**Refugee Realities**

**Episode 3: A Better Future**

[Podcast theme song begins]

Brad: I’m Brad Joseph…

Amanda: And I’m Amanda Patton.

Brad: And this is episode three of Refugee Realities, a podcast series where we interview local refugees to explore their individual journeys and the obstacles they’ve had to overcome.

Amanda: For our third and final episode, we wanted to discuss some of the resources that are available for refugees in Charlottesville. We spoke to the executive director of the Charlottesville International Rescue Committee to learn more about their services.

[Podcast theme song fades]

But before we get into that part of the episode, we want to start somewhere totally different, approximately 7000 miles away. We’re going to start on the southeast border of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where one refugee named Bushiri spent years of his life seeking asylum.

Bushiri: My first name is Bushiri. And my last name is is Salumu.

[Start “Should We Go,” intense drums]

Brad: When Bushiri was 7 years old, the Second Congo War began, which has since been classified as one of the deadliest global conflicts since World War II. And although the war officially ended in 2003, the North Kivu region of the Congo where Bushiri is from, has had continuous armed conflicts. Rebel soldiers regularly raided Bushiri’s town of Katwa, and when Bushiri was 17 years old he suffered the loss of his parents and six of his eight siblings to what he describes as a bombing attack.

[“Should We Go” ends]

Bushiri: It was a bomb, my parents had it two houses, one it was the big houses away with my parents and my 6 siblings live there. and then me and my two siblings we slept in the small house.

Brad: Bushiri and his two younger siblings survived the attack because they were staying in a separate house at the time of the bombing. But they were unable to stay in their village due to the danger present, so they were forced to leave.

Bushiri: After that. So some people who know my parents ~~they were kind to~~ help us and then we ran away. So so we walked for a month. Like eleven months or so from our way down. So until when we get to the refugee camp.

[Stat “Desert Sky”]

Amanda: Bushiri explains that him and his two siblings were with a group of other refugees, all headed south from North Kivu to the Zambia border. They would walk for three weeks, and then rest, and then walk for a month, and then rest. For almost an entire year, they walked from village to village with nothing but the clothes on their back. And at the end of eleven long months, Bushiri said they finally made it to the border and were transported to a refugee camp.

[Fade “Desert Sky”]

Bushiri: When we get to the refugee camp. It was big camp. Twenty two thousand. About they are twenty to 24000 people. But you know life in a refugee camp was. It was kind of hard I guess. Sometimes we don't have food. We live in the tent so sometimes a hundred and twenty hundred and 50 degrees or so. We live in a tent. No air conditioning no furnace.

Amanda: Although Bushiri and his siblings were safe, life in the refugee camps was extremely difficult. Bushiri spent 4 and a half years in two different refugee camps, hoping for an organization to pick up his case. After a long period of waiting, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees selected Bushiri’s family for interviews. From there, the United States accepted his case and conducted health check ups and interviews with Bushiri for ten months until he was finally given a visa. In total, Bushiri spent over 5 years in refugee camps.

[Start “*Green Leaves*”]

(I want you to) Think about who you were 5 years ago. Where were you in life? How much has changed since then? Five years is a long, long time. And at the end of those 5 years, Bushiri said he was glad to finally move to America.

Bushiri: Oh I was very happy when they took us from that refugee camp to capital city of Zambia We came from of Zambia to Dubai to New York.So the next step because the big office for IRC the International Rescue Community is located in New York City. So they have some paper to fill in the office after that the same day they send us here.They sent you to Charlottesville. Yes.

Amanda: 5 years and 7,000 miles later, Bushiri and his siblings finally landed in Charlottesville.

[Fade “*Green Leaves*”]

Brad: We learned in our first episode that refugees are placed in Charlottesville because of the city’s public transportation system, low unemployment rate, and the UVA Medical Hospital. Now that we know what brings refugees here, we want to discuss some of the resources that are available for refugees in Charlottesville for our third and final episode.

We spoke to Harriet Kuhr, who is the executive director of the International Rescue Committee branch located here in Charlottesville. We interviewed Harriet in her office at the IRC to ask her about what their organization does around the world:

Harriet: International Rescue Committee is a international humanitarian organization. We're active in over 40 countries around the world. We have offices in 26 cities around the U.S. So a lot of the work we do overseas is emergency and crisis response, often responding to conflict or post-conflict situations but sometimes also disasters. And then what we do in the U.S. is pretty much exclusively refugee resettlement and refugee services.

Brad: Harriet told us that the office in Charlottesville is fairly small, with only around 20 employees, but she explained the extensive amount of work that they put into refugee resettlement around the Charlottesville area.

[Start “Easy Day”]

Harriet: know they're coming a couple weeks ahead of time we look for housing for them. We furnish it, very basically, but we furnish it. We pick them up at the airport, take them to this house that's furnished and even to the point of there has to be food in the fridge and a meal waiting for them that they can sit down and eat as soon as they walk in.

Amanda: It seems like such a simple detail, having food in the fridge and a meal waiting for you. But if this is your first day in an entirely new country with little except the clothes you have… a hot meal is really important . Harriet explained some of the other immediate work that the IRC does to help new refugees get settled.

[Fade “Easy Day’]

Harriet: And you know, it's, it's very detailed out and then you know we start working and help them apply for Social Security cards, make sure they get a health screening, and any medical needs attended to rolling the kids in school and then start working with the adults to help them find employment because there's an expectation in refugee resettlement that families should be self-sufficient within three to four months after arrival.

Amanda: It takes time for refugees to adjust to life in an entirely new country and city. When Bushiri and his siblings arrived in Charlottesville, he said it was especially difficult at first due to the language barrier. English happens to be Bushiri’s third language, after Swahili and French.

Bushiri: First a few days it was hard because when I came here when we came here we spoke no English. So it was kind of difficult a lack of communication but we had a volunteers from from the IRC So they come to help us I like to go to shopping to show us around.

Brad; In addition to the volunteers who helped Bushiri, the IRC also helped to provide other life necessities.

Bushiri: So they help to find housing. They give out food stamp then and they give us uh Medicare for eight months. They're looking job for us. Then they send us for English classes.

Brad: And the IRC continues to support refugees like Bushiri for years after their initial resettlement.

Harriet: We do that first initial job placement which is like, you've got to get something so you have money coming in. But, then we continue working with families on career advancement. If people want assistance to get into, like, we can help people get into workforce training likes PCC courses or if they were a professional in their country like they were an engineer, we can work with them and see if we get them recertified, so they can return to their career here where.

Brad: The work that Harriet describes is only a small sample of the extent of services provided to refugees. The IRC also provides legal support, English classes, family reunification services, youth programs, nutrition programming, parent education, among several other services, with the goal of integrating refugees into the local community.

[Start “Wish You’d Come True”]

Amanda: Since Bushiri has come to America, he has used the employment services of the IRC to try and earn a living. He has worked at a car wash, a restaurant, and a nursing home, and now he is working in housekeeping. But all of these jobs have simply been stepping stones to Bushiri’s larger goal. Bushiri wants to go into healthcare as a nursing assistant, and he cites his father as his inspiration, because he saw the impact that his father had as a physician in the Congo.

Brad: And after living in Charlottesville for the past 6 years, Bushiri has accomplished a lot.

Bushiri: Last year I get my citizenship. Uh then I get my GED. Mm hmm. And then and now I'm still taking some prerequisite classes for nursing and then I'm still taking English classes because I had some difficulty of English. Then I'm taking CNS. CNS is a certified nursing assistant. I want to get some experience before I apply for nursing school.

[Fade “Wish You’d Come True”]

Brad: It was a long journey for Bushiri to arrive at this point in his life. Now, Bushiri wants to get his story out to as many people as possible to help others realize how hard it can be for refugees. To wrap up our interview with Bushiri, we asked him if there was anything that people should know about refugees.

Bushiri: That's why I try to write. I put a story in a competition every year since 2017. Then I tried to share about how refugee life is. For me I can say, it’s not very easy to be a refugee. the country we come from, we came here and so it’s totally different. Then especially for culture and language… to be a refugee it’s not easy, it’s hard.

Amanda: Leaving your home country behind is never easy, and often, refugees have little choice in the matter. Through sharing the stories of refugees and learning about all the hurdles they have to overcome, we hope to dispel some of the anti-refugee or anti-immigrant narratives out there.

Harriet: one of the anti-immigrant narratives that's out there is oh immigrants just come here to get on. People think that because you're accessing public assistance that just means you're on it forever and the whole point of public assistance is to be a short term transition and that's what we see happening with our families are they. They need it for a few months and then they they're working and they move on it's not immediate it takes time.

Brad: The United States was largely built by immigrants and our diversity is what makes this country so great. Harriet told us how the immigrant population in America actually boosts our economy.

Harriet: The statistic you know people don't like citizens that the there's pretty good evidence that. That. Then immigrants grow the economy and they open small businesses at a much greater rate than American poor people do and stuff like that.

[Start “Keep Going”]

Amanda: In addition to an improved economy, refugees enrich our communities simply by being here and sharing their perspectives. And we could all be a little more understanding and recognize that refugees are not here to terrorize us, or take our jobs, or take advantage of the system. For the most part, they just want safety and happiness.

Amanda: What does the term “American Dream” mean to you?

Bushiri: I think it’s to live like it’s a better life, because there are many opportunities when I came here. If you want to work maybe two or three jobs and so depend if we want to go to school, so to live in a better life. Yes I believe so.

[Fade “Keep Going”]]

[Podcast theme song starts]

Brad: Thank you for listening to Refugee Realities, a podcast series revealing the stories of refugees in Charlottesville. Over three episodes we have spoken to refugees from Afghanistan, Western China, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to learn more about the violence they faced that forced them to leave their homes and come to America. We also spoke to the directors of the International Rescue Committee and International Neighbors, which are humanitarian organizations that provide aid to refugees once they arrive in the country. We’d like to sincerely thank everyone who shared their stories with us.

[Theme song fades out]

[Start “Eagle Rock”]

Amanda: If you feel compelled to do more for your community, the IRC and International Neighbors are always open to new volunteers to help get our refugee neighbors situated. And remember to try to be more accepting and understanding towards people who seem different from you, because if you talk to them, you will probably find that they really aren’t that different at all.

[Fade “Eagle Rock”]

**End.**