

April Program Survivors of Torture

The April 4 program at Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County was our unique opportunity to hear the stories of those refugees who fled from their homeland for safety and security. The basis for their persecution could be religion, race, gender, or simply what they are doing. Many have spent two to 10 years in a refugee camp. It may take a refugee 40 days to go to Canada as compared to two to four years to be accepted into the United States. The refugees have to repay the cost of their trip to this country. They have traveled long distances and they may suffer from separation, isolation, and stress. Many suffer physical and psychological pain. Thirty-five percent are torture survivors. We were told 400 women are raped each day in the Congo. Many Burmese refugees were prisoners who experienced body torture. In addition to language difficulties, cultural differences such as eye contact, touch, physical space, and parenting need to be addressed before building a trusting relationship that includes safety, choice, collaboration and empowerment in this country. Many with professional credentials need to start their education all over again. In 2014, 4,085 refugees settled in New York State. They have a case manager for the first three months helping them with housing, food and community orientation.

The primary refugee population in the Buffalo area is from Burma, Bhutan, Iraq, and Somalia but they also come from many other countries. They are fully documented and heavily vetted before they are approved for admission. After reviewing their work history, employers, and extensive records, the U.S. takes the cream of the crop. Jewish Family Service is one of four resettlement agencies in the Buffalo area. This non-denominational agency is more than 150 years old. The other resettlement agencies are Catholic Charities, Journey's End, and the International Institute. They all have religious roots but different funding sources. Jewish Family Service receives federal funding. One of the speakers was Marlene Schillinger, president and CEO, who has been with the agency for 22 years. Another speaker was Blaine Schwartz, chair of their board, who explained the distinct differences between an immigrant and a refugee. They are proud to house the WNY Center for Survivors of Torture. Their work with Holocaust survivors qualifies them to work with victims of torture. They gave credit to the League of Women Voters for the help we provide to refugees as they become citizens with the right to vote, since they are anxious to exercise their interest in the democratic process.

Amela Soteli, a refugee from Bosnia, is care coordinator at the agency and Leonce Byimana, an asylum seeker from Rwanda, is program director. In Rwanda, Leonce was a clinical psychologist who worked with HIV-positive children and children who were genocide survivors. Amela was asked about her success rate with her clients given the need for a multitude of adjustments. She replied that she can't have failures. Her enthusiasm convinced us that she is dedicated to assuring their assimilation. We ended with a quote from Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel that is their mantra: "All are entitled to live with dignity and respect. All are entitled to live without fear or pain."

Marian Deutschman