

Matthew 25



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A journal on ministry and service to the margins in western Oregon

Catholic Charities

The Catholic roots of Salem's refugee effort

BY BARBARA CURTIN MILES

SALEM -- Salem folks can hear a vibrant African girls' choir, nibble falafel at a Syrian eatery, and send their kids to camp with youngsters from Afghanistan.

This growing diversity reflects the influence of an organization called Salem for Refugees, which has welcomed hundreds of new neighbors from around the world.

The thriving nonprofit organization traces its roots to the vision and leadership of Catholic Charities of Oregon. Salem for Refugees differs from that parent in many ways, but if you look closely, Catholic Charities' DNA shines through.

"People of faith and people of goodwill -- Catholic Charities brought them together,"

reflected Anya Holcomb, a founding partner of Salem for Refugees. "This has been a real strength of SFR as well. We

want to bring together the whole community with a shared mission of welcoming our new neighbors."

Refugees are people who were forced to flee their countries because of persecution, war or violence. Many have spent years in refugee camps, getting vetted and waiting their turn for a better life. When they finally arrive in Oregon, they have short-term support but long-term needs.

Until 2015, the Portland area took in most refugees for the state.



ANYA HOLCOMB



Tania Wilson Moran, volunteer coordinator, welcomes tutors to a training session at Salem for Refugees.

Salem's Jenny Barischoff helped find housing through her job at Catholic Charities in Portland. Then her boss issued a challenge: "You live in Salem? Why don't you look into housing there?"

Barischoff could relate. She had immigrated to the United States at age 5 with no English. Memories of being the stranger had led her to a career aiding refugees.

Barischoff first shared the need through a panel discussion at Salem's library. The effort that emerged would rely on local volunteers and donors, medical providers, landlords, employers and educators.

Anya Holcomb and her husband Doug, newly returned from refugee work in Eastern Europe, were elected leaders. Salem Alliance Church put them on the payroll and contributed office space, vehicles and other support.

"It was Catholic Charities that

had the initial vision, with Jenny Barischoff being the point person," said Anya. "Otherwise, resettlement would never have come to Salem."

This fiscal year, SFR expects to resettle 250 individuals from Afghanistan, Syria, Central African Republic and many other lands. Next year, the number will likely swell to 330. Salem for Refugees has purchased a north downtown building and spun off its model in Corvallis, which recently welcomed 30 refugee newcomers.

Barbara Curtin Miles is a Catholic Charities of Oregon committee member and a retired journalist.



Jenny Barischoff poses with husband Erich Barischoff, her partner in the Ariana House nonprofit.



Curtis Johnson (right) vice president of housing strategy at Catholic Charities USA, makes an observation during a tour of Chiles House.

Delegation likes housing progress

A team from Catholic Charities USA visited Portland earlier this year, meeting with Catholic Charities of Oregon leaders and touring local affordable housing sites.

The delegation is part of the Healthy Housing Initiative, in which Catholic Charities agencies have teamed up with local healthcare providers and Catholic parishes to create opportunities for housing and healthcare.

“We are seeing incredible progress made in four years,” said Ben Wortham, vice president of behavioral health integration for Catholic Charities USA. He had just seen Cathedral Village, Good Shepherd Village and Chiles House, three new Catholic Charities housing locations where Providence Health and Services monitors health needs of residents.

Curtis Johnson, vice president of housing strategy at Catholic Charities USA, beamed as he toured Chiles House, a building with 27 apartments for transitional housing. Johnson noted the exposed wood, plus the airiness and natural light, all features meant to help in healing people who have experienced trauma.

“That is part of recognizing human dignity,” Johnson said.

Lane County work supported

EUGENE -- Catholic Community Services of Lane County helped supporters start their day right Sept. 21 during a breakfast at Venue 252.

For more than 70 years, the Catholic Charities partner agency has been a staple of support for people who are poor and homeless in the county that includes Eugene and Springfield.

“Catholic Charities network member agencies are doing great things,” said Natalie Wood, executive director of Catholic Charities of Oregon.

The event, called the Great Hour of Caring included Auxiliary Bishop Peter Smith’s reflection exploring the theme of “neighbor” in scripture. Franciscan Sister Veronica Schueler, chancellor of the Archdiocese of Portland and a board member, also provided insight into why and how Catholic Community Services provides critical services to neighbors in need.

Lorri Perreault, executive director of Catholic Community Services of Lane County, reviewed staggering outcomes from last fiscal year and unveiled the new Seniors Off the Streets program, which will house 25 seniors and prevent another 40 from becoming homeless by Jan. 10. Perrault also discussed the new OASIS Emergency Family Shelter community that will house five families at the Springfield Community Service Center.

Christine Zeller-Powell, Refugee and Immigrant Services Program director and immigration attorney, shared the news that 50 new refugees will be welcomed into the community.

Guests experienced firsthand how war and events happening a world away are affecting the community with the arrival of new neighbors like 14-year-old Zubair and his father, refugees who fled Afghanistan after the takeover of



Zubair, a 14-year-old refugee who fled the Taliban in Afghanistan, speaks Sept. 21 at a breakfast for Catholic Community Services of Lane County.

the Taliban in 2021. Zubair’s personal account of his journey left tearful guests asking how they can help these new arrivals to the country.

Juliette Smith of KVAL television hosted the event. The breakfast included her Sept. 20 KVAL news video about an Afghan refugee named Toran Ibrahimi, a third grader at Cesar Chavez School in Eugene.

At just eight years old, Toran already speaks five languages and says his learning might help save Afghanistan someday. He hopes to become an astronaut.

Have a story about Catholics reaching out to those on the margins? Contact Ed Langlois, Catholic Charities communications director, elanglois@ccoregon.org or 503.935.6187.



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