

Our History

MISSION

Fundamental to the mission of NICE is the elimination of the root causes of poverty within greater Nashville's refugee and immigrant community, the creation of opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility, and the social integration of those it serves. Clients are encouraged and even challenged to think beyond their current circumstances and discuss long-term goals. NICE makes every effort to establish the foundation necessary to achieve these goals by placing clients in educational and employment environments that are conducive to ultimate success.

Below: Nashville International Center for Empowerment banner alongside flags from some home countries of clients on World Refugee Day. Photo by Stacey Irvin.

FOUNDING

In the 1990s, thousands of refugees fled war-torn Sudan hoping to find a safe place to live, work and raise families with dignity, but for many of these refugees, especially the women, war had rendered formal education impossible. As a result, those refugees who came to Middle Tennessee found that resettlement was extremely difficult, and they struggled to find a place where they could learn English and begin their integration. In 2005, a group of these Sudanese men and women, lead by the current President & CEO Gatluak Ter Thach, founded the Sudanese Community & Women's Services Center with the goal of providing Sudanese refugees the skills they would need to facilitate independence and self-sufficiency.

GROWTH

As word spread quickly throughout the refugee and immigrant communities in Nashville, the SCWSC began receiving requests for help from non-Sudanese. Eventually, our mission was amended to meet the needs of the larger refugee and immigrant community, and in the spring of 2010 our name was changed to Nashville International Center for Empowerment, more fully representing the services we provide and the multicultural community we serve. Since our founding, NICE has helped more than 7,000 people from 43 nations living in the Nashville area, with most of our clients being of African, Asian and Middle-Eastern descent. We aim to increase our clients' abilities to effectively read, write, and speak English through our adult and youth education programs, as well as facilitate self-sufficiency and integration through employment and resettlement services. These programs are offered to legal permanent residents with refugee, ayslee, or immigrant statuses.



Client Stories



THE SUBBA FAMILY

Hasta, Jir Maya, Sumin, Sudikshya

Husband and father Hasta Subba arrived in America in early May 2011, accompanied by his wife, Jir Maya, and their two daughters, 3-year-old Sumin and 5-year-old Sudikshya. The family comes from Nepal, where they had been living as refugees after conflict forced them from their home nation of Bhutan.

Before coming to the U.S., Hasta was an esteemed teacher for refugees in Nepal. The children speak only Nepali, Jir Maya has some knowledge of English, and Hasta speaks English well. The Subba family's religion is Kirat, an indigenous sect of Hinduism.

The Subbas live together in the Highlands Apartment Complex in Nashville.

This gracious, kind family is thrilled to be in the United States, but they have needed help as they adapt to life in America. Life in America is much different than a refugee camp, and the family would love new friends to help them find their way around their new home.

BHUTANESE REFUGEES

During the 1980's, the Druk Buddhist majority and king of Bhutan imposed a series of policies on the Lhotsampa minority group in Nepal. These policies, known as Bhutanization, were designed to eliminate the growing Lhotsampa presence in Bhutan by banning the minority's ethnic dress, language and customs. Large-scale protests and violent conflicts between the Bhutanese police force and the Lhotsampas resulted, and by 1990, tens of thousands of Lhotsampas were forced to leave Bhutan. Many fled to Nepal and have been living in refugee camps for the last 20+ years. Because Bhutan refuses to allow the refugees to reenter the country, and Nepal will not grant the refugees citizenship, the only option left for these refugees is resettlement in countries like the United States.

(Information provided by the Center for Applied Linguistics Cultural Orientation Resource Center: "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal")



BISRAT AWALOM

Bisrat Awalom, hailing from the small African nation of Eritrea, came to Nashville in late July 2011. Bisrat, a young woman in her 20's, arrived in the United States alone and without family. However, the Eritrean community in Tennessee was quick to respond and has welcomed her into their close-knit group. Excitedly, Bisrat found several former friends she once lived near in her Ethiopian refugee camp.

Bisrat greatly enjoys visitors, and always has a home full of company. Bisrat's favorite treats are injera bread and oranges. She speaks Tigrinya and Amharic, which are two native languages from her country, and she has some English skills. Before arriving in America, Bisrat worked as a waitress in the town near her refugee camp in Ethiopia. She is Orthodox Christian, and her religion is a key element of her life.

ERITREAN REFUGEES

The small East African country of Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 following a 30-year war, but despite the ending of this war, tensions remained high. In 1998, a border dispute sparked a 2-year conflict that resulted in thousands of Eritreans fleeing to Ethiopia to escape the conflict and harsh compulsory conscription in Eritrean national service, which requires conscripts to service on a civilian work gang or in the military for an indefinite period of time. In Eritrea, it is illegal to cross the border into an enemy state, and those Eritreans who fled to Ethiopia cannot return to their home country without risk of persecution. In addition they cannot integrate into Ethiopian society due the extended political tensions. For these refugees, resettlement is their only option.

(Information provided by the Center for Applied Linguistics Cultural Orientation Resource Center: "Eritrean Refugees from the Shimelba Refugee Camp")



THE TOE-HTOO FAMILY

Tay Toe, Dah Htoo, Ech Kamoo, Eh Lay Lay, Day Lay, Saw Plae Mu, Eh Htoo

The Toe-Htoo family arrived in Nashville in mid-June 2011, from the Southeast Asian nation of Burma. Mom Dah Htoo and father Tay Toe came with their five small children: Ech Kamoo (6), Eh Lay Lay (3), Day Lay (8), Saw Plae Mu (5), and Eh Htoo (1). The family speaks very little English, and they have spent the past several years at the Mae La Oon Refugee Camp in Thailand. The three eldest children completed some kindergarten there, but their parents have received little schooling in their lives.

The Toe-Htoos are Karen, a prominent and heavily persecuted ethnic group in Burma. They are Christian, and their primary language is Karen. The kids love exploring American toys and games, and enjoy receiving clothes. The family is in need of a mentor or advocate to help them adjust to American culture, as they come from an extremely rural part of the world and are not accustomed to Western housekeeping, nutrition, and general life.

BURMESE REFUGEES

After decades of British colonization and various regime changes, the small Southeast Asian country of Burma fell under repressive military rule in 1962. Harsh anti-minority policies and destructive economic decisions crippled the small country, and eventually a nationwide people's uprising calling for democracy ended in a brutal response by the military regime. Over half a million Burmese refugees have fled to neighboring countries in attempts to escape human trafficking, forced labor, child labor and repressions of freedom of speech and assembly. The majority of Burmese refugees are now found in Malaysia and Thailand, but due to their large numbers and uncertain host-country refugee policies, resettlement in countries like the United States is necessary.

(Information provided by the Center for Applied Linguistics Cultural orientation Resource Center: "Refugees from Burma: Their Backgrounds and Refugee Experiences")

2011 Accomplishments

EDUCATION

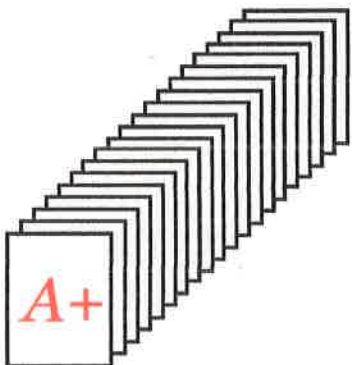


In 2011, at least 65% of English Language Learning students advanced at least 1 level of proficiency every 6 months.

STUDENTS

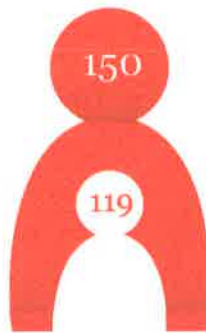


445 students participated in at least one of 14 adult education classes taught by 20 volunteers.



20 citizenship students passed their exam and are now on the path to citizenship.

YOUTH



150 volunteers tutored and mentored 119 children in the Youth Impact Program.

EMPLOYMENT



We served 93 job placement clients, and 90% of those clients were placed in jobs.

We began the Refugee Farmers Feeding Nashville initiative, which places refugees with agricultural backgrounds on local family farms



RESETTLEMENT

Our 7 full-time staff members on the NICE resettlement team served 102 refugees from countries like Bhutan, Burma, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Burundi, and others.



The majority of these refugees had the status:



HIGH PRIORITY:
*fleeing persecution
in home country*