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Photograph courtesy of Teddi Jallow.

In 2009, Teddi Jallow arrived in Rhode Island with few connections and little resources to her name. A nurse from The Gambia, she followed her husband, Omar Bah, a journalist who fled their country's dictatorial regime several years earlier. Now settled in Rhode Island, the couple set about making a life in their new country — attending school, finding jobs and advocating for themselves and others.

In 2015, they founded the Refugee Dream Center to help other refugees adjust to life in the United States. The Providence-based organization offers services both during and after the ninety-day resettlement period and has assisted approximately 15,000 people over the past decade. In January, President Donald Trump indefinitely suspended the United States Refugee Admissions Program, halting refugee resettlement and placing its mission and those of similar organizations in jeopardy. With the political outlook changing by the day, Jallow reflects on the challenges faced by refugees and the center's future amid an uncertain landscape.

Tell us about the Refugee Dream Center and what services you offer.

The Refugee Dream Center is a nonprofit that is based in Providence, and it serves all cities in Rhode Island. We serve refugees and immigrants and we have four major programs — advocacy, training and mentoring, refugee resettlement and integration services. We have twenty classes a week that run. And then we have reception and placement, which is the refugee resettlement program. That is picking somebody up from the airport, [taking them] to their new home and helping them to settle — getting them to appointments, getting the kids to school, fixing the house, the apartment, beds, everything from scratch that you need for them. Even the first meal that they eat. Normally what we do if a refugee is coming from Syria, we get a Syrian family to cook for them. That helps welcome them into their new home.

How has the center been impacted by the recent changes in federal policy under President Trump?

Recently, in January 2025, Trump said to put the whole ban on refugees. There's no refugees coming to the United States. And that means our entire program on reception and placement is shut down. We had to lay off five staff. And then we had forty-nine individuals to support. What Trump failed to understand was America promised to support those refugees that are already here for ninety days. But he banned it, and he not only banned refugees coming, but also added a stop-work order. Meaning those refugees that are here in the U.S., in Rhode Island, nobody should work with them.

Imagine yourself going to a new country, a new place where you don't know anybody. You don't know how to take the bus, how to go around. You have kids who are supposed to go to school. You are supposed to get a job. You need food. You need cultural orientation. And then somebody woke up one day and said, 'Look, now you're on your own. You can do it yourself.' So that is what we are facing right now.

Tell us about the other services you offer.

We do job orientation, we call it Job Club — meaning you come in, we build your resume, we train you on jobs, we help you find a job. And making sure your kids are in school. We have a health promotion program for knowing the culture of American health care.

Then we have a women's program that is all part of the integration services. Our women's program is targeting women that are going through domestic violence. Currently we have twenty-five women and then twenty-five men. And then we have our youth mentoring. We have right now fifty youth. And every youth is matched with an American youth and a mentor.

How many people is the Refugee Dream Center currently serving?

Right now we are serving over 4,000 individuals across the state.

Are there particular countries you're seeing a lot of people coming from?

Right now, a lot from Afghanistan, and also from Syria. And they are all refugees. And then from Guatemala and Venezuela. When it comes to asylum seekers, a lot of them are from Senegal and from Mauritania. The Senegalese, most of them are from the LGBTQ+ [community]. From Senegal they are refugees running from prosecution. And then Mauritania, believe it or not, is slavery. A lot of these young men and women are running from slavery.

What's the feeling in the community at the moment?

People are scared. You see people working three jobs just in case if they are deported, at least they have some money with them. You see people who are scared to send their kids to school because of ICE. You see people who are quitting their work because they fear ICE. You see people who are scared of going for their court appointments. And if they miss those court appointments, they will have deportation orders. So that is the fear that we see in the community. People are suffering. People are depressed.

How many cultures do your staff members and volunteers represent?

Between staff, we speak twenty-one languages. Between the communities, twenty-five. And fifty-seven countries. All our caseworkers are former refugees.

What was your experience like coming to the United States?

I am a refugee from The Gambia, and I came here in 2009 through Dorcas International Institute. When I came, I was lucky because my husband was already here two years before me. So I had help, even though it was so difficult. He was working, going to school full time. Most of the time, I was alone, taking English classes at Dorcas and looking for jobs. But we had this piece that was missing, like a place that you can feel a sense of belonging and home and people who understand you. I remember I had to teach myself how to take the bus. We were living in a duplex apartment, and Omar was interpreting for those families. Even phone calls, letters, they would bring it to him to read. He was involved in so many other organizations as a board member, and then he realized, 'Look, we should start a center where we do the actual work where we support people instead of doing this haphazard.'

So that's how the two of you founded the center?

Yes, in 2015 we finally got an office and moved into that office. It was growing as we go, because there was no post-settlement agency in Rhode Island. Refugees were only served for ninety days. How can you expect somebody to be self-sufficient within ninety days? It's practically impossible. The work comes after the ninety days. Because the ninety days is what we call the honeymoon. That's where they have food stamps. They have health care and then they're coming for classes, going back and forth, learning the bus, the kids are getting enrolled in school. They don't even see a doctor yet, because in Rhode Island, you cannot just come in and see a doctor because we don't have appointments. You have to wait longer than ninety days to get the hospital appointments. You don't even know what is wrong with you yet. Imagine after that you are on your own.

What was your professional background in The Gambia?

For me, back home, I graduated from high school, then went to college to become a nurse. When I came to the U.S., I could not practice as a nurse, but I was a CNA. Then became a med tech and started working and eventually, I graduated from college.

Can you tell us more about your journey from The Gambia?

Omar was a journalist in The Gambia. We were married for two months. He investigated a story about a killing that was an unjust killing. So when that was out, he was wanted. And he had to escape, but the day he was escaping, I was at school in college. And he knew when he called me, they will come for me because they will trace your phone — any person you last call is in trouble. And we did not get to say goodbye to each other.

He narrowly escaped. If you know about his story, he was lucky to make it out. I went home, and when I came back home, our room was ransacked. A neighbor told me, 'Oh, the soldiers came here looking for Omar and you.' I knew something happened, so I went to my uncle's place. I called, [Omar's] phone was not connected. I called his work and they told me, 'Oh, we don't know where he is.' Then I just started crying because I thought they caught him. And in The Gambia, if they catch you, they will not tell anybody they caught you. They just kill you and you go missing for the rest of your life. Nobody will know where you are buried. Nobody will know anything. I thought he was going to be another number.

At night that day on the news, we saw his pictures blasted all over the media. 'Omar Bah wanted.' And for me, it was just like a dream. The man I married for two months, now here are the pictures — wanted, wanted. I 100 percent believed that he was caught and killed. Then about one week later, I receive a call at my uncle's place on the landline. There's this lady, a woman's voice saying, 'I'm looking for Teddi.' She said, 'I'm going to give you somebody to talk to. But do not mention the name, because you will be in trouble. Somebody may be listening.'

The following day, when I received the call, I heard Omar's voice. That's the day I knew he was alive. We both started crying over the phone. I did not hear from him again until he went to Ghana. He was in Ghana for about a year, and then he came to Rhode Island.

Were you afraid for your own safety during that time?

I was so afraid. Imagine, very young, living my life, and all of a sudden my movement is monitored. If I go to the market, I am always monitored. My phone was always monitored. I never used my phone to talk to him. He would always call me through a different line for us to talk. And I have to pretend like he never existed. And when I was doing my paperwork to come to the U.S., I was always escorted by IOM, the International Organization for Migration. They help refugees do their immigration paperwork. I can remember the day I was coming to the U.S. They came to my uncle's place to pick me up where I was staying, put me in their car with their security, and they escorted me to the plane.

Did you have any idea your lives would take you here to the United States?

No. That was never part of the deal. I never thought of traveling all my life. I was born and raised in a very rural village. They

don't allow girls to go to school. Out of my entire family, I'm the only one who ever went to school. I went to school because I was going with my mom to visit a family member, and then a car stopped next to us on the road. They were asking for directions. The lady in the car motivated me. She was wearing a very beautiful purple dress. You could tell she was so different. When she rolled the windows down, as an eight-year-old, I started peeking inside the car. I could not get my eyes off of her. And my mom told them the directions. They kept going, and I just stayed back looking at the car. I ran to catch up with my mom and I said to her, 'Mom, can you buy me that purple dress? It's so beautiful.' I kept bugging her, and she said, 'Come on, stop with that lady. Can't you see, that lady's in a car? That's not a farmer's pocket. These are the people who work with the government.' Then I told her, 'Mom, how can I work with the government?' She said, 'Well, she went to school and worked with the government.' And I said, 'Well, then I'm going to go to school.'

What I saw in that lady, even though I was eight, it's not only the purple dress. She was different. She doesn't look like the person that I was with, the person who will wake up at 5 a.m. to go to the market to sell, to feed her kids. The person who will go to the farm or take water and walk miles to come home, or the person who will be beaten every day because they have food on the table late. That woman was totally different, and I just wanted to be like that woman. From that day, I swore to myself I will buy the purple dresses that I want, and I am working on it every single day of my life.

What do you anticipate the future of the center looks like?

It is scary, but I'm very optimistic and I believe we will survive Trump. It is going to be difficult, but we have amazing people in Rhode Island. Rhode Island is one of the states that is very welcoming, and people are always ready to help and support. So I believe we will have the support. It will not be as if Trump is not here — we lost five staff, and we have another federal grant that we invoiced and we are not getting paid. Sometimes you just wake up and you cannot draw any money. And that is going to affect us, but I have to believe that Rhode Islanders will come to support. Because that's what we are known for.

People are resilient, and that's what Trump fails to understand. Refugees go through hell to get here. So we are already unbreakable, and it's going to be difficult, but we know we will survive. There is, of course, fear and stigma and trauma, but we will survive because we are survivors.

What message do you have for the administration and lawmakers in Rhode Island?

Let them consider what they're saying. Let them have a human heart, an American heart. Because Americans are known for being good. Let them consider these people — working families who are working every day, contributing to taxes, paying taxes, living. They have no criminal record. Their kids are born here, or the kids never chose to come to the country, but because of circumstances, they're here going to school and they should be free like any other American.

What can the average Rhode Islander do to help the Refugee Dream Center? They can do two things. They can donate monetarily. Know that your donation goes so many ways. Today, we use it for bus passes. We use it for toiletries. We use it to help a family pay their rent.

The other part is volunteering. You can always volunteer. You can be matched with a youth to mentor. You can be matched with a family to teach English. You can be matched with a family to take them around to help them know their environment or the city that they live in, or how to get to the grocery store, or help the kids register for school.

Where is your favorite place in Rhode Island?

Narragansett Bay. I love the beach. Maybe it's because Gambia's nickname is the Smiling Coast of Africa, because The Gambia is surrounded by Senegal and on one side is the Atlantic Ocean. So anywhere you go in The Gambia, you see beach everywhere. And the river divides the country in the middle. Maybe that's why I love the water. I just love being next to the ocean. It helps me clear my mind, think, and believe that I can be anything.



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