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EAST OF ELMGROVE

A Beacon of Hope in Providence

Omar Bah welcomes refugees from all over the world



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BY LIA MARCOUX

Posted Friday, April 22, 2016 3:45 pm

By Elizabeth Rau

We take freedom of the press for granted in this country, but in places where dictators run the show speaking up can be a death sentence. Omar Bah knows that and has the scars to prove it. Just take a look at his lower back. A crescent moon rises from it – an old wound from the bayonet that sliced into him while he lay dying in a jail cell in Gambia.

A few minutes with Bah, and you'll come to appreciate how lucky we are that we're able to challenge authority – and live. Gambia is run by men who make Donald Trump look like Mr. Rogers. The dictator is Yahya Jammeh, who beats up his fellow Gambians and throws them in prison if they dare to criticize his government. That's what Bah did, but, miraculously, he escaped to the United States

and is now an advocate for other refugees fleeing oppression and trying to make a go of it in this country.

Maybe you read about Bah in the news or saw him on TV reacting with horror – and sadness – to Trump’s call to block Muslims from entering the United States. Maybe you read about his meetings with Rhode Island Senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse to talk about the challenges refugees and immigrants face. Or maybe you read about his organization, the Refugee Dream Center, which he founded a year or so ago to help refugees, many from Africa, find their way among the amber waves of grain.

In his office in South Providence, he shakes my hand and flashes a bright smile. He comes across as kind and affable. There’s no hint of anger or self-pity. He’s moving forward, grateful for the opportunities offered to him since he arrived in America nine years ago. It wasn’t always easy; then again, he says, rising from the ashes never is.

His journey started 37 years ago in a dusty village in Gambia, a small West African country bounded by Senegal. His family expected him to become a cattle herder, as generations before had done, but Bah had other ideas. He moved to the capital to study journalism, eventually writing reports critical of Jammeh. When the government cracked down, he secretly fed the reports to an American-based website. The government found out what he was doing and came after him.



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They threw him in jail, beating him in the head with the butt of an AK-47 and stabbing him with its bayonet. Curled up on the hard cell floor, he said goodbye to all the people he loved. He thought he wouldn’t make it. Then, the unexpected: the latch opened and they told him to get out.

He did, but was more determined than ever to report the truth. For the next several years, he wrote about the government’s torture, murders and anti-gay killings. One day, a friend called to warn him that officials were after him again. This time, he had to flee the country.

After living in hiding in Senegal and Ghana, the Media Foundation for West Africa reached out, lobbying to get him to the United States. He landed at T.F. Green Airport on May 24, 2007. One suitcase. No money. Frightened.

The Dorcas International Institute embraced him, helping him find an apartment, shop for groceries and learn American customs. He found a job at Rhode Island Housing and got his college degree, then his masters. One day, he realized he was getting too far away from past. The Refugee Dream Center was born.

His center is a meeting place for refugees from all over the world: Iraq, Myanmar, Rwanda, the Congo, Somalia and more. He's their guide and mentor, helping them find apartments, fill out job applications, apply to schools or sign up for English classes. Listening is his strength.

"My message to all refugees and immigrants is make use of the opportunities that you have here," says Bah. "Do not take the abundance here for granted. Serve your community. Remember that there are millions who are not here, who remain in the camps or in desperate situations without hope of a better future."

America, he says, is special: "Here, there is hope."

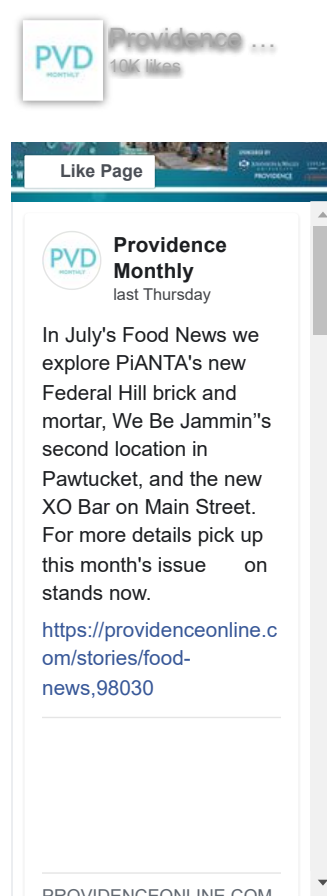
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