



reaching out

AmeriCorps Member Empowers African Refugees

A refugee is an individual granted legal status by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency based on the person's "persecution, or fear of persecution, on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." Refugees have the right to live and work in the United States and eventually can become U.S. citizens.

Linda Id'deen came to Blue Ridge Commons in Charlottesville, Virginia 2 years ago as an AmeriCorps member, and was immediately struck by the unique and urgent needs of the community's African refugee population. Approximately 12 families living at Blue Ridge Commons have fled countries in Africa ravaged by civil war, drought, and famine. Like the hundreds of thousands of other refugees trying to escape from violence and poverty in Africa, these families of mostly women and children arrived in the United States with little more than the clothes on their backs and hope in their hearts, ready for a fresh start far from the chaos that forced them to abandon their homes.

"These people are coming from a war-torn world where they lived in mud huts and subsisted on meager allotments of food. Once they get here, they are overwhelmed by all of our modern conveniences such as toilets and stoves, not to mention basic chores such as making a doctor's appointment or balancing a check book," commented Id'deen.

What was perhaps even more remarkable to Id'deen, however, was the motivation of the refugees to educate themselves and improve their situation. As a former social worker, the now-retired Id'deen felt herself moved by the families' determination to succeed, and began devoting all of her skills and resources to assisting them as they transitioned into American life. Id'deen has since worked non-stop to connect the refugees with health care providers, teachers, and job providers, while personally showing them how to cook, clean, and shop. Id'deen also championed the creation of a library at Blue Ridge Commons once she saw how much the new residents treasured books and reading.

"These families are in my heart forever, and even though my service time with AmeriCorps is up, I will work with them for rest of my life," Id'deen said.



Above: Linda Id'deen says that her work with Blue Ridge Commons' African refugee population has stirred her heart, mind, and soul.