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## GIVING A VOICE TO REFUGEES

### Introduction

Imagine being born in a country where you fear for your life every day, whether from war, persecution, famine, or natural disasters. You must leave in order to live. When you get to your new home, however, you discover that it is very different from what you have known. No one speaks your language. You are forced to adapt to a new culture. You must forge new relationships, find shelter, and discover a way to meet the financial demands of living in a very expensive world. You thought you would be welcomed, but discover that many see you as a problem, and your needs as competition for resources for people who were here before you.

Although refugees-as-an-issue get a lot of press today, very few people are familiar with actual refugees and know their unique stories. Refugees do not live in most of our neighborhoods, because most of our neighborhoods are too expensive for them. They live in the margins of society, and are mostly invisible there. Refugees had no choice but to leave everything behind, and now face the harsh realities, not least of which is poverty. Even if they meet the challenge of learning our language, they have very limited access to resources that would enable them to share their stories. The result is that they are not only invisible, but silenced. Their true worth is unseen, and their voice goes unheard.

## Who Is a Refugee?

It is important to recognize that the term “refugee” really describes a circumstance. It should not be a permanent label to define a person. Refugees are people who have been forced to flee their country due to persecution, violence, or war. If the situation in their homeland improves, there is the possibility that they will be able to return. Refugees are not solely passive victims of circumstance, but active agents engaged in daily life (Dudley, p. 1).

Many people put refugees in the same category as immigrants, who have come to the United States under different circumstances. Unlike immigrants, however, refugees did not leave their homeland freely in search of a better life; they fled dangerous situations and often threats to their very existence.

Refugees are not only adults; they are often children. Fifty-one percent are under the age of 18. The circumstances under which people become refugees vary greatly. Some have been internally displaced, some are stateless, and some have even spent a significant portion of their lives in refugee camps awaiting resettlement (UNHCR). Why is this important? Because it dispels the cultural myth that refugees are all alike. Their stories are truly unique.

## Refugees Worldwide

There are more than 65 million people worldwide who have been displaced either within their own country or outside of it, resulting in what the UNHCR calls “immense human suffering.” According to the National Public Radio, “one in every 113 people on Earth has now been driven from their home by persecution, conflict and violence or human rights violations,” and that every twenty-four minutes, a person is forced to flee their home. The UN says that this

situation is unprecedented in world history (Domonoske). In stark contrast to the number of displaced people, the number of those who are granted asylum is far lower. A mere 0.66% of the world's refugees - the "lucky ones" - are resettled.

### Refugees in the United States

Of the 50 million resettled refugees estimated by UNHCR, the United States has received approximately 3 million since 1975. Some 100,000 are resettled in the United States every year. Although the September 11 attacks dramatically decreased the number of refugees who were allowed to enter the United States, the years following have seen a steady increase in the number of individuals welcomed to our haven. From 1990-1995, there were some 112,000 refugees brought into the US each year. This number dropped to 27,000 following 9/11, but has trended upward since, close to the six-figure mark (Krogstad and Radford).

Under the current presidential administration, there have been several attempts to block as many refugees as possible, putting individuals from certain countries through "extreme vetting." In addition to travel bans, President Trump has set caps on the number of refugees that can be accepted. Though presidents were given the power to do this in 1980, President Trump has set historically low numbers. From his inauguration day to December 31, 2017, 29,022 refugees were accepted - nearly as low as the 27,000 admitted in the year following the September 11th attacks (USA Today).

Refugee acceptance is expected to diminish to less than half that of previous administrations. For comparison, even with lows following 9/11, the average number of refugees admitted per year has been 75,000. President Trump has placed a 45,000-person limit for 2018, a number that he is far from reaching. In the fiscal year to date (October through

March) only 10,548 refugees have been admitted to the United States (Refugee Processing Center).

### Refugees in Colorado

Of the refugees settling in the United States each year, between 1.5-3% end up in Colorado (IRC NoCO). While Colorado has done better than Wyoming, our neighbor to the north, who did not accept any refugees in 2017, we are not among the top states that accept refugees. This is partially due to the high cost of housing in our state (US News). Colorado was one of eight states that decreased the number of refugees accepted from 2015 to 2016 (PEW Research). In Colorado, refugees tend to settle in metro Denver, and then branch off to Colorado Springs, Fort Morgan, and Greeley (PEW Research).

### Refugees in the City of Greeley

Greeley is a secondary resettlement area: that is, refugees and individuals who are eligible for refugee status first resettled somewhere else in the United States (IRC NoCO) before coming to Greeley. Many refugees secure employment JBS Swift, a meat processing plant in Greeley with backbreaking work and less-than-ideal conditions (Wood). Greeley also offers assistance to refugees through nonprofit organizations, which makes it an attractive place to settle.

It is virtually impossible to obtain numbers and statistics on the refugee population in Greeley. The City of Greeley does not maintain records on refugees. The Health and Human Services Department of Weld County provides refugee services, but provides no demographics on their website (<https://www.lfsrm.org/programs-and-services/refugees/>). According to Greeley

Police Chief, Jerry Garner, "We don't know quite how many refugees we have here. Nobody's counting them." (<https://www.hcn.org/issues/41.18/refugees-unsettle-the-west>).

Information on the refugee population in Greeley is largely informal and anecdotal. There are two non-profit organizations that provide services to refugees in Greeley. Lutheran Family Services, Rocky Mountains, maintains an office in Greeley, and promotes services to refugees on their website. (<https://www.lfsrm.org>) According to Colorado Public Radio, Lutheran Family Services has 360 clients in the area. (<http://www.cpr.org/news/story/greeley-feels-the-tension-of-being-both-a-city-of-refugees-and-trump-voters>) The organization I partnered with for this project, the Immigrant & Refugee Center of Northern Colorado (IRC NoCO), currently has some 370 students enrolled in English classes, and has helped more than 1,200 refugees with their English since 2014.

There is a strong tension in values and political commitments in Greeley. On the one hand, according to Politico, 56.7% of the voting citizenry in Weld County voted for Donald Trump. (<https://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/colorado/>) Many voice the concerns and objections about refugees and immigrants that their candidate has espoused. On the other hand, Greeley is home to the University of Northern Colorado, a liberal community within a larger conservative context. Many there advocate for the human rights of refugees and immigrants, and volunteer with local refugee organizations. (On March 4, 2017 there was a March for Global Refugees from the UNC Garden Theatre to the Global Refugee Center. See <https://allevents.in/greeley/greeley-march-for-global-refugees/1877935452421476>.) Refugees are likely to encounter both of these extremes in the way people in Greeley view them.

## Challenges of Being a Refugee

### American Attitudes

The United States' position on refugees fluctuates with global events and national priorities. In the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis, only 41% of registered voters believe the US has a responsibility to accept refugees (UNHCR). Why people are so much more ready to abandon people to death in their homeland than to let them live safely here is a question that begs an answer. Many are frightened that refugees pose a threat to their lives and livelihoods, that outsiders will come in and take their jobs and disrupt the comfortable life they have known. They worry that refugees will bring their culture with them and demand that Americans change their culture to accommodate them. Many fear the unknown, fear strangers, or believe that the problems of others should not become their own. One woman in Greeley stated that she believed Trump's proposed travel bans were put in place to protect the American people and to "keep bad people out." (Brasch)

Language barriers present a host of problems. Most Americans only know English and are not likely to attempt learning another language to converse with people they don't know. They wrongly think that because refugees aren't highly conversant in English, they must be unintelligent - when in fact they may be very bright and may have been highly competent in their homeland where they could speak their native tongue, as well as perhaps a language or two more.

Some believe that financial resources are directed to refugees that would otherwise be directed towards natural born citizens. I have seen posts on social media claiming that assistance to refugees will deprive Baby Boomers of their Social Security. This assumes falsely that

assistance given to refugees comes from the same budgetary funds as Social Security, and that a binary choice must be made (Jackson).

Some hold beliefs that are based upon inaccurate numbers. Contrary to popular claims, refugees do not receive the financial resources that many people think they do. With complete documentation, refugees are eligible for \$332 of assistance per month per individual, or \$420 for a family of two, and only if they are not also participating in programs such as the government program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This number is reduced as the individuals earn money, disappearing altogether after they surpass \$1,000 in monthly income or their first eight months here (DSHS). The financial assistance is clearly not a hand-out (No one can live on these government subsidies alone - they are paltry enough to not even begin to cover rent) but a hand-up, with a goal of moving people into jobs as quickly as possible. As I have spoken with refugees, it is clear that they desire to work and to be productive. Many even express a desire to give back, saying they would like to be interpreters or have their children become doctors.

### Resettlement

The process for refugee resettlement is more extreme than it is for any other traveler group. Many must wait for months and even years before they are eligible. During that time they must undergo extreme scrutiny and rigorous background checks. In order to be resettled, they must go through a process that lasts an average of 18-24 months and includes such measures as fingerprinting and iris scans. The program is run through eight different federal agencies, taking the highest care possible to ensure optimal results (Altman).

Once they arrive in the United States, refugees begin the resettlement process. In Colorado, there are three main resettlement agencies: Lutheran Family Services, the African Community Center, and the International Rescue Committee. These agencies are contracted by the Colorado Refugee Services Program (CRSP). Resettlement agencies provide a variety of services such as language classes, employment skill classes, immigration services, and even help with community navigation such as how to interact with medical professionals or fire fighters. When refugees are resettled, these resettlement agencies group them in locations where others with similar backgrounds are located. They work to find places where it is relatively easy to get around, where affordable housing and job prospects are available, as well as places that are near the agencies themselves.

Many refugees take the initiative in venturing into their new world. They may take language classes, or do job training to better their situation at organizations like the Immigrant and Refugee Organization of Northern Colorado. Some will even attempt to take community college or university classes, frequently without the same federal assistance granted to citizens. Often they try to find communities of faith or other social groups where they can have a sense of belonging, which also offers a way of helping each other navigate situations (Lichtenstein et.al). Refugees are hard workers. A higher percentage of refugee men become active in the workforce than natural-born US citizens. Many become business owners as well, expanding the local economy. Over time, many of them move from blue-collar jobs to white-collar jobs, and many of them take pride in their new country and become citizens (Dyssegaard Kallick and Mathema).

As a whole, refugees in Colorado experience high rates of success over time. While 61% report income too low to cover expenses, and 52% report that they do not regularly speak with



people whose first language is English, (a barrier for long-term integration according to Lichtenstein, et. al), the RISE Study, conducted from 2010-2015, reports that 92% of adult refugees were employed for more than 30 hours per week, that 76% were covered by medical insurance, and that 58% were fluent or able to speak English. Over the course of four years, the number of refugees receiving government assistance for housing went from 79% to 2.2% - a number that includes both disabled and elderly individuals. Even with all the challenges they face, 76.2% report a level of high integration over the course of four years.

### Integration

One of the biggest obstacles refugees face is integration. They are resettled with people who have similar backgrounds and may struggle to find their way into American culture.

Everything is new to them, from electricity to our foods. Many of them express desires to have friendships outside of their small communities, but are unsure where to find outlets to do so and are frequently self-conscious of their ability to navigate English - whether they are proficient or not. In order to allow them to thrive to the best of their ability, it is important to find ways of helping them integrate.

Integration done well allows for a marriage of cultures. We cannot assume that displacement means a rupture or loss of culture, just as we cannot assume that they do not yearn for emplacement (Dudley, p. 9). “To be cultural, to have a culture, is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensely to cultivate it - to be responsible for it, to respond to it, to attend to it caringly” and that it is “in particular places [that]...culture [can] take root” (Casey, p. 34). Many people who are forcibly displaced share this view. They deeply care for communities wherever they are, enriching life around them and doing all they can to contribute. The richness comes

from allowing them to bring their own cultures and traditions as well as giving them the space to adopt new ones.

### Theoretical Framework for This Project

It is impossible to experience the refugee story directly. The subject must necessarily be mediated. It comes with a point of view that inevitably misses dimensions of the story, and may inadvertently distort others, requiring the audience to be critical of what they are consuming.

Stuart Hall questions who gets the privilege of writing history. Any attempt is in danger of essentialism: boiling a category of people down to an underlying or unchanging essence. Hall argues that we must have a dialogic approach. Refugees are active agents in their own lives and should be treated as such. With this project, I attempted to use my privileged position as a producer to allow refugees to share their histories and realities as they saw fit, rather than forcing them into a box.

Critical theory speaks of “subalterns” – populations that are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* GC Spivak delves into ideas of narrativity and representation of the subaltern. Not only are subalterns frequently not the ones telling their own stories; their stories are often told as a single story: one that is not healing, helpful, or even accurate. They are used for convenient narratives. Subjects often do not even have a say in approving the narratives that are shared. Though there are inevitable power dynamics at play, I did my best to make sure that refugees approved their own representations, that they genuinely affirmed them, and that the stories were what they wanted to share.

In the Western world, people are frequently viewed in categories of western and nonwestern - the “other” versus “us.” The myth of Western exceptionalism allows us to view the United States as the pinnacle of the world, the peak of civilization - a notion that often leads people to believe that letting outsiders in would taint this. With respect to Arab peoples, the author Edward Said describes this as “orientalism.” Orientalism is “a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous,” ([www.arabstereotypes.org](http://www.arabstereotypes.org)). I reject this “straw man” approach. It is always easier to point out differences than it is to find similarities and common ground. I have tried to do the latter in this project.

Luc Boltanski notes that refugees are frequently depicted as outsiders, as others, as the “unfortunate.” Theodor Adorno describes race relations as a commodity in which people of color are used to describe exceptions to the norm. Frequently, representations only confirm what a storyteller already believes. This project will challenge all of this. It will not exoticize refugees, as so often happens. It will humanize them, show that they are people like you and me, and strip away the false but comfortable stigma of otherness. It will allow refugees to depict themselves and share their own stories as they see fit.

## Interactive Documentaries

### Introduction

Interactive documentaries force the reader out of a traditional linear narrative and into a “choose your own path” experience (Gemayel). They employ a variety of different media

including text, audio, and video. No two look alike. They may send the audience on different paths, depending on what they select on the website, thread them back through the story, or allow them to explore a core idea (Munday). Mine employs a concentric narrative model, offering ideas around a shared central point: the authentic humanity of refugees.

The reason for creating a platform as opposed to doing a simple documentary is that a platform facilitates a much broader engagement. Not only does it have the power of visual stories, the menu allows participants to explore. As the audience is drawn in, they can learn more about the facts and break down misconceptions surrounding refugees. It offers ways for the audience to further engage with the issue and adopt it as their own, from a simple act of making a donation to a much greater commitment of adopting a refugee family and helping them navigate life in their new country.

### Target Audience

This project is intended to reach an audience that likely has a superficial understanding of what it means to be a refugee. They may be open-minded, or may not believe refugees have a place in our society. Either way, this project will seek to break down misconceptions and provide insight into the lives of refugees. It will hopefully persuade people who come to the issue with a negative attitude, separate myth from reality for them, and offer opportunities for those who want to do more.

### My Approach

My documentary opens with an appeal: quotes from many major religious texts, an excerpt from the Statue of Liberty, and other references to show people that the acceptance and

support of refugees is an essential thread to any fabric we are weaving. This is paired with statements from each of the refugees, and light cello music called “Homeward Bound” to set the tone.

It then leads to a story quilt with pictures of each of the refugees serving as links to their videos, histories, and textual biographies. There is an intentional uniformity that allows each of the stories to take its own shape, while at the same time remaining part of a cohesive whole. The choice not to include music in individual videos was intentional. A few of the refugees follow a version of Islam that does not allow them to listen to music or watch media for entertainment purposes - which would have excluded them from viewing their own contributions. Others said they had favorite songs and musicians, but could not remember what they were called. With these factors in mind, I chose to focus on their voice alone for their stories.

The platform includes a gallery of photo booth pictures from a couple of the events with refugees: a baby shower, and a fundraiser for their school. It shows them in a different, more relaxed environment that lets them express themselves creatively. There is also a section with recipe books that allows the audience to engage with the issue on a different level: the breaking of bread. The website menu allows for the exploration of the project, the issue, and even an opportunity to connect and get involved.

Luc Boltanski describes a “distant suffering” in which an “unfortunate” suffers, and a spectator views the suffering without having to undergo the same fate or being exposed to the same misfortune. An appropriate response to this is to challenge indifference, draw indignation, intervene, and take action (Boltanski, p. 114). This is what I am seeking to do in this project, viewing suffering through the lens of an exhibitor who depicts and reveals the issue (p. 116) and

motivates an audience to respond and engage. Typically, the greater the distance between spectator and subject, the greater the disconnection from the issue. The beauty of working with refugees in a nearby community is that it brings the issue closer to home. I can reduce the sense of spectacle by not focusing on the horrific or exceptional, but on the common, everyday experience.

The goal of this project is to provide space: space for the refugees to tell their stories, space for the general population to gain understanding and insight, and space to ignite a conversation. It presents an easy-to-navigate introduction to the topic, offering demonstrative facts as well as personal stories to give it human dimensions instead of just an issue. Lastly, it provides ways in which people can move forward with appropriate action and make the cause of refugees their own.

According to Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with, "secondly." She talks about the danger of a single story, and how detrimental it would be to simply label these people as refugees and leave it at that. While navigating language barriers, I have attempted to tell a greater story: one that shows them as family members, as dreamers, as people who have been through hardship but are overcomers. They contribute to the world, and they have a far richer story than we could imagine. This project attempts to introduce the public to this larger story.

## The Refugees

The subjects for this project were mostly self-selected. Five of them are students at the Immigrant and Refugee Center of Northern Colorado who volunteered to share their stories.

Another, who was identified by people in her community and others as a leader, happily shared her story. The remaining individual is a dear friend who eagerly shared his story when I invited him to be part of this project. The stories that have been offered were shared by people who wanted to participate, and were under no outside pressure to do so. In every case I allowed them to help guide the process of sharing their voice.

## Website Layout

### Home Page

The homepage is intended to function as the master layout for the website. It opens to an appeal: quotes from major religious texts and other sources coupled with soundbites from the refugee stories and a song called “Homeward Bound”. This is intended to set the stage, to show the audience that refugee acceptance is a core thread between all major ideologies, to open their minds to the possibilities. Scrolling down, the viewer gets a view of the story quilt: their first taste of the personal narratives.

### Pictures/Stories

Each refugee has his or her own space. This is important, since this is a luxury that most of them don't get. There is a written biography reflecting some of the things I learned during my time with them, paired with a video of them sharing their story in their own words.

## Photo Booth

The photo booth section provides insight into other aspects of the refugee lives. In some of the photos, a glimpse into Pu Meh's baby shower is offered. You can see her interacting with her Karenni community members, relaxed but tired as she prepares to welcome her new baby into the world.

In the other set, a few of the refugees can be seen goofing around with each other and their friends following their speeches at a fundraising event for the Immigrant and Refugee Center of Northern Colorado.

I believe these were important to showcase, since the pictures let us see refugees not as victims in a distant land, but as people in settings that Americans might find themselves in.

## Recipes

It was important for me to include recipes for a number of reasons. First, there is nothing more communal than the breaking of bread. We get to understand each other so much more over a shared meal. At each of the events depicted in the photo booth, we shared meals together.

Beyond that, food is an important component of identity. Refugees experience a disruption in their lives when they enter a new country without access to familiar foods. It may be because food sources are different, or it may be that we don't observe the same holidays and their special cuisine, such as a religious observance with Halal foods in Islam.

Refugees do not have much opportunity to participate in material culture, so food knowledge is sometimes one of the only things they bring with them. By sharing the recipes that bring them comfort, we get to participate in learning more about their identity.



## Menu Links

I have included several menu links beyond the ones listed to help the audience gain a full scope of the project. Under the “About” tab, there are many subcategories to help the audience explore the issue at different levels, as well as how to project functions within a larger frame of reference.

“Resources” was an important component to include in order to have a call to action. I have contacted many of these organizations. Refugees have worked with them. Most are local or nearby. I tried to make it as easy as possible for the audience to choose where to step in by providing a brief description as well as a list of opportunities to help under each organization, hopefully increasing their likelihood of getting involved.

Finally, there is a “Get In Touch” tab to finish things off. This was put in place to allow people to share stories they know, or reach out with experiences or questions of their own.

## Reflections on the Project

### Inspiration

This project was undertaken with a desire to share perspectives that often go unheard.

It seems that refugees are in the news all the time, but really only as people in distant lands.

They are viewed as victims of horrible circumstances, but with an apprehension that they may bring those circumstances with them and impact us if they get too close. Refugees are depicted as unfortunate, and sometimes even as dangerous.

Borne of my own curiosity, this endeavor sought to gain insight into the everyday lives of refugees. I wanted to know what makes them unique, what their journeys and lives have truly

been like, the challenges they face and the joys they experience. More than their differences, I wanted to see how we are much the same.

I have not seen many projects that focus on individual refugees, or that allow them to share their stories in their own voices. Many news organizations have attempted to broach the subject, but still use their own words and viewpoints to convey the stories. For me, that wasn't good enough. I wanted to hear what refugees themselves had to say.

Though still through my camera lens and therefore my point of view, I took every step I could to allow the refugees to guide their own stories. I had some prompt questions, but also took pains to ask what they wanted people knew, what they loved, what their lives were like, what challenges they faced. Each person had a lifetime of experiences before they came here, and will have a lifetime of experiences yet to come. I wanted to learn about their past and hopes for the future, but also to understand more of what life is like for them here and now.

My website is intended to function as a story quilt. For many of us, we have had very little interaction with refugees; we know very little of their realities. Though merely an introduction, it allows the audience an opportunity to gain insight. It gives them a taste that will hopefully leave them wanting to learn more. I used video purposely to allow the individuals own voices to shine through, coupled with a textual biography in which I share some of what I learned about each one during my time spent with them.

### Challenges

Going into this project, I anticipated that it would be it hard to make connections with refugees. I did not realize, however, just how difficult it would actually be. Because refugees

are a vulnerable population, the people who work with them are extremely protective. If they allow you in at all, they will frequently require that your work serve projects that they are already working on. Truthfully, sometimes, the natural born American citizens were the hardest barriers to breakthrough.

I have worked with vulnerable populations before; in fact, that tends to be my primary focus in life. However, I have never dealt with language and cultural barriers to the extent that I did with refugees. If you can manage to get into the same room with a refugee, they are frequently lovely and very open. It is finding a way to be together in the first place that proves most challenging.

Throughout my process, I learned that refugees change cell phone numbers frequently, that they tend to prefer texts over calling and generally don't email, and that you may need several reminders and flexibility for rescheduling if you try to set up meetings. They may have appointments come up, they might not have childcare coverage, or they may have issues with transportation.

As the Refugee Integration Survey describes, if you expect refugees to fit neatly in a 9-5 structure, you will be frustrated and disappointed. Refugees are highly mobile, and their schedules are very fluid. They often function communally, relying on each other for childcare and rides whenever they have access. They may have jobs that require them to work odd hours, such as bakery or meat processing work. This did not fit well with the structure of my own schedule!

I learned that the best way to connect with refugees is to know where they spend their time. If you can catch them coming out of class or church, you are far more likely to be able to

set something up with them. In itself, that was a challenge for me because of the “hit-or-miss” nature of the opportunity.

For me, it took months to make contact with the people I wanted to interview. I took days off from work only to have no one show up. I learned that the greatest things you can bring with you into an undertaking with a population like this are time, flexibility, and understanding.

Having said that, I want to add that refugees generally are very gracious. Their fluidity may mean that if you catch them, they will sit and talk to you then and there - a luxury not freely offered with the average western population. Many are open and will tell you anything and everything you want to know. They open up their homes, their lives, their tables, and are eager to dispel myths about their population.

Without time constraints, it would be much easier to do so much more with them. You will not meet a more open group of people, excited that they get to practice their English and interact with people outside of their normal communities. Even with the challenges I faced with access, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to meet each and every one.

### Hopes

Moving forward, I would love to continue to add voices to the story of refugees; thus adding to its richness. My desire is that this project will move people towards understanding and involvement. I hope that people will begin to see refugees as community members with much to offer, and to do what they can to seek, welcome, help, and integrate these new neighbors.

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