

Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio



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Generations of stories, nation of immigrants

by Koula Glaros-King, staff attorney

I have recollections of more than a lifetime of stories, generations of stories of how and why people came to the United States. Some are from family and friends, but most are from the most courageous people I ever met as an immigration attorney.

My personal story goes back 130 years, to the industrialization of this country and the building of the American West. My spouse has stories centuries older that touch every major migration and conflict of these United States. We grew up in a rich and diverse immigrant Ohio community, filled with the colors and sounds and smells of that American essence. We honor and celebrate our past while also pledging allegiance with all our hearts to the United States.

There is a huge world atlas on my office wall, tagged with the countries of origin of my clients, of the newcomers. It is full, and their stories speak volumes to the strength and courage and resilience of the human spirit. They talk of tragedy and longing and loss, then of hope and freedom and opportunity -- and above all else, about seeking the best and safest future for their families, for their children. It is always about the children.

The circumstances of arrival are unique to each immigrant, but their concerns are almost always the same:

How do I safely stay?

Can I work to educate my child?

How can I buy a home?

When can I become a United States citizen?

For decades, I've heard variations on the same themes of hope and dreaming:

"I know nothing and have nothing, and no one here, but I am safe, and I will learn."

"I want my kids to be able to go to a coffee shop without the fear of bombs."

"I finally have a voice and my real name."

"My father just wanted me, his daughter, to be able to read."

"It's OK. Life is hard here, but I can build a future."

Not once have I heard, *How can the United States take care of me?*

But far too often I hear, *Why does America hate me when I haven't done anything?*

These thoughts hit hard after the recent mass evacuations from Afghanistan. After 20 years of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, as many as half a million Afghans who worked with the U.S. or other western entities, and their families, are vulnerable to great danger. And they have begun resettling in Ohio -- our newest neighbors.

Today, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) reports humanitarian aid missions to more than 82 million displaced people. More than two-thirds, 68%, are from just five countries: Afghanistan, Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria, and Venezuela. Comparatively, Ohio's entire population is roughly 12 million, the United States' 330 million. For many countries, almost their entire population is displaced. Droughts and floods, earthquakes and volcanoes, war and famine fill our news with powerful images of masses of people fleeing home. The extent of displacement has never been so bad.

This begs a more appropriate question: *What makes people desperate enough to risk even death to leave home?*

Humanity has always been transient -- seeking food in famine, shelter in calamity, and safety from violence. The natural and man-made forces that move people never change. People will always struggle for basic needs and safety, for freedom and human rights. Ironically, now we verify the massive extent of this history with the popular DNA ancestry testing to label our individual ethnic origins, our "identity." But depending on our personal or even sacred beliefs, words like "immigrant" and "refugee" immediately bring vivid disturbing images to mind.

Why do you hold this belief? How does it define your own story in these United States? What makes your story more "American" than mine or than an Afghan refugee?

With more than half a millennia of recorded migration, our country is the nation of immigrants. Even the many original inhabitants of this land had ancient histories of migration before European explorers "discovered" them. Yet, out of fear, we continue to create even more adverse conditions that threaten this intrinsic human drive to survive. And our world gets smaller.

How do we answer these questions? From where this immigration attorney sits, my hope is that these thoughts guide our nation of immigrants to a real dialogue based on our own history and humanitarian concerns, rather than on our fear and prejudices. Let us welcome and protect our new neighbors from the dangers they left behind.

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