Paradise Valley Community Services.

Jean-Marie

Jean-Marie is in the United States today because of his political activism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He is a survivor of his first wife's murder and several prison terms in the Congo and Rwanda. He also is a college graduate and former math and French teacher.

One day in Nairobi, Kenya, where he and his second wife, Sudi, had established a new life, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees informed him that his life was in danger. They put him under their protective service and began paperwork for his evacuation to America.

Jean-Marie, Sudi, and their four younger children arrived in San Diego in July 2011. Although he spoke French, Swahili, and Lingala, he knew no English. At home in his apartment one Friday, he looked out the window and saw Ephraim Bendantunguka, Refugee Assimilation Project director, distributing food to other refugees in the apartment complex. He went out and learned that Ephraim spoke French also. Ephraim said he would return the next day and take Jean-Marie to church.

"I went by myself and saw it was interesting. I came the next week with my family. After three months I started to learn about the Bible and Adventism," he said. He, Sudi, and their children were baptized.

Jean-Marie and Sudi's youngest son, John Jack, was born in 2013. Three older children from Jean-Marie's previous marriage, who had remained in Africa, joined the family last year. They also have been baptized.

Jean-Marie, who worked at P.V. Thrift Store for more than two years, now works in environmental services at Paradise Valley Hospital.

"This church is very helpful to all the refugees," Jean-Marie said. "If I have a problem, I ask Peggy [James, Community Services director], and if she doesn't have what I need, she prays. I feel good here." ■



Jean-Marie was assistant manager of P.V. Thrift Store, which was established to provide funding and work experience for refugees. He now works at Paradise Valley Hospital.