

RI NEWS

One woman's path to Providence: How a refugee's persistence propelled her from Somalia to the United States

Despite her physical limitations, Ubah Kahiye presses on, taking advantage of everything the country has to offer.

By **Magdalena Del Valle** Updated May 20, 2022, 6:00 a.m.



Ubah Kahiye learned henna painting while she was in Somalia. She is a student at Community College of Rhode Island, and her artwork is on display at the Refugee Dream Center in Providence. BUSRA TOPRAK -- REFUGEE DREAM CENTER

When Ubah Kahiye was 9 years old, a battle tank launched a bomb at her home in Mogadishu, Somalia, and decimated it. Ten people died. Kahiye survived, but became paralyzed from the waist down.

The explosion was only the beginning of her long journey from home to a refugee camp in Kenya, and all the way to Rhode Island.

Today, Kahiye sits in her bright red wheelchair in the back room of the Refugee Dream Center in Providence, reflecting on her challenges and how she was helped by others along the way.

“If you really pray for God, you will get everything,” she said.

Kahiye is one of hundreds of refugees who have made Rhode Island their home. Between 100 and 345 refugees enter Rhode Island every year, according to the [RI Department of Human Services](#). In November 2021, [Governor Daniel McKee](#) announced the state would welcome 250 Afghan refugees within several months.

With the current conflict in Ukraine, it is only a matter of time before the state opens its doors to more evacuees. Even before refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine dominated headlines, people like Kahiye were escaping their own war-torn countries and finding new lives in the United States.

Kahiye, 34, is a frequent visitor to the RDC, a local organization dedicated to helping refugees feel at home in the United States after they are no longer eligible for government assistance.

“Life for a refugee is not easy,” she said.

‘MOST OF MY LIFE I WAS ALONE’

Since arriving in Providence in 2016, Kahiye has taken countless art classes and is now a student at Community College of Rhode Island. Her work hangs all over the RDC center. A drawing of the sun shining behind two green mountains greets visitors in the lobby. Beside it, a picture of five women in multicolored hijabs picking flowers in a field reflect the center's sense of community.

But Ubah's life was not always so colorful.

"People and bodies mixing. The blood is coming like water outside," Kahiye recalled of the explosion that wrecked her home and incapacitated her.

For three years afterward, Kahiye couldn't move her hands and lived in a hospital. Relying on others to clean, dress and feed her sometimes wasn't enough and Kahiye often remained unwashed and unkempt. People mocked her, she confided through tears.



Ubah Kahiye left Somalia in 2005 and stayed at Kakuma refugee camp for 11 years before coming to the United States and becoming a citizen. BUSRA TOPRAK -- REFUGEE DREAM CENTER

Tragedies like Kahiye's are common in Somalia, where civil war has ruled since 1991.

Kahiye's mother still suffers from the trauma of witnessing criminals murder her husband, Kahiye's stepdad.

Because their mother was not in a position to care for them, Kahiye and her eight siblings were separated and sent to different foster homes. Four of Ubah's eight half-siblings died of

illnesses like anemia or malaria as children. Marian, who was 7, died sleeping in her mother's lap.

"Most of my life I was alone," Kahiye said.

LEARNING HER CRAFT

Kahiye left Somalia for good in 2005. She took a bus to Kenya with money fellow community members raised for her. The 16-year-old arrived at Kakuma refugee camp on Jan. 1, 2005 and stayed there for 11 years.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) founded Kakuma in 1992 following the arrival of the "Lost Boys of Sudan" and protects hundreds of thousands of refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia.

She lived in a tent for a year while UNHCR registered her and found a hut for her to live in. Because the UNHCR only turned on the camp's water fountain for an hour every morning, she had to rise early to fill up the 20-liter jug of water she would use to bathe, wash clothes, and drink from throughout the day.

The days at Kakuma were hot, only dipping to 92 degrees in the winter. When it was windy, the fire would spread from one person's hearth to the entire camp, making it impossible to cook. Even when refugees could cook, the food was limited to porridge, corn and salt. Kahiye constantly wished for rice, flour, soup, vegetables, and more water.

Kahiye filled her days at Kakuma with henna painting, a traditional art she learned helping clean a salon in Somalia. Kahiye put her henna skills to work at Kakuma and decorated refugees' hands with flowers or mandalas for a small price. Kahiye purchased the water and food she needed with the profits.



Ubah Kahiye's family is still in Mogadishu. Every month, she sends her mother money from donations she receives for henna and art. BUSRA TOPRAK -- REFUGEE DREAM CENTER

Kahiye also braved the arduous resettlement process. Refugees do not apply for resettlement themselves, according to the UNHCR. Instead, the organization identifies vulnerable people — those with medical needs, survivors of violence and torture, or women at risk — and considers them for resettlement. Each country then selects the refugees they want to resettle. In 2019, less than .25% of refugees worldwide were resettled globally.

Because the UNHCR prioritizes cases for people with disabilities like Kahiye's, many try to take advantage of the opportunity for themselves.

Two men convinced Kahiye to marry them with hopes of leaving Kenya. After separating from her first husband because of infidelity, she married again. Kahiye learned her new husband had a second disabled wife who had been relocated to the U.S. but had not taken him with her. Kahiye couldn't believe she was the second disabled woman this man married in an attempt to be relocated to America. Feeling betrayed, Kahiye separated from him soon after. She was ready for a better life.

CHALLENGES CONTINUE IN THE U.S.

In 2016, the United States chose Kahiye for relocation.

Being resettled in America is like “winning the lottery,” said Isabel Kayembe, a refugee from Angola and caseworker at the RDC.

Being in America, however, did not mean an end to Kahiye's struggles. Even though Dorcas International Institute, the nonprofit authorized by the U.S. Department of State to resettle refugees in Rhode Island, provided Kahiye with an electric wheelchair and a folding one so she could get around, the first-floor apartment the government arranged for her did not have a ramp.

For months, four stone steps dictated where Kahiye went and when. Sometimes, community members from the RDC or the local mosque carried her up the steps and brought the wheelchair up behind her. Other times, Kahiye tossed the foldable wheelchair down to the sidewalk, hoping someone would stop it from rolling onto the street, and awkwardly used her hands and arms to carry herself down the steps. Sometimes she wouldn't leave her house for days. But Kahiye wasn't angry. She was in America.

SHARING HER INSPIRATION

Kahiye's family remains in Mogadishu. Every month, she sends her mother money from donations she receives for henna and art.

But Kahiye has her own finances to worry about. While she gets some help from the U.S. government in the form of Social Security Disability Insurance, Kahiye only recently finished paying off the debt from her 2016 flight.

Despite her physical and fiscal limitations, Kahiye pushes on, taking advantage of everything the country has to offer. When she first arrived, she learned English and art at Dorcas.

“My first school was Dorcas International,” said Kahiye, who had only received a religious education before arriving in the U.S. Now she spends all her free time on homework or helping others.

Every Friday after going to the mosque, Kahiye spends all afternoon cleaning the RDC. Seamlessly guiding her electric wheelchair down the halls, she sweeps and mops the floors, re-arranges the books, and even cleans the bathrooms. Although RDC executives tell her she doesn't have to do this, Kahiye insists on contributing to the center that has helped her.

Tears line Kahiye's eyes whenever she talks about not being able to go to school in Somalia, but she recognizes this might have been what prompted her fascination with art.

In addition to her henna paintings, she paints pink trees and starry nights on canvas. Kahiye shares her passion with others by giving away her art to friends or the RDC. She also spreads the beauty she creates by posting pictures and videos of her paintings on Instagram and Tik Tok.

"I don't have school, but I have an imagination," Kahiye said.

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