



# "Joy From Your Heart to Theirs"

By: Kati Miller-Holland



"Your pillowcases are meant to comfort these children. They'll lie on something soft and colorful, and they will feel that someone is thinking about them," said Youth Haven ambassador Balinda Cunningham as she received a bounty of hand-made pillowcases from Mary Younkins. "You're spreading joy from your heart to theirs. Thank you!"

Mary was a busy seamstress for many years, but health challenges now have her wheelchair-bound, depending on the care of others. Members of the Village at Rockville Auxiliary got to know her and her talents for sewing, and wanted to find a way to tap them. The pillowcase project for LSS/NCA's Youth Haven Camps and Retreats was perfect.



Mary Younkins, a resident of the Village at Rockville, delivered more than three dozen hand-sewn pillowcases to be used at upcoming Youth Haven overnight retreats. "Over the years, I made good money sewing, but I enjoyed this project more," she said.

Auxiliary members contributed a large collection of colorful flannel fabrics, and carefully cut the pieces to prepare them for sewing. Mary's sister, Cora, got involved by ironing and assisted in any job that required standing. From her wheelchair, Mary got to work, pinning and then sewing each pillowcase. The final result was enough soft pillowcases for each person who will come to Youth Haven's Family Mini-Camp this spring. Thank you to Mary and her team members Janice, Martha and Cora – for your time, your talents, and your joy of life! ■

If you would like to volunteer with LSS/NCA, visit [Issnc.org](http://Issnc.org) and click "Get Involved." Use YOUR talent to make someone smile today.



Mary and her sister, Cora, check out the Youth Haven photo album and hear camp stories from Youth Haven client, Tierra.

Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area [www.lssnca.org](http://www.lssnca.org) United Way #8146 CFC #78343

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# A Thanksgiving to Share

By: Melissa Mahfouz

This past fall, six refugee families joined members of Lutheran Redeemer Church in McLean for a festive Thanksgiving dinner, complete with traditional Thanksgiving foods, including a very large turkey! For many recently arrived families, this was their first Thanksgiving experience.

This year, members of Redeemer Lutheran (along with several other community organizations) also provided our families with winter jackets, mittens, hats, blankets, and gift cards. All of our refugee families, most of whom come

from Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, are not only unaccustomed with DC's cold winter but also arrive in America with very limited clothing and belongings. Thus, every single item that was collected—nearly 400 blankets and coats—was distributed to a child or individual in need of warmth this season.

In return, our families felt privileged to share their journeys with their new friends at Redeemer. A special thanks to Redeemer Lutheran for helping us create lasting memories and keeping our neighbors warm! ■



## *A Thankful Thanksgiving*

# Keeping Our Neighbors WARM

By: Colin Richardson

LSS/NCA, in partnership with SWRC (Suburban Washington Resettlement Center), hosted a winter clothing drive at our Silver Spring office for the fourth year in a row. For weeks leading up to the winter season, supporters and organizations from around our community donated outgrown clothes, gently used coats, and new mittens and scarves.

Before the temperature started to dip, clients were invited to come

and pick up what they needed for their families so that they would be prepared for the winter ahead. Because refugees often come to America with very limited resources, their excitement for the new gifts echoed in our office halls as children played in their new knit caps and mittens.

These families were also treated with a traditional Thanksgiving meal. Not only was this event crucial in preparing our families for the cold climate, but it

also provided our staff and community the opportunity to officially welcome these families "home"—continuing the historic Thanksgiving tradition of welcoming immigrants and new friends to America. Almost 300 refugees attended, representing LSS/NCA and SWRC agencies. We would like to thank our generous partners and donors who helped us collect enough winter clothes to ensure that no family went home empty handed. ■



# Giving Thanks for a New Home

By: Matt Haygood

The metal countertop of the serving window in Luther Place's kitchen was bare at 5:30pm on the Monday before Thanksgiving. A few individuals shuffled about decorating tables and preparing food, as youth from all over the world began trickling through the door with their foster families.

Ana Lainez, the Youth Resettlement Specialist for LSS/NCA's Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) Program, had been planning the URM Thanksgiving Celebration for over a month and the event was finally underway. Two hours later, there was not an inch of free space on that metal countertop or the two additional tables that had to be brought in to serve food. The room was filled with chatter in English, Spanish, Tigrinya, Farsi, and Swahili as the food slowly disappeared. Foster parents bragged about the youth living in their homes and traded stories of memories they

had created as a family. In the corner, Burmese and Honduran youth conversed in broken English after having met for the first time.

There was much to be thankful for this past holiday season. The URM program has grown to 32 youth (from 5 at the beginning of 2014), hired 3 new staff, and added over 10 new foster families in the past year. Gratefully departing refugee camps, shelters, extreme poverty, and violence, these 32 youth have been given the opportunity to begin a new life in the United States because of your support. While there have been individual struggles and challenges, the holiday celebration was a moment to focus on our many blessings and share in a growing community. The evening ended with snapping photographs and whispering friendly goodbyes—as a new Thanksgiving tradition began. ■



*Your support helps us create families each and every day. If you are interested in becoming licensed as a foster parent/caregiver and joining LSS/NCA in the effort of creating families, please contact Tiffany at (202) 723-3000 x150*

# Santa Visits Foster Care Families

Christmas holds many magical moments—snowman building, hot chocolate with friends, family traditions—and at LSS/NCA, our staff and families delight in these moments just the same. One of our favorite winter events is our foster care holiday party. Each year, we invite our foster families, birth parents, and children to join together in one grand celebration. This year had no shortage of magical moments as the children

were tickled to take family photos, play games with Santa, and open Christmas presents. Because of your generosity, every child received the perfect gift and dozens of families were able to create new holiday memories.

Special thanks to Grace Lutheran, Bowie for hosting the event; St. Luke, Silver Spring for collecting gifts; and Piers Lamb for donating his photography services. ■





## RENEE M. GONZALEZ Volunteer Awards at the Youth Haven Holiday Reunion

By: Dara Yah'Ya

a humble spirit who put the Lord first, and everyone's needs before her own. She would never come empty-handed or alone, bringing multiple family members to every event we hosted. Ms. Renee took it upon herself to volunteer weekly and actively recruited new families to our program. She led the way for Youth Haven to incorporate parental involvement, enhancing our program development.

In July of 2014, the Youth Haven program was saddened by the unexpected passing of Renee M. Gonzalez. Ms. Gonzalez, known as "Ms. Renee," was an enthusiastic ambassador for Youth Haven, speaking at the LSS/NCA Expressions of Abundance breakfast in April of 2013.

Behind the scenes, she was a constant presence at the office and at all of our events. Ms. Renee was

In her memory, we established a volunteer award to recognize persons who particularly embody Ms. Renee's value of service to our agency. At the Youth Haven holiday party in December, the first honorees were Ms. Sharron Newman and Mr. Justin Williams.



Dara presents Mr. Williams with first volunteer award.

Ms. Renee's joyful presence is deeply missed by her family members and her Youth Haven "family," but her loving spirit lives on as others follow her path of service. ■

## An Unexpected Gift

Youth Haven Camps & Retreats received a grant this winter from the Miller & Chevalier Charitable Foundation in a serendipitous turn of events.

Employees of the Miller & Chevalier Law Firm are encouraged to nominate local organizations as recipients of the grant funds. Mere weeks before the nomination deadline, a passionate LSS/NCA supporter was unknowingly chatting with one of the law firm's employees about the great work of LSS/NCA. Days later, Youth Haven was nominated by the employee and chosen as a grant recipient. ■

As an LSS/NCA champion yourself, remember that many workplaces have in-house charities and you may just find yourself in a position to nominate your favorite organization for a special gift.



Pictured: Dara Yahya, M.Ed; C. Frederick Oliphant III, President of the Miller & Chevalier Charitable Foundation; Maria O. Jones, 2015 President Elect of the Miller & Chevalier Charitable Foundation; Linda Carlisle, Esquire, member of Miller & Chevalier; and Alison Walker; LICSW



## Because of Volunteers like Lizhette

By: Nizama Tikvina

Lizhette began volunteering at the LSS/NCA Falls Church office at the end of October. Alongside other volunteers, her time was spent sorting, organizing and tracking all of the donations that came to the LSS/NCA Falls Church Office. Not long after she started volunteering, she realized the difference one person could make through LSS/NCA and decided to get more involved by serving as an intern.

*"I really enjoy helping and getting to know the staff at the LSS/NCA Falls Church office. I am gaining valuable experience and learning a lot about the different aspects of the refugee resettlement process. I am glad to be part of such a great organization!" –Lizhette*

Now, she is at the office three times per week. Lizhette helps with reception and placement by creating case files and organizing client information. She edits and creates resumes for clients who are actively seeking jobs. And recently, she was able to help a family complete their *Adjustment of Status Documentation* as part of the immigration and citizenship services that LSS/NCA offers at the Falls Church office.

## Why Hire a Refugee?

By: Autumn Orme

Over the past year, LSS/NCA resettled nearly 700 refugees fleeing from persecution and war. At LSS/NCA, we help each family find a place to call home, provide needed daily household items, and train mentors to help families navigate their new community.

But one of the most important aspects of resettlement is helping each individual find a job so he/she can become self-sufficient. So I sat down with one of our local employers, Jamey and Rudo Robinson from Trust Security who have hired approximately 15 refugees over the past year, to ask about their experience as a refugee employer.

### Why did you decide to hire refugees?

**Mr. Robinson:** Many folks don't appreciate the basic, entry level opportunity that our company has to offer. Refugees do appreciate the opportunity. They work hard and excel in their role. They show up to work on time and are very gracious.

Last year's "employee of the year" was Ahmad. He lived about a mile and a half from our store and would walk to work every day. He was never late to his shift and he worked in that position for 3 years—a security role that others had found difficult. We also had four other refugee employees that have become "employee of the month."



### How has LSS/NCA helped you find and retain employees?

**Ms. Robinson:** LSS/NCA has helped refugees fill out tax forms, prepare for interviews, fill out job applications, utilize the metro, and create bank accounts. Before refugees come to America, they sometimes know very little about American procedure and processes. LSS/NCA walks with them every step of the way, making our job as the employer exceptionally easy.

### Can you share a story of an employee who has made a difference?

**Mr. Robinson:** Muhammed N. from Afghanistan lost an arm and a finger trying to save an American soldier. He is an amazing example of someone who gave up everything to do the right thing and now we can help him rebuild his life by giving him this opportunity at our company. ■

Read the full interview with the Robinsons on our blog: [CompassionVann.wordpress.com](http://CompassionVann.wordpress.com). And learn more about our partners at Trust Security by visiting their website: <http://www.protectedbytrust.com>



## A Resolution

By: Alice Benson, ELCA

Here's a resolution for 2015: Are you like many of us. . . and you postpone completing your will? You are not alone!

Did you know that through your will – or the beneficiary designations of your retirement account, life insurance policy, or even bank accounts – you can support Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area? After you have remembered your family, please remember the families you support through LSS/NCA – and the hundreds of lives you are changing. Your support can continue after your lifetime. With your faithful planning, you can continue to support our community and neighbors that need your help.

If you'd like to know how you can continue to make a difference through LSS/NCA in your charitable estate planning, please contact Autumn at [orMEA@lssnca.org](mailto:orMEA@lssnca.org) or 703-698-5026 x.112.

*Thank you for always thinking of us.*

## What's new with Vann?

I remember it was a cold day just like this one when I picked Hamed UP at the airport. Coming from Southern Azerbaijan, he wasn't used to the snow and bitter wind. Luckily we had come prepared with a few coats and blankets that our donors had provided.



Hamed sat quietly for a long time but over the course of several weeks, driving to get groceries and to job interviews, I learned about his childhood dream of finding freedom and his determination to give his people the rights they deserved.

*"I was just a teenager when I began fighting for freedom. Our people are denied employment and educational opportunities, referred to as "donkeys", and forced to practice our cultural traditions in hiding.*

*During one demonstration, my friend was arrested by the Iranian police and although I tried to save him, I was unable to free him from the bindings. This is when I decided I must leave..."*

Read the rest of Hamed's story on my blog at <http://bit.ly/LSSHamed>

**SAVE  
THE DATE**

**Tuesday, May 5 8:00am - 9:00am**  
**Expressions of Abundance**  
**Annual Benefit Breakfast**  
RSVP to Autumn at [orMEA@lssnca.org](mailto:orMEA@lssnca.org)

## We are STRONGER TOGETHER

Our centennial campaign, STRONGER TOGETHER, ensures that more people like Hamed not only find freedom and safety, but are able to rebuild their lives in America by reaching self-sufficiency. By developing a formal volunteer and community awareness program through this campaign, we will be better able to engage our neighbors in compassionate service and internships, allowing us to serve each individual to the very best of our ability.

With an increased demand for all of our services, these community partnerships will afford us the ability to collect essential items for every neighbor, such as coats and blankets, while providing more substantial resources like youth mentors and family sponsors. By fortifying these relationships we will be STRONGER TOGETHER for years to come.

Make a difference, learn more, and support the campaign today at [lssnca.org/stronger\\_together](http://lssnca.org/stronger_together) ■



## Message from Melissa, CEO

Dear Friends in Service,

Eleanor Roosevelt said, *"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."* This quote resonates with me as another year has passed and we are a season closer to our centennial anniversary in 2017. Your belief in the dreams of our neighbors has given hope to thousands of children and families for nearly 100 years.

Just in the past few months, your support has guaranteed new opportunities and lasting memories. New congregational partnerships have shared holiday traditions and joy with refugee families and foster children (pg.2-3). Donors across the region have ensured that refugees and low income youth have blankets, coats, and mittens to keep them warm this winter (pg. 1-2). And dedicated volunteers, local employers, and community organizations have aided in securing the needs of our neighbors by way of friendship, support, employment, and pledged revenue (pg. 3-4).

*Thank you for believing in the neighbors we serve. Thank you for believing in the beauty of their dreams and the potential of their futures. Because someone believes in them, they believe in themselves. Knowing you stand behind our mission, our staff, and those we serve, we aim to collect \$2.5 million through our STRONGER TOGETHER campaign. As many of you know, this campaign will strengthen and expand our programs so we can continue changing lives. To learn more about our future and how you can help hundreds reach their dreams, please visit our website [lssnca.org/stronger\\_together/](http://lssnca.org/stronger_together/)*

Cheers to a new year and to our shared dreams!

In Peace,



Melissa K. Graves, CEO



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# Keeping Our Neighbors WARM



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## Save the Dates

- Jan 22 Compassion in Action tour, VA
- Jan 30 Career Fair, hosted by LSS/NCA Refugee Services
- Feb 7 Support U Crash Course Part 1 - McLean, VA
- Feb 21 Support U Crash Course Part 2 - McLean, VA
- Feb 21 Compassion in Action tour, MD
- Feb 26 Compassion in Action tour, VA
- Mar 1 Support U Crash Course Part 1 - Fort Washington, MD
- Mar 15 Support U Crash Course Part 2 - Fort Washington, MD
- Mar 21 Compassion in Action, MD
- Mar 26 Compassion in Action, VA
- Apr 11-13 Youth Haven College Sampler Teen Retreat
- May 5 Annual Expressions of Abundance Benefit Breakfast
- May 30-31 Youth Haven Family Mini-Camp

For more information, visit [LSSNCA.org](http://LSSNCA.org).