



# DISCIPLES REFUGEE & IMMIGRANT STORIES

## ***A Disciples Immigrant Family Struggles:***

Cynthia Pena never anticipated her family would face such challenges. She and her husband Juan Luis have served as Youth Pastors for over 7 years in the Alpha and Omega Disciples congregation in Phoenix, Arizona, and she and her husband have been part of the first Hispanic class of study with Lexington Theological Seminary. Cynthia is a U.S. citizen, with U.S. citizen children. Her husband has been the primary breadwinner, working as a painting contractor for over 14 years. Although he was born in Mexico City, he has not returned to the country for over 14 years. In April, committed to paying off a simple traffic ticket, he went to the courthouse to pay his fine. The courts took his money. But then, because they'd noticed in his records a trespassing charge from a decade ago (a charge he'd long ago taken care of), the judge sent ICE officials to his house to follow him as he went to work in the early morning four days later. Detaining him, he was sent first to Florence Detention Center, and then to Eloy Detention Center. For two days, Cynthia was unable to find out what had happened to her husband. When she did, she was devastated.



*Cynthia (far R), her husband (3<sup>rd</sup> from L), & children at a family celebration.*

“My daughter’s grades in school dropped immediately when he went into detention, and my son feels angry and confused. For all of us, this is extremely difficult for our family, as my name was not on our bank accounts, and my husband has always provided for our family. I was in school, but now I have dropped out and am applying to find a job.” Recently, Cynthia received news that the court denied her husband’s ability to get a bond. Another court date looms soon. She is fearful, and has visited seven lawyers to try to find out what she might do. “I am grateful for everyone in the Disciples churches who has reached out. We need our churches to help families like mine learn what to do to protect our families, and we must all rise up and make a priority to prepare in this time. It’s not only the husband or wife affected in situations like this—it’s the children. As Christians, we must pray, but we must also ACT. Faith without works is dead.”

## ***An Asylum Seeker Helps Disciples and Ecumenical Partners Understand Migrant Realities:***

Stephanie\* (name changed for protection) and her family experienced traumatic threats by drug cartels in her home country of Guatemala, as they repeatedly tried to force her mother-in-law—who worked for a bank—to funnel money illegally through her workplace. Refusing them, Stephanie’s family moved to try life anew in another nearby town, but were again followed and threatened. Finally, they escaped and fled through Mexico to seek asylum protections in the U.S.



Upon arrival at the U.S. border last Christmas Eve, Stephanie’s family\* approached border authorities. She recalls, “I’ll never forget my Christmas meal, as all I had to eat was craisins.” After presenting herself, Stephanie\* was placed on an ankle monitor, and she and her 3- year-old son were released to join an uncle in the Washington, D.C. area, where she remains and will deliver a baby boy next month. Meanwhile, her mother-in-law was detained in Southern California, and her husband was sent for detention in Georgia. As her family is preparing their asylum case, an opportunity guaranteed for through both international and U.S. law, Stephanie\* grieves the distance from her family. Disciples and other congregations are offering support for immediate needs and are seeking legal assistance; even as Stephanie’s\* plight undergirds root causes that force families into migration, unjust separations faced by immigrants, complexities of lengthy legal processes, and daily challenges to meet human needs and remain hopeful.

## ***A Refugee Finds and Gives New Life in a Disciples Congregation:***



*(Peter, in center of left photo, with Rev. Linda Jones (L) and Kentucky Refugee Ministry’s (KRM) Co-Sponsorship Developer Maha Kolko (R) at the Disciples Women Spring Gathering in Frankfurt, KY. in April, 2018. Peter shares his story for the first time publicly at the event in photo at R.)*

Region, saying, “What was my food? It was a tree. It was a leaf. It was mud.” The boys first stayed for six years with other refugees in Ethiopia, surviving day by day, and sometimes seeking safety in the river. As violence continued to encroach there, Peter tragically

was one day shot in the face by soldiers, and was then given assistance by the Red Cross in Africa. He and other boys next found their way into a U.N. refugee camp in Kenya, where they lived for about 10 years. “There” he said, “we were given 5 gallons of water two times a day—to be used for cooking, showering, and drinking.”

When his injuries prioritized him for resettlement through Kentucky Refugee Ministries, he eventually found his way into the welcoming arms of Jeffersontown Christian Church near Louisville, which has worked with eight refugee families over the years. Church members have helped Peter get the multiple surgeries needed to repair the damage to his face and teeth from being shot. “In Africa” he testified, “Red Cross was my family. But here, Jeffersontown Christian Church is my family.” And indeed, the love of church members for Peter is apparent. Rev. Linda Jones, KY Regional Minister and Jeffersontown Christian Church member beams as she says, “Peter, his new wife, and three children have brought so much love into the church. He says he has ‘found new life.’ But through him, the church did too.”

### ***Disciples Model Extreme Hospitality:***



*(Michael Puckett, layleader with Beargrass Christian Church and KRM Board Chair on far left in left photo, together with restaurant owner Sal Rubino in blue plaid shirt. 4<sup>th</sup> from L. in left photo is the John Koehlinger, Ex. Dir. of KRM in Louisville. Second from R. in left photo is Rev. Derek Penwell, at R. is Jane Parker of Middletown Christian Church, KRM Co-Sponsorship Developer Maha Kolko is in red, and RIM Director Rev. Sharon Stanley-Rea is in green. Other photos courtesy of KRM.)*

Michael Puckett, Elder of Beargrass Christian Church in Louisville and Board Chair for Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM) for the last six years says, “For the past decade and a half I’ve been inspired by the courage and resilience of refugees arriving in Louisville, and by the efforts of the staff of KRM to assist them in resettling here.” The Beargrass Church has welcomed eleven refugee families over the years, which Puckett says has “enriched the lives of all in the Beargrass Christian family, as the hope, dignity, and self-worth of the refugees have been restored, and the resilience of the human spirit has been on full and vivid display.” KRM also helps to inspire other community leaders such as restaurant owner Sal Rubino of “The Café” in the city to employ new refugees to help sustain and grow their businesses. “Refugees learn quickly here how to cook even Kentucky classics like a Hot Brown!” says Rubino. “They are some of our most hard working employees!”

Beargrass Christian Church further puts wheels to their welcoming through their creative “Pedal Power Project” in collaboration with KRM—which has provided over 3,000 bicycles to refugees in the area since 2013! As project coordinator Bob Callander says, “Rusty frames? No problem, we’ll clean them. Flat tires and tubes? No problem, we’ll replace them. Broken spokes, brakes, pedals? No problem, we’ll repair them.” Year by year, bicycles are also presented to refugees as a part of Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer’s Give-A-Day Week of Compassion each Spring. See here and above for photos, as the Mayor attended the giveaway for the fourth time: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/KentuckyRefugeeMinistries/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=10160221545940468](https://www.facebook.com/pg/KentuckyRefugeeMinistries/photos/?tab=album&album_id=10160221545940468), and see local news coverage about the project here: [https://voice-tribune.com/\\_/news/cover-story/pedal-power-local-organization-gives-refugees-set-wheels/](https://voice-tribune.com/_/news/cover-story/pedal-power-local-organization-gives-refugees-set-wheels/).

Rev. Dr. Derek Penwell, Senior Pastor of Douglass Blvd. Christian Church in Louisville, has also recognized for years that another essential gift communities of faith must offer refugees is our public voice of welcome. As he wrote in Huffington Post, insights from the parable of the Good Samaritan “seem especially appropriate to remember as we decide how to treat Syrian refugees running for their lives: No matter your religious credentials, the test of your faith is not your doctrinal purity, but how you treat others—especially those who are most vulnerable. Regardless of the nature of your fear, the primary responsibility of those who follow Jesus (especially leaders) is to care for the powerless. Christians don’t get to assume as a result of their faith commitments that they possess some kind of superiority to foreigners of ‘dubious’ religious pedigree. In short, when in doubt, embrace your fears and help anyway.” Dr. Penwell further demonstrated his commitment to advocacy when he helped gather and lead area interfaith partners to support a sign on statement (<https://derekpenwell.net/the-company-of-the-eudaimon/2015/12/8/position-statement-a-call-by-communities-of-faith-to-welcome-syrian-refugees>) and hold a Press Conference underlining the moral imperative of welcoming Syrian and refugees. See video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jav5n6JIH0>.

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