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How Omar Bah, Founder of RI's Refugee Dream Center, Is Helping Community During Coronavirus

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Guest Contributor Annika Prinz

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From fleeing persecution and torture in Gambia to founding a refugee post-resettlement agency in Providence, Omar Bah has undergone a tremendous journey since first setting foot in Rhode Island in May 2007. Today, dealing with the Novel Coronavirus is the latest task on his agenda.

As COVID-19 spreads across the world and social distancing has become the new norm, children are no longer seen playing basketball in the parking lot of the Refugee Dream Center, located on Lockwood Street. A safe haven for many refugees in Rhode Island, the Center now stands still and silent as people are told to stay home and self isolate. But the work they do is more important than ever, and Omar Bah - founder of the organization - continues to work around the clock to serve the needs of refugees amidst the outbreak, making hundreds of phone calls a week and driving around town delivering supplies to families during these difficult times.

Bah is now 40 years old, married with 2 kids, but his passion to help others began as a young adult over 19 years ago in Gambia. He grew up in a small town, and was one of the only kids who was able to complete his high school education. There was no medicine, no clean drinking water, no hospitals, and no access to education in this impoverished town. His mother would carry heavy buckets of water on her head each day to serve dozens of people in the village.



Omar Bah

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When Bah turned 21, he felt the urge to make an impact. Growing up in a dictatorship, where people were being killed, harassed and tortured everyday, his dream was to become a lawyer and fight for the rights of others. Gambia did not offer a full law degree; students would be able to complete 2 years of the degree in Gambia, and then would have to travel abroad to complete the degree elsewhere.

Desperate to do something meaningful, he decided to start the program and see where life would take him from there. Because his family had very little money, he was lucky to complete the program but wasn't able to continue his studies abroad, and felt like he hit a dead end.

Continuing to witness the suffering and injustice taking place around him, he decided to combine the legal skills he had acquired with his passion to help the community, and become a journalist. He got a job at a small newspaper in Gambia, where he became a reporter for court cases.

Being a journalist in Gambia was a dangerous job to have, with many journalists getting killed or tortured for their work, but Bah risked his life for freedom of speech and for the livelihood of his community. "I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to have a voice, I wanted people in the country to be empowered", Bah says.

He bravely spoke out against the country's brutal dictator and against the poverty and corruption that was so rampant, despite being aware of the terrible repercussions he might face.

Bah was harassed and tortured on various occasions, and was eventually declared "WANTED" in May 2006, with his name and photograph plastered all over the media.

Bah decided to flee Gambia to save his life.

Bah first fled to Senegal, but realized he was not safe there, and moved onwards to Ghana. After spending almost a year in an urban slum in Ghana, he got acceptance for resettlement in the United States.

"When I came to the US I was the only refugee from Gambia. I never knew what Rhode Island was - I hadn't heard the name Rhode Island until the day before I arrived here," Bah says.

During his initial days in Rhode Island, seeking support from refugee resettlement agencies was a nerve-racking experience. Bah felt ashamed to ask for help, wanting to appear strong and well adjusted. The only place he could go to for support was The Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island, the largest immigration service in the state, which provided support to refugees but expected them to become self-sufficient after six months.

Resettling into Providence was tough - he had come to Rhode Island alone, he didn't have anyone to share the experience with, and was highly traumatized from his past experiences in Gambia.

"This isn't right. This cannot continue like this," Bah thought to himself.

Having briefly met refugees from different parts of the world (Iraq, Liberia, Rwanda, and more) at Dorcas, Bah psychologically prepared himself to become closer and connected to other refugees in Providence. He started going to Dorcas just to meet people, and began knocking on his neighbors' doors in an attempt to foster a greater sense of community.

All he wanted was one friend. Soon, everyone became a friend.

"By going into other people's homes, I saw that there were so many challenges. Sometimes I would cry just walking into someone's home," Bah says.

Bah describes the disturbing reality of children getting poisoned by lead paint in houses, and of families struggling in the winter without adequate electricity or heating in their houses. Witnessing the terrible living conditions so many refugees had to endure inspired Bah to make a difference, and he began organizing community leaders to make sure refugees were placed in better housing. These were just the first steps of what would later turn into a lifelong advocacy project.

Because he could read, write and speak in English (he was a former journalist), and because of the tremendous effort he was making to form connections in his community, everyone began calling him for help.

"How can they expect people who cannot read and write in English, to become self-sufficient after six months?" Bah continues to ask himself till this day.

Bah recalls walking in the snow with families from one street to the other, helping them find apartments to rent. He describes spending hours and hours on the phone with National Grid - an electricity and utility company - begging them

for help, but getting turned down because “his accent was too thick”.

In 2015, Bah solidified his passion and desire to help the community by founding the post-resettlement organization “Refugee Dream Center” to fill gaps that exist within the existing resettlement process, and to help refugees with the continuation of services, especially after six months. Today it gives him immense joy to see the successes of his organization - especially to see people smile and feel like there is no unrealistic expectation of being self-sufficient after six months. Nothing has made him happier than to see people so comfortably walking into the Refugee Dream Center, sometimes not even seeking help but just coming in because they want somewhere to go.

“At Refugee Dream Center, every refugee who walks in is served”, Bah says.

What started as Bah running around from one house to another, has turned into a movement with hundreds of people doing that together, helping people like him who came after him.

Over the past few years, Bah has watched people form strong bonds with each other. He describes the powerful scene of Jewish refugees and Syrian refugees working together, uniting in their struggle to gain a footing in a new country, as well as American kids working alongside refugees, not as helpers or volunteers but as equal participants in a youth education program.

On a typical day just a few months ago, Bah was very busy working on adult and youth mentoring programs, health promotion projects, and grant applications (to name a few)- tirelessly providing ongoing support to refugee families in Rhode Island, many of whom still suffer from psychological trauma and are trying to adjust to their new lives.

Then came the novel Coronavirus.

COVID-19 has exacerbated challenges for refugee families in Rhode Island, and many families are facing a great deal of psychological uncertainty during this time. Drive-through testing sites are harder for refugees to get to, many of whom cannot afford cars or do not have driving licences. Zoom calls and online teaching are not viable options for many families, who do not have laptops or access to WiFi in their houses. Families are facing food shortages, as they previously relied on school or day care services to cover at least one of their children’s meals each day. Information about the virus is harder to obtain, as many refugees are still overcoming the language barrier and don’t have access to all news outlets. In countless ways, the Coronavirus has amplified pre-existing inequalities between refugees and the rest of the population.

Before the outbreak, the Refugee Dream Center would have on average 50 people coming in each day. Today, the Refugee Dream Center is temporarily closed, but their outreach and impact has been on the same scale, if not more. The Center has been working tirelessly to keep refugees informed, help refugees file for unemployment, and deliver food and cleaning supplies to families.

Much of Omar Bah’s time has been spent checking Whatsapp, responding to questions, and sending messages to families reminding them to stay home. “We have been calling 125 individuals on average each week to tell them about what is going on, to tell them about social distancing, to stay home, and to give them our numbers so they know how to reach us”, Bah explains.

Because language is a barrier for up to 90% of the refugees Bah works with, staff at the center have also been sending out audio recordings in Arabic, French and Swahili to keep refugees up to date on what is happening - especially regarding the orders from the Governor and health officials. These audio recordings are accompanied with photographs of the staff, so that people can see a friendly face during this time. Youth mentoring programs continue to take place virtually.

So far, the Refugee Dream Center has received over 30,000 dollars in grants which they use to personally buy and distribute supplies on a weekly basis. The supplies involve non-perishable/durable food - such as rice, oil, and mayonnaise - as well as cleaning supplies. They have also given many families free WiFi connection, and have distributed 11 computers so that refugees can continue online learning.

Bah organizes the supplies in bags and baskets, and then drives around Rhode Island to deliver them. Most of the deliveries are in Providence. In order to comply with social distancing orders, he leaves the basket at the front door, goes back into his car, and then calls the family to make sure they have received it, before heading on to do his next delivery. Many more volunteers at the Refugee Dream Center have been doing the same thing - passionately putting themselves on the frontlines, delivery after delivery, day after day. It has been a tremendous team effort by the Refugee Dream Center and has truly shown the power of the organization in making a positive impact on the lives of refugees.

For refugees who may have had no social interaction in weeks, getting supplies and continuous support from the Refugee Dream Center has been very gratifying. "Some have been screaming with joy on the phone - they cannot believe we are running around going the extra mile to help," Bah says.

In addition to sending out information and distributing supplies, the Refugee Dream Center has also been helping people understand the benefits they are eligible for. One of their biggest successes over the past few weeks has been in helping on average 10 families per week apply for unemployment benefits, something many refugees didn't even know was an option.

While Bah is occupied with day to day demands, he is also worried about how policies on immigration are likely to change post-pandemic.

There has already been a drastic reduction in refugee resettlement over the past three years due to the anti-immigration policies of the current administration. On April 22, President Trump posted a tweet saying he would suspend all immigration to the US. He then signed an executive order which would impact anyone applying for a green card to become a permanent resident in the US. This may just be the beginning of a likely much longer set of consequences immigrants will face due to the Coronavirus.

Bah says "Now that there has been COVID-19, this administration will use that as an opportunity to further stop refugees from coming." He says the next challenge will be to get families psychologically prepared for the long-term impacts of this pandemic, and to warn families about the difficulty in family reunifications.

While the days ahead may look grim, nothing, not even a global pandemic, can stop Bah from doing his job and supporting refugees in Rhode Island. His work across national borders has been phenomenal, and his perseverance is truly an inspiration to all.

Annika Prinz is a student at Brown University in Providence and is slated to graduate in 2022.

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