

# A REFUGEE'S STORY

“When you can’t communicate, everything is terrifying and confusing. At least in Sudan I could understand what was going on around me or ask questions. All I knew that day was suddenly the faces that were always happy were not smiling anymore. The news said it was Muslim terrorists. We didn’t know what was going on, but at the time I couldn’t even ask questions.”

Hager Ahmad, a Sudanese refugee, spent several years as an asylum seeker in Lebanon. When she arrived in August 2001, she and her small family were the first refugees in Waynesboro, Virginia — and then Sept. 11 happened. For a long time, people’s stares in the street let her know they were frightened of her, which made her frightened of them. The situation left her in despair, and she worried about her family’s decision to come to the U.S. Finally, she decided she was not going to fall into this trap any longer.

“Suddenly I thought, ‘As refugees, we are here, but we still don’t feel like we’ve arrived. We need a way to communicate.’ And since then, I’ve been open to questions about my culture and faith. I know I can make a difference.”

Her impressions of refugees’ experiences in the U.S. are mixed. “Some Americans think we are here to steal jobs or go on welfare, but most refugees are trying to put themselves back together after horrible suffering and just want to work hard to keep a job, whatever it is. Still, compared to when I got here, Americans are more open-minded and willing to make sure newcomers are accepted seamlessly into their neighborhoods. That’s important because immigration doors are closing so quickly.”

Eager to facilitate understanding between Americans and refugees, Hager has been trained as a public speaker and advocate, sharing her experiences as both a woman



and a refugee. She is involved with multiple organizations in and around Waynesboro, one of which is Bridges, which conducts an intercultural community potluck and dance every three months at which people of all faiths socialize, learning about one another’s cultures in a relaxed setting. She is also the founder and president of the Sudanese Community, Harrisonburg, VA, an organization of 13 families and 45 individuals that supports refugee families. Finally, as a certified medical interpreter and Arabic translator, Hager has worked with Church World Service, teaching Americans how to respond in a culturally appropriate manner to refugees in their community.

The move from asylum seeker to resettled refugee is an exhausting, disconcerting process that can take many years to navigate, usually while stuck in a dangerous place. For more information about U.S. refugee resettlement, go to [pcusa.org/pda/refugee](http://pcusa.org/pda/refugee).

Hager Ahmad shares her story as part of a panel at Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia with PDA and Church World Service.