

# A Crack in the Rock

VRRP's Volunteer Newsletter

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VRRP is a field office of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

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## VRRP's Mission

The Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program brings hope and opportunity to the lives of refugees and immigrants. We act to defend human rights, promote self-sufficiency and education, and forge community partnerships through a full range of services and programs.



Photo: Rose McNulty

## Out of a Crack

*By Judy Scott*

Some days have so much packed into them that there's no time to think. I've had a few days like that lately and I'm finding that something inside of me is rebelling against it. That something is insistent that I make time to think. So, as I sit down to write, thoughts are swirling into my mind -- swirling out of those recent packed-full days.

One of the days was in Vermont. I spent it on phone calls and messages, e-mails, a staff meeting, a meeting with clients after their English class, and coffee with our State Refugee Coordinator. None of these gave me startling new information that changed my thinking. But each one, in different ways, reminded me that starting a new life in America is an intense struggle.

Yesterday, I talked with a family in their home, a family who arrived last September so they haven't yet been here for six months. They talked about how different everything here is from Africa, everything, everything, they kept saying. They talked about their pro-

found relief to be in a place where they could feel secure: where their possessions would not be stolen, where their daughter was safe, where they could go to sleep at night knowing that nothing terrible would happen before dawn. But, they let me know, in America they felt far more insecure about their financial responsibilities, having never had them before. In the refugee camp, they made bricks out of mud and built a hut for the family to live in. The land was there for that purpose. There was no need to pay rent there. Here, they have to pay over a thousand dollars in rent every month to a landlord. They were no longer kept awake at night by the fear of thieves but they were anxious, day and night, with the worry of making enough money to support their family. I had only partial answers for them, partial solutions, and I longed for the time to think this all through.

Last week I spent two more packed-full days at our national office, the U. S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, in Washington, DC. It was an opportunity for me to meet with key staff

Our world often seems to be a hard, rocky place. Manmade and natural disasters strip people of what they need to survive. But Vermont is a crack in the rock, widened by the smiles, persistent efforts, and adventurous spirit of its people. Thanks to 232 volunteers, we are offering a new life to people who have endured the harshest conditions in hopes of a new opportunity.

to learn about their roles and responsibilities. Again, I've had enough previous experience with USCRI that I didn't learn anything totally new or surprising. But each of the dozen or so people I met with laid out for me the complex structure that they work within to make it possible for refugees to have a chance to start a new life.

Each person fascinated me in their own way. It was a chance to ask the experts anything I wished about how refugees get from a camp to Vermont, about the federal programs that provide funding and what they require of us, about our budgetary constraints, about the nutrition and general health programs that USCRI develops for use at resettlement sites, and about the cultural information that's gathered and culled for each population we resettle. I spent those days absorbing information and asking questions that created more information for me to take in.

I also had a few wonderful hours sitting in the office of my boss talking over current issues in Vermont. It was a treat to do that in person

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## Ask the Expert

By Rio Holaday

It was early in the morning, and I was seated in the kitchen of a family that had arrived just the night before. The purpose of my visit was to cook breakfast with them and, through doing so, demonstrate once more how to adjust the stove temperature, wash the dishes with dish soap and a sponge, and put all dairy products back in the fridge right away. I had done this many times before and considered myself a seasoned pro at Pantomiming Kitchen Use 101. It was a big surprise, therefore, to find out that this family not only knew all about modern kitchen appliances, but that they expected me to cook an American breakfast for them.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention three things. First, the family was courteous and pleasant and welcoming. Because of their obvious friendliness, I truly wasn't offended when asked to cook breakfast for seven people I had just met. Second, the father immediately asked me where he could access his email. (This interaction took much longer than necessary, not because his English was poor, but because I wasn't exactly listening for words like "internet.") After this conversation, I should have considered myself warned that breakfast with this family was going to be unlike any other I'd had before. Third, it was I who brought up breakfast in the first place. So all things considered, I shouldn't have been surprised when asked to cook an American breakfast. But I was.

For one thing, I had no idea what an American breakfast was. There are so many choices these days: pancakes, cereal, bagels and cream cheese, eggs, (French) toast, yogurt, sausages. I trembled to think that the family's understanding of American breakfast food hinged upon me. Luckily, I was spared by the fact that all they had for breakfast foods were eggs and toast. But then I was confronted by the many different ways to cook eggs. I settled for scrambling some and hard-boiling others. But I didn't have the words to explain that, while Americans may choose between these two, one thing almost nobody does is eat a meal of variously cooked eggs. Unfortunately for the family, I didn't even realize that they may have interpreted the choices I presented as a meal until writing this article, and I'm no longer in Burlington to stop by their house and explain my mistake. For all I know, they may be arguing with friends that a real American breakfast includes scrambled, over-easy, and poached eggs.

One of the positions I've consistently found myself in when working with newcomers is that of the expert. I expect this to a certain extent, of course, and there is a certain type of knowledge that I'm well-versed in and happy to share: how to send international mail, strap a child into a torturous car seat, or read English. But as the resident American, I'm sometimes expected to be infinitely knowledgeable about things that I haven't even the slightest inkling about. Deciding which health care plan to choose? Reading the jargoned fine print on a piece of official-looking mail? I'm flattered by the authority given to me, but concerned that I may be accidentally leading many newcom-

ers down a road of misconceptions.

Sometimes the things we are asked don't have easy answers. A young woman in the family I volunteer with just started high school. She's been here for a year, but decided that she would learn English faster in high school. Normally vivacious and talkative, she was withdrawn and completely overwhelmed when I met her for lunch on her first day of school. We ate in silence, and I watched as she gaped at the loud and chaotic cafeteria. Her next period was gym, and I stayed long enough to understand that, despite the best efforts of the guidance counselors who were showing her from class to class, the labyrinthine quality of the school corridors made it impossible for her to remember how to get from one place to another.

While I could answer her questions about what to wear in gym class and how many credits she needed to graduate, I didn't have the words to answer the questions she didn't have the words to ask. If I could have, I would have told her that high school is scary for Americans, too. I would have tried to make her laugh at the fact that high school is infamous as the time in life when we are at our most socially awkward and vulnerable. Not knowing where to sit in the cafeteria or how to behave in gym class has nothing to do with being new to the country. But I couldn't, and leaving her in a gym full of 16-year-old boys was the hardest moment I've faced as a volunteer.

Then there are the questions I have that no one can answer. One of them is: why me?

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## Urgent Volunteer Information!

There is a growing problem that we all need to help address. Medical service providers and the hospital have contacted us asking us to assist in this matter. It is a serious problem for all involved and could lead to serious mistakes being made, both medically and financially through unnecessary billing to clients.

Please review with your family or individual that they must ALWAYS SHOW their Medicaid card to the doctor or dentist upon arrival at appointments. EVEN if the receptionist knows them by name. We have many reports of confusion when it

comes to insurance billing and also there is the potential at the hospital emergency room of confusing identities! This actually happened to me recently.

### SHOWING MEDICAID CARDS EACH TIME AT THE DOCTORS:

1. Gives the correct name in the correct order (especially for our Burundian families)
2. Shows that they have Medicaid (for billing purposes)
3. Gives their social security number ( no MISTAKEN IDENTITY!)
4. Correct spelling of name (again, this helps with mistaken identity!)

This is especially important in an emergency situation as birthdays are not a reliable identification for many of our clients. The medical providers that work with our clients have a very difficult time and we need to assist them in any way that we can.

Please help by talking to your families and continue to reinforce this in the months to come. This pertains to all of our populations and not just new arrivals. Thank you for making sure that you bring this to your families attention and reinforce this as often as possible! This is a great opportunity for a role playing game!

## One Name, Two Countries

By Deirdre Smith

Africa. It's such a massive continent, but it is so easily lumped together as one single entity, whether referring to the people, or to the land. Even to my own father, who in talking with family or friends about where his children were in the world, my sister had studied in Poland and was teaching in South Korea, my brother was setting off for a semester in Japan, and I had been to Africa. I tried very simply to explain and say, "No, I went to Uganda, with a brief foray into Rwanda", but this was lost on him. I even tried explaining that this is the same as saying that I returned to North America, but to no avail. The endless amusement and frustration I feel with these kinds of interactions doesn't make me give up though, they serve to push me to learn more about the different countries, people and histories that flow throughout the continent.

The common lumping together of Africa's countries causes even more confusion when a term may refer to completely different locations or groups of people. Recently VRRP has been resettling two distinct populations that fall under the same name. So not only do these groups fall under the term African, but they are also both called Congolese, or are said to be from the Congo. Many Americans are not even aware that there are two separate Congos, the Republic of Congo, or Congo-Brazzaville, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), or Congo-Kinshasa. When this seemingly simple distinction is

noted, people logically often respond by asking what the difference is between the two countries. But where do you even begin to answer a question like that? It is similar to asking what the difference is between Brazil and Argentina, or any other two countries for that matter. With histories stretching back thousands of years, filled with hundreds of different ethnic groups and languages, diasporas, forced migrations, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and more, the topic is immense, but some information is better than none. And who knows, you may get hooked and start exploring on your own.

Geographically, the Congos are located along the Equator in the middle of the African continent. The DRC occupies 905,351 square miles, approximately one-quarter of the size of the United States, while to its west, the Republic of Congo is slightly larger than New Mexico at 132,000 square miles. The two countries are mainly separated by two rivers, the Congo and the Ubangi. The Republic of Congo is bordered by Cameroon and the Central African Republic to the North, Gabon to the West, Angola and the DRC to the South, and the DRC again in the East. The



larger Democratic Republic of Congo is bordered by the Sudan and the Central African Republic to the North, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Lake Tanganyika, separating it from Tanzania in the East, and Zambia and Angola to the South. Both Congos have ports on the Atlantic Ocean.

The history of any country is difficult to explain in a short article, but it is extremely hard with most African countries since the borders that we know today were not established until colonialists invaded the continent and staked out their territories. The DCR and the Republic of Congo were originally inhab-

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## Dear "Volunteers in Waiting" !

By Marcia Stone

I know that many of you might be wondering why we haven't called you with an assignment. When we first started to volunteer I was so anxious to get started and would have been frustrated if I had to wait for a long time. I understand if you are feeling this frustration.

We are experiencing a real slow down in arrivals. Recently only single arrivals have been assigned to us and even they have been repeatedly cancelled due to difficulties on the other end of the process. I wish it was as simple as letting UNHCR know that we are ready, willing, and able and have wonderful people waiting anxiously to settle refugees in their new homes. However, this is totally beyond our control. I hope

you won't lose your enthusiasm as we wait for things to improve with arrivals.

While you wait patiently for your match, there are some things that we need help with. I will be posting these 'jobs' in our monthly newsletter. It would be wonderful if you would want to help with some different opportunities. Many of these 'jobs' are ongoing and you might want to keep doing it or team up and continue as a committee of sorts even after you are matched with a family.

Again, thanks to you all for being the best volunteer base any agency could ask for and bear with us as we figure out how to keep our work done and our volunteers happy!

Following is a list of things we need help with.

**\*Help us create a PowerPoint that we can use for various presentations .**

We need a computer guru to help us learn how to import video clips and photos as well as creating basic PowerPoint presentations.

**\*Solicit and collect donations of consumable goods that we use in our Welcome Kits:** things like toothpaste, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, etc. This is an excellent opportunity to gather a group of friends and/or students to do this very important piece of resettlement. Want to get your kids involved in community spirit? This is the opportunity!

**\*Help with our monthly newsletter.** We are always on the lookout for relevant articles that will inform and inspire our volunteers. A personal story is always the most widely read and appreciated.

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## Meet Mukiza Noel

By Deirdre Smith

By now, many of you have realized that we have added a new Case Manager to our staff. Although he hasn't been in this country all that long, Mukiza Noel has shown a tremendous fortitude and ability to adapt to new situations that is not seen here everyday. With his ability to speak French, English, Swahili and Kirundi, Mukiza is an invaluable addition to our staff who can help ease the transition of our new Burundian arrivals. Furthermore, since he arrived in Vermont as a Burundian refugee from a camp in Tanzania, Mukiza is able to connect with our clients through shared past experiences and build from there as they begin to create new lives in Vermont.

Mukiza has started to build his own new life in Vermont, a state which he already "likes very much and is very proud of". He says that Vermont has "beautiful hills, valleys, trees, rivers and the lake" and that it "reminds him of Rwanda, the country of his birth. It is a real new home". Mukiza has easily adapted to the cold temperatures and the snow, which he doesn't view as a problem at all, despite what many Vermonters might initially think. He has even had the chance to go sledding with his sister and with his brother's children, who have resettled in Vermont with their parents. Overall, Mukiza has been impressed with the people he has met in Vermont so far, especially in the way that they "welcome new people, the way they understand them, and the way they talk to them".

Mukiza is very happy to be a part of VRRP, which he considers to be a "very open agency with a very good staff made of people with different languages, from different nations and different races". He is "excited by the way VRRP's assistance reaches the clients and the way it leads clients to self-sufficiency". He also notes that "VRRP treats all of its clients equally although they originally come from different countries and different cultures".

Mukiza knows that he is still learning about VRRP, but he has learned very quickly in the couple of months that he has been here. He has already found that "VRRP must cooperate with other agencies" since "this is very important for an agency who's services are beneficial to a large number of people". He also knows that it will be a challenge to meet all of his clients without having a car, but this is only a challenge to overcome and he "hopes it won't take a long time" to learn to drive. Mukiza knows that his ability to communicate in four different languages is something that best prepares him to help our clients since the language barrier is a major obstacle to overcome when trying to navigate different social systems and the realities of daily life in Vermont.

The opportunity to start a new life and a new job in Vermont has been a great joy for Mukiza, but like many other people here, he has not forgotten family that remains in Tanzania. Many of the Burundian arrivals are leaving family members behind in Tanzania, with the hopes that they will join them here, but as noted in the article below, the camps

may soon be closing.

In the past, Tanzania has closed some camps and relocated refugees to other camps within their borders, but this time, the Burundians will be forced to repatriate to Burundi, one of the most densely populated countries in Africa. Many of the Burundians living in Tanzania have never even set foot on Burundian soil, do not know where their ancestral lands are located in Burundi, and have no relatives living there, but Tanzania is ready to send them "home". Even the older generation that fled Burundi in 1972 knows that the land that was once theirs is now inhabited by other people. People who have been resettled in this country and people who remain in the camps in Tanzania are fearful of what is to come, since land is not the only issue in Burundi. It is not so easy to bury the past and the reasons for which people originally fled, so security is a serious concern. For now, people are forced to wait and see if Tanzania will close the camps, but until then minds will not be at rest.

It is difficult enough to comprehend the problems people face as they try to adjust to life in America, but all too often, we forget that it is not just a geographical location that was left behind, but an entire social network as well. We are very lucky to have someone like Mukiza who can remind us of this and help our clients clearly express their fears, worries, and successes as they happen. He is a wonderful addition to our staff.

## Tanzania Vows to Close Camps by Mid-2008

DAR ES SALAAM, Dec 27, 2007 (AFP) - Tanzania said it would close camps housing more than 200,00 refugees displaced by war in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo by June 2008.

"In the last two years, the government managed to close six out of 11 camps, the goal is to close the rest by June next year," Home Affairs Minister Joseph Mungai said at a press conference in Dar Es Salaam.

He said the remaining camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in western Tanzania were home to 110,643 refugees from Burundi and 99,799 from the DRC.

Mungai said there were another 220,000 refugees from Burundi, the DRC and Rwanda living in settlements not supervised by the UNHCR.

The Tanzanian authorities have repeatedly urged Burundian refugees to return to their country, no longer in the throes of civil war but only slowly recovering from 14 years of civil strife that left hundreds of thousands dead.

Mungai said however that the number of refugees in the east African country has significantly dropped from 615,000 in December 2005.



## Employment Services Update *by Matt Thompson*

The news is saturated with reports on the state of the national economy, the mortgage crisis, and other “pocketbook” issues. While none of the recently-arrived refugees has a mortgage to worry about, the mortgage crisis may be having a direct impact on our clients.

Many sectors of our economy are consumer-driven and tourism-driven. Traditionally, the winter months after the holiday season are slow months in the Burlington area for most industries (with the exception of winter sport tourism). On top of that, most companies are being cautious about increasing production or services in the event that there is a recession. The result is that workers are not being hired as frequently and the competition for jobs may be higher than usual at this time of year.

Many of our clients had limited opportunities for education in their home countries and in refugee camps. For clients without a high school diploma and, (even more importantly) for clients with limited proficiency in English, there are high barriers for obtaining employment. This does not mean that a client cannot be successful. However, it often is an incremental process. Even a series of short-term, temporary jobs can be helpful. It shows that a client is employable in the U.S. and can lead to valuable references.

Several volunteers have posed questions, such as “How can I help \_\_\_\_\_ get a job?” Or, “I helped \_\_\_\_\_ apply for a job, but never heard back.” If you are interested in helping a refugee obtain employment, there are several things you can do.

1. If you hear of an appropriate employment opportunity, let the client or an employment counselor know. If you have a personal or professional connection to the position, that is helpful as well.
2. When you are volunteering with the client and speaking in English, try to practice words or phrases that might be helpful to the client in an interview or in a work situation (e.g. skills, hours available, how to explain their work experience, etc.)
3. Let an employment counselor know if you are willing to be a reference. Including a volunteer as a reference helps to diversify the references. Making a phone call or sending a personal letter of reference and describing the client’s aptitude, motivation, skills and abilities, etc. can be helpful and prompts the human resources staff to look at the client’s application a second time.

If you have questions or would like more information about employment services, please feel free to contact Matt at 338-4615 or [mthompson@uscrvt.org](mailto:mthompson@uscrvt.org).



## In Their Own Words

Stories from Refugees Settled in Vermont Communities

Photographs and Interviews by Ned Castle

February 25 – June 14

opening reception Friday, February 29, 5:00 – 7:00

educators preview Tuesday, March 11, 3:30 – 4:30

*In Their Own Words* is a collection of personal histories from refugees who are living in Vermont.

These stories offer a glimpse into the remarkable diversity of life experiences that refugees bring to our community.

**\*For information about lecture programs, materials for educators, or to schedule a class visit, contact the Vermont Folklife Center.**

Vermont Folklife Center

Exhibit Hours: Monday – Friday 10:00 – 5:00

Saturday by appointment

88 Main Street, Middlebury Vermont

802.388.4964

[www.vermontfolklifecenter.org](http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org)

## Ask the Expert

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Or, equally as compelling and unanswerable: why them? I was helping a young woman fill out a Food Stamps application the other day, and we struck up a rapport in passing back and forth all of the ID cards her children and husband had, searching for the one with the needed information. We filled out her information last, and it was only then that I realized that she and I were the same age. She had five children and had lived through a horror that I can't even begin to imagine. How is it possible for two people from different parts of the world to have such vastly different experiences? And why was it that I happened to be the person who had had the better one – the one in which I, through no virtue of my own, was in the position to give help?

It's probably self-centered to think that all

the families I've ever interacted with take my answers as absolute and my example as exact. I shouldn't feel bad when I don't have the answer to a question, or guilty when I've accidentally made someone think that Americans celebrate birthdays with banana bread (it's the only thing I'd ever baked with success before!). But I do think that the act of shrugging your shoulders and making your "I have no idea" face actually strengthens your relationship. It demonstrates the fact that even Americans get confused about their own systems, and also that America is not only a land of opportunity, but also of choice. I



might like my eggs over easy, but no one will judge you for having yours scrambled. So, while I may be the expert at life here, the choice is – and always will be – you.

## One Name, Two Countries

*Continued from page 3*

ited by the Batwa, but from 3,500 to 2,000 BC, as the Bantu expansion spread south-eastward across the continent out of the area now known as Cameroon, the Batwa were pushed to secondary lands. In the Republic of the Congo, several Bantu Kingdoms were established, notably the Kongo, the Loango and the Teke. The DRC also had many different kingdoms within today's boundaries, such as the Kingdom of Kongo, the Luba Empire, the Lunda Empire and the Yeke Kingdom. The DRC also experienced a migration from the North from people leaving the Darfur and Kordofan regions of Sudan, as well as East Africans migrating to the interior of the continent. As you can see, in both countries, there were many distinct groups living within today's borders.

Once Europeans began to explore Africa and realized they could raid the land for slaves and natural resources, the different kingdoms and people were pitted against each other and forced into manual labor. In the 1880s, the French claimed the territory now known as the Republic of Congo and from 1882-1891 worked to secure the rights to the land from local leaders. In 1908, France created French Equatorial Africa from the lands now known as Gabon, Chad, Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo, with Brazzaville as its capital. Concurrently, King Leopold II of Belgium sent Sir Henry Morton Stanley to explore the lands of present-day DRC and to claim them as Leopold's own personal colony, the Congo Free State, which lasted from 1885-1908, until it was turned over to Belgium and renamed the Belgian Congo. France and Belgium maintained their colonies until 1960 when both the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo were granted independence and established themselves as separate countries with the

same name, Republic of Congo.

Following independence, turmoil plagued both countries. The Republic of Congo suffered through a series of military coups, each leading the country into stronger alliances with Communist States, notably the People's Republic of China and the USSR. In 1992, popular opinion forced the transition to a multiparty democracy and the creation of a new constitution, but tensions remained high between supporters of opposing political parties. Leading up to the 1997 elections, heavy fighting broke out in the capital, Brazzaville and the country descended into civil war. The war lasted until 1999 when the government was able to establish peace with some of the rebel fighters. At least one group remains active, but the rest of the country is relatively stable. The Republic of Congo is now led by President Denis Sassou-Nguesso who first achieved power in a 1972 coup, but then lost power in the country's first democratic elections in 1992 to Pascal Lissouba, only to regain power following the civil war.

The DRC, an extremely mineral-rich country, was led out of colonialism as a multiparty democracy by Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and President Kasavubu, but tensions between the two leaders, aspirations of a military leader, and foreign interests denied the possibility of forging a stable nation. The country descended into civil unrest, clearing the way for General Joseph-Desire Mobutu to establish himself as the head of the country, a position he would hold from 1965-1997. Mobutu's rule was characterized by embezzlement, as the country's infrastructure deteriorated, its resources were plundered and Mobutu's own personal riches grew immensely. Mobutu was toppled by a coup in 1997, led by Laurent-Desire Kabila, but the country had already been suffering from fighting in the eastern part of the country connected to the

war in Rwanda. Fighting continued throughout the country under both Kabila, and his son Joseph Kabila, the current president who has been ruling since 2001. The country has moved towards peace through power sharing agreements in the government, but there are some regions, especially in the south and east, that remain extremely volatile.

The Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo are two completely separate countries, as is shown by their different histories. While both Congos share French as an official language and Lingala as a national language, the Rep. of Congo also considers Munukutuba a national language, while the DRC lists Swahili, Kikongo and Tshiluba as national languages. The Rep. of Congo is one of the most urbanized countries in Africa with seventy percent of its 3 million people concentrated in the cities of Pointe-Noir and Brazzaville or along the railroad that connects them. The DRC, on the other hand, is populated by 58 million people of at least 200 ethnic groups who live throughout the country. The economy of the Rep. of Congo is dominated by its oil production, although timber is also a valuable resource. The DRC is a predominately agricultural country, but it is also mined for its numerous resources, such as diamonds, cobalt, and copper. Both countries have large groups of Christians, small populations of Muslims, and many people who practice traditional beliefs.

This is but a scratch on the surface of these two countries. It is important to note though, that the differences amongst African countries, even those with similar names, are just as complicated as amongst countries in the rest of the world. I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to get my father to know this, or if he'll ever be able to locate Uganda on a map, but it doesn't hurt to keep trying.

## Reflections

By Sadie Stone

I began tapping on the glass window pane to get the attention of those inside. It's a classic chilly day in Vermont and I definitely did not dress for the weather! In my right hand is a huge black plastic bag filled with men's jackets and boots. In my left, I hold an old J-Crew bag full of children's hats, mittens, scarves, anything I could get my hands on that is warm. At my feet are three more huge bags with more winter clothes and in the car, my mom is gathering the rest of the donations to bring inside. It was my first day volunteering for the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program with a Somali Bantu family who lives in Winooski. I couldn't have been more excited!

Inside the door, a long strip of cloth acting as a curtain, is pulled away and I see the adorable head of little Hassan. I give a wave and he smiles, showing off a huge grin of incoming teeth. His older sister struggles to open the sticking door and greets me with a big bear hug. Being only ten, she has nonetheless assumed one of the biggest roles in the household, the translator. Z\* was born in Africa and has only been here a year yet she speaks the best English in her whole family (though still very limited). Next comes H\*, a mischievous little thing full of personality and energy. The parents, A\* and O\* were born in Somalia but due to the civil conflict there and in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, were forced to flee for their lives and ended up in a refugee camp in Kenya.

At the start of my work with VRRP, I really had no idea what I was getting into. As my visits to this family's small apartment increased and after each of these visits I had to leave with little Hassan crying at my feet, because he wanted me to stay, I knew I had made the issues that brought them to the United States personal.

I had been working with my Somali Bantu family for a little less than one month when the days started getting shorter and a lot colder. The family was used to hot African sun and had no comprehension of just how cold it gets or what snow was. The family was spending their first winter in the United States and to top it off, they were spending it in Vermont, one of the coldest states! In addition, it wasn't just my family of six, it was the seven upstairs, the five next door and the nine in apartment E!

A wise friend of mine once told me, "Do what you can handle. Don't feel that once you start your work that you need to go and save Africa, because you already are".

Making small strides toward a lifelong goal is where I started, and I plan to work on making the lives of refugees better in the United States. The idea of giving back is the main purpose of my life. I can't handle living with myself and not doing anything knowing that tens of thousands of children have been abducted or orphaned and that millions of people have been herded into refugee camps or killed in Africa. It seems like helping others is a part of my soul that I had never exercised before meeting my Somali Bantu family. This is a gift that they have given me. Working with them gives me a huge sense of reality about the real world and I can't imagine the way my life would be if I had never met them. They have given me much more than I have given them. My heart aches when I think of all of the others still living in fear and disease in their native countries. However, reflecting on what my friend said to me, I am doing what I can to help and it may not save Africa, but I am helping those wonderful Somali-Bantu folks that I now know and love. I wonder if they have a clue that what they bring to America is what will really help change things in Africa.

Dear "Volunteers in Waiting"  
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We even have a wonderful professional writer who has volunteered to interview others and write articles about their experiences. We're always interested in talking over any ideas you have for a story.

**\*Emergency donation committee:** Ideally this would be a group of volunteers who wanted to do this long term or at least be willing to follow up. It's ideal for someone who doesn't have a lot of time but can be flexible for phone calls and coordination. What happens is that when we have a quiet period of no arrivals it usually means that we are going to get multiple arrivals all at once. This is always unpredictable and often diminishes our supplies of furniture in the warehouse very quickly. We need someone who has the resources to call their friends, church members, and community to quickly get things donated when needed.

**\*Host Family Awareness:** The best start for any new refugee family is living

with a host family for a couple of weeks before they move into their own apartment. We find the apartment and orchestrate the move – the host offers a safe place for the family to begin learning about life in Vermont. The host family would also be helped by the volunteer group assigned that family. If you have friends or relatives that would be able to offer their home and kindness, at their convenience, we would love to contact them.

**\*French Speaking Volunteer:** A French-speaking client needs help studying for and taking his learner's permit test, tentatively on March 13 at 8:00am. Please call Matt Thompson 338-4625 or Marcia Stone 338-4627

These are all very brief descriptions and I would be delighted to talk further with you about any of them. Please contact me either by email or by calling my office number.

Marcia Stone mstone@uscrvt.org or office number 338-4627

Starting on March 18th, VRRP's ELT Program is offering a 6 week content-based Financial Literacy class series with refugee students at the Sara Holbrook Community Center. A curriculum has been developed in partnership with an expert from Opportunities Credit Union, and classes will focus not only on basic banking skills, but also on valuable budgeting skills. This curriculum will meet our students' existing need for better comprehension of the banking system in the United States. Furthermore, there is the flexibility and potential for adaptation for future use in intermediate-level ESL classes with a focus on mortgages, loans, credit history, and home-buying.

Out of a Crack

*Continued from page 1*

rather than over the phone. As we were talking, some of the other field office directors called him and I realized, as the three of us discussed issues, what a valuable resource we have in this system of field offices. We're all doing the same thing in different communities so we all have to figure out different mixes of soils to create the most fertile ground. It puts each of us in great position to pass along to the others valuable experience and ideas. When that's combined with USCRI's 100 years of experience nationally and internationally and with the engaging welcome offered to newcomers by Vermonters, we can see why our program is one of the best in the country.

While I was down there, I had some time to think as I took a walk thorough the streets of Washington, a lovely city to walk through, where pansies are already blooming. Swirling in and out of all the information I'd learned that day was a statement that had come as a shock to me when I'd first heard it a few years ago. It was made by Lavinia Limon, the President and CEO of USCRI. It came as a shock to me because I immediately recognized its truth, unwelcome though it was. She said that the U. S. Refugee Program settles people into poverty. I guess I'd known that for a while at that point but

I hadn't allowed it to become part of my consciousness because I didn't want it to be true. But, stated with such elegant simplicity, I took it to heart and I recognized the equally powerful truth of the other side of that coin, that it is our job to offer people the tools to dig themselves out of that poverty.

All this came together into one thought: how can we help new families reach financial security faster? I know some of the answers: learn English, learn what your boss is looking for and then learn new skills so you can move up the ladder, work towards both parents being employed, learn financial literacy, learn American culture.... I also know that a human being can only learn so fast. It takes time and patience.

I didn't feel very patient sitting at a kitchen table with the family that arrived less than six months ago. I had stopped by their house to congratulate the father on landing a full-time job, something he and his employment counselor had been working on for months. He was proud and happy to

have the job but his concern over whether he would earn enough money to survive was palpable. He demonstrated a perfect understanding of the programs set up to assist him as he pointed out the problems that daunt his family. Food stamps assure him of having enough food for his family but they don't cover soap or laundry detergent. His rent is extremely low compared to the market but it requires a huge percentage of his income to pay it. At the refugee camp, resources were scarce to the point of inadequate food and water but the situation was equal for everyone. Here, a person without enough cash to pay for heat or rent is not living up to the American ideal of self-reliance.

Starting a new life in America is a struggle, particularly when you have a large family to support. It demonstrates to me the necessity of working together to open the opportunities that will give people a chance to become self-sufficient. In the same way that USCRI works with its field offices to support and expand successful resettlement, we at each site must marshall our resources together with our best cooperative efforts to aid each other in giving newcomers the tools they need to dig themselves out of poverty. As hard as they are working to accomplish this, surely we can do more to open up the opportunities of education and employment to them.

Please view this wonderful story about former refugee Jean Luc Dushime that was published in the Christian Science Monitor last month  
<http://www.csmonitor.com/slideshows/2008/refugee/>



## VRRP STAFF PHONE DIRECTORY

Deirdre Smith	AmeriCorps*VISTA Volunteer Office	802-338-4632
Emily Cochrane	AmeriCorps*VISTA ELT Office	802-655-2656
Fatuma Bulle	Staff Interpreter	802-654-1706
Jacqueline Rose	Coordinator of Interpreting Services	802-654-1706
Judy Scott	Director	802-654-1700
Loan Nguyen	Financial Support Specialist	802-654-1701
Marcia Stone	Coordinator of Volunteer Services	802-338-4627
Marija Valencak	Deputy Director	802-654-1705
Matt Thompson	Employment Counselor	802-338-4625
Megan Cannella	ELT Coordinator	802-654-1704
Mukiza Noel	Case Manager	802-338-4617
Nada Popovac	Front Office Manager	802-655-1963
Olga Foss	Case Manager/Employment Counselor	802-654-1717
	Barre Office	802-479-7547
Rashid Hussein	Senior Case Manager	802-654-1707
Tam Truong	Accountant	802-654-1733
Volunteers and Interns	Volunteer Office	802-338-4633
Wendy Reid	Relationship Enrichment Coordinator	802-338-1860

*e-mail addresses follow this pattern: Judy Scott = jscott@uscrrt.org  
 (Exception: Volunteer Office = volunteer@uscrrt.org)*

# community buzz

## April Issue

Each month, we pride ourselves on the fact that our newsletter includes articles by volunteers, former refugees, and staff members. Input from such a wide range of people involved in the resettlement process enables us to offer many different perspectives on the experience to our readers.

We would love to include an article about **your** experience, which will help us keep volunteers and community members abreast of challenges, successes, and questions that volunteers face. If you have a story to share but don't have the time to put it into words, one of our volunteers is a professional writer and has offered to work with other volunteers to capture their stories.

If you'd like to discuss an idea for an article, please contact Marcia at 338-4627 or [mstone@uscrvt.org](mailto:mstone@uscrvt.org).

**Articles for our April newsletter are due March 20th.**

## Benefit Dinner Planning Meeting

Supriya Serchan, the wonderful volunteer who organized the Benefit Dinner in January (see February newsletter) is planning another Dinner for June. We need volunteers to assist in many ways from advertising to clean-up, and will form committees based on interest at our Planning Meeting.

The Planning Meeting will take place on **March 10th**, from **4:00-6:00** at the **Fletcher Free Library**. Please RSVP to Marcia Stone at [mstone@uscrvt.org](mailto:mstone@uscrvt.org), or 338-4627 if you are interested. If you would like to help out, but cannot attend the meeting, please let Marcia know by **March 14th!**

## Volunteer Open Houses

Open Houses provide a wonderful opportunity to learn more about our organization, Volunteer Program, and volunteer opportunities. Marcia and Deirdre will be present to discuss our programs and answer your questions, and we hope that experienced volunteers will stop by during the second hour to share their stories or concerns. While attendance at one Open House is mandatory before beginning service, they are also a great time for new and veteran volunteers to check in with VRRP staff.

**In March**, Open Houses are held every **Wednesday** from **5:30 - 7:30**.

If daytime meeting times are better for you, then you're welcome to come to one of our **April** Open Houses, which will be held the every **Monday** from **11:30 - 1:00**

We look forward to seeing you there!

## Movie Night!

Please join us on **Thursday, March 13th** at **5:30** in our Colchester office for a showing of the documentary, "**A Well Founded Fear**".

Both shocking and enlightening, the film travels inside the Office on Immigration and Naturalization (INS) to observe various interviews for asylum. The film provides a glimpse into how interviewers decide whether or not to grant asylum and on what basis these claims are either accepted or rejected.

## March Volunteer Training

### Personal Boundaries

12:00-1:30 Wednesday, March 27

Presenter: Denise Richards, a VRRP volunteer and former social worker

Back by popular demand, Denise Richards, a volunteer and former social worker, will give a presentation on respecting and understanding the boundaries between yourself and the families you work with.

Please contact Deirdre ([dsmith@uscrvt.org](mailto:dsmith@uscrvt.org) or 338-4632) if you plan to join us for a training. Out of respect for our presenters, **we will cancel sessions if volunteers do not RSVP**. Unless otherwise noted, all trainings take place at the VRRP office.

Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program

462 Hegeman Ave, Ste 101, Colchester, VT 05446

Phone: 802-655-1963 Fax: 802-655-4020

E-mail: [volunteer@uscrvt.org](mailto:volunteer@uscrvt.org)

Volunteer Office Phone: 802-338-4633

## Directions to VRRP

**Coming from downtown Winooski**, follow Route 15 east past St. Michael's College. Continue past Camp Johnson Military Facility. Take a left at the next light and turn into Ethan Allen Complex.

**Coming from Essex**, follow Route 15 west past Susie Wilson Road. Turn right at the next stop light to turn into Ethan Allen Complex.

Hegeman Avenue is the third road on the right. VRRP is at 462 Hegeman Avenue (the third building on your left — a brick building with a green on white sign out front.)