

**WTE column of February 7, 2015. Editor's headline: "It was a grand day"
CST of same date: "Refugee status a turning point"**

The young man is a naturalized citizen, as am I. Like me, he came to this country as a young adult, settled down, and started a family. Like me, he retains horrid childhood memories of a country at war. My flashbacks are of a toddler at the window, watching a nearby house go up in flames, and stumbling across burned-out fields to craters left by bombs. Soon after my country surrendered, which ended the war. The young man's recollections are more protracted.

He was six when civil war broke out. His parents, proud of their just-finished brick home, owned farmland where they raised vegetables and cereal crops for food, and to sell at market. They also owned a couple of goats, a cow, and some sheep. All this they left behind when they fled for their lives.

"Mother told me she saw her brothers killed by gunmen," he said. I have memories of a mother sharing similar trauma.

"We had to walk to a refugee camp, a distance of 500 miles, taking only what we could carry," he went on. "It took us a month. Often we went without food and water." On their way into Kenya they marched past the weakened, many of them children, dying of hunger and thirst. The screams of those left behind who were attacked by wild animals still ring in his ears.

"It's horrible to leave family dying, or crying for help, and there's nothing you can do." The ones who made it to the refugee camps were lucky, he says. He, his parents, and an uncle arrived utterly exhausted.

They soon found, life in the camps was full of hardships. Unbearably hot during the day, the air filled with dust, nighttimes turned frigid—too cold for people who owned not even a blanket. Food and water were scarce, shelter nonexistent. Worse, since refugees were forbidden to leave and security was nil, "You heard the screaming of young girls being raped by gunmen and you cannot offer any help."

Every two weeks, a UN delegation distributed flour, rice, beans, and cooking oil, but never enough to still people's hunger. Sometimes the food was looted by gunmen.

There were no classrooms. Students sat under stunted trees in the glaring sun, with no health facilities. "A lot of refugees died for lack of medication. Or they died fighting for scarce resources."

In early 2009, the young man was among the lucky ones to be resettled in Colorado. Though it meant the end of refugee life, he encountered a frightening new world: the food was strange, the weather freezing or snowing, the cultural challenge enormous. Though he had learned English in Kenya, communicating was marred by setbacks. An individual of color, and a devoted Muslim, he still finds himself the target of suspicion and hostility.

His parents, and his two siblings born in Kenyan camps, live in Minnesota and attend services in a nearby mosque.

He landed a job at a Denver hotel and worked there eight months, then moved to Greeley to work at the JBS Beef plant, “not a place I’d recommend to anyone,” he said. “Employee safety is minimal, and you suffer a lot of expectations and pressures.” Eventually he enrolled in an accounting program at Colorado State, graduating in 2013. He is married to a Somali refugee. The couple have a two-year-old son.

Involved with refugee communities to assist with interpretation and cultural training since his arrival, he now works for the Greeley Global Refugee Center. One thing he always shares with receiving communities: “No one is born refugee” and “No one decides to be refugee.”

With refugees, he emphasizes “It’s not the end of your life. With luck and some help, it can be a turning point. But you must work at it every day.”

Refugees are screened for health issues and vaccinated before traveling to the country of their resettlement. Travel costs are covered by loans they must repay. Once in the U.S., they are screened and vaccinated again.

“Our Center in Greeley serves refugees and immigrants from 43 countries,” he says. “Different religions, languages, cultural backgrounds.”

Abdirashid Hassan plans to return to school for a master’s program, preferably one that will benefit refugees and immigrants, as soon as finances permit. “I want to stand with them day and night to help achieve their dream of a fresh start.” He is particularly enthusiastic about the Center’s youth program, which mentors refugee youngsters in after-school programs.

Mr. Hassan became a US citizen in Denver on a memorable day in November 2012. “With me were Russians, Mexicans, Iraqis, Guatemalans, and other nationalities who passed the tests.” A Somali friend from Wyoming also attained citizenship. “It was a grand day!”