

Action Update- June 15

Born a Second Time: Disciples Welcome Refugees



Reunited at the airport, the Nsanzimfura family is joined by friends and extended family members

On the evening of August 15, 2019, Rutigerera Nsanzimfura landed at Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport. It was the 5th and final airport of a long journey--he had departed Kigali, Rwanda, 48 hours earlier. At age 27, the young man had spent 23 years of his life in a refugee camp there, having fled the Democratic Republic of the Congo with his family when he was just a boy.

The DRC has long been plagued by violence. An estimated 20 million

people (half the population) died during colonization in the first half of the 20th century. Since then, civil wars in the 1990s caused the deaths of another 5.4 million. It was that violence which forced Sayiba Twahirwa, his wife Ancille, and their then-4 year-old son, Rutigerera, to flee to Rwanda in 1996. Sayiba and Ancille later had two more children, both born in the refugee camp.

Following more than two decades in the Rwandan camp, the family was finally going to start a new life in the United States. Rutigerera would arrive first, and the rest of the family would travel shortly after.

When he stepped off of the plane in Louisville on that summer evening, Rutigerera was greeted by members of Beargrass Christian Church of Louisville, KY, many of whom had been working for weeks to prepare a home for him and his family. The joy of that welcome was palpable. Ten days later, he visited Beargrass for worship and Bible study, where he shared in a discussion on human rights. Through an interpreter, he spoke to the group of feeling "born a second time" when he touched down in America.

However, shifting U.S. policies would make the experience less welcoming for the rest of the Nsanzimfura family. Now in their late 50s, these parents of three had dreamed of better lives for their children in America. When saying good-bye to Rutigerera in Kigali, they expected to join him just 2 weeks later. But their departure--scheduled for early September of 2019--was delayed due to the travel ban imposed by the administration at that time. During the 3-week moratorium on refugee travel, all of their security and medical clearances expired. Their travel was then delayed indefinitely.

As the family waited through that painful and uncertain time, another complication

arose: COVID-19, and all the related restrictions it would bring over the coming months.

Finally, in September of 2020, Sayiba, Ancille, Jean, and Cecile reunited with their son and sibling, Rutigerera--12 months late and on their 4th scheduled arrival. It was a wonderful reunion. The family now resides in a small home in a Louisville neighborhood, which was primarily furnished by Kentucky Refugee Ministries, in partnership with Beargrass Christian Church.

During a COVID-safe front yard visit shortly after arrival, Sayiba prayerfully expressed his family's gratitude for all the assistance and prayers the church provided in advance of their journey. They are now enthusiastically setting about making a new life in Louisville, after 24 years of waiting in a refugee camp.

As part of our mission, Week of Compassion works to provide humanitarian assistance for refugees worldwide and support refugee resettlement in the U.S. The story of the Nsanzimfura family is an all-too familiar one, as thousands of other refugees have faced similar delays, uncertainties, and challenges in their already painful journeys. But this is where the church is called to respond and make a difference--and where Disciples can live into our shared commitment to **welcome refugees** to our local communities. With the recent increase of the refugee entry numbers, and as easing COVID restrictions begin to enable more travel, the welcome that we extend as Disciples can have a significant impact.

June 20 is World Refugee Day; it is also a day when churches across denominations will celebrate Refugee Welcome Sunday. Like Beargrass Christian Church, many Disciples congregations have found welcoming families to their local community to be a meaningful and transformative part of their mission identity. And while sponsoring a family is important, it is not the only way to be involved. From welcoming refugees at the airport to writing letters to legislators, there are many opportunities to embody Christ's love and spirit of hospitality to those making a new start.*

Michael Puckett is an Elder at Beargrass Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and Board Chair for Kentucky Refugee Ministries. He shares: "My vantage point is a rewarding one. I have met hundreds of refugees, and my life has been made richer, more complete, by each of them. Through the months and years of rebuilding their lives after arrival, I've watched their hope, their dignity, their self-worth restored. I've seen the resilience of the human spirit on full and vivid display. The impact made by Kentucky Refugee Ministries and Beargrass on these refugee families has been large....but the impact on those at Beargrass has been even larger. Refugee co-sponsorships are transformative experiences. They have become central to the faith journeys of our members. It is work God calls us to do... It is about my faith imperative to serve as God's hands and feet, as a Disciple of Christ."

Reach out to Disciples Refugee and Immigration Ministries--or to your local resettlement office--to find out how your church can get involved. You can also visit the Refugee a website for worship materials and other **resources for Refugee Welcome Sunday.*

Week of Compassion
Responses Since June 3



Oklahoma,
Storm Relief



Arizona,
Wildfire Relief



Democratic Republic of
the Congo, Emergency
Volcano Relief



Gaza,
Emergency Relief

For an interactive map of responses, [visit our website](#).

*Week of Compassion is the relief, refugee and development mission fund of the
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