

Posted on Sun, Jan. 20, 2008

# Finding home

## Refugees settle in Bluegrass

By Jennifer Hewlett - [JHEWLETT@HERALD-LEADER.COM](mailto:JHEWLETT@HERALD-LEADER.COM)



David Perry | Staff

Sharon Chrisman, right, handed Ikra to her mother, Tausi Havyarimana, during dinner at First Presbyterian Church in Lexington. Havyarimana and her family are 1972 Burundians -- their families fled the African nation to escape ethnic cleansing.



[Burundi facts](#)

Alli Alfani says he's from Burundi, but he doesn't know that country. Since September, he and his family have been getting to know Lexington.

They're among 48 Burundian refugees who have resettled in the Lexington area in recent months.

The refugees are called "1972 Burundians" because their families were forced to flee the African country of Burundi that year to escape ethnic cleansing. Many of the people classified as 1972 Burundians are the children or grandchildren of those who fled in 1972 and have never actually lived in that country. Instead, they've spent most, or even all, of their lives in refugee camps in surrounding African countries, including Rwanda, Congo and Tanzania.

The 1972 Burundians who have resettled in Lexington came here from a Tanzanian refugee camp. About 20 others are expected soon, and even more could eventually be relocated here. Tanzania has a large influx of refugees from surrounding countries, and its infrastructure can't support them all, said Barbara Kleine, director of Kentucky Refugee Ministries' Lexington office, which is helping the newcomers.

"It's a hard adjustment. The culture and the language -- that is all difficult. But, for the most part, everyone is doing really well," said Karissa Porter, client services coordinator of the refugee organization's Lexington office.

"It's the wish of God that I'm here," 34-year-old Alli Alfani said through an interpreter during a program at Lexington's First Presbyterian Church on Wednesday. Alfani's father was killed in Burundi in 1972, he said. His mother fled to Congo, where he was born.

"When the war started in Congo, my mother was killed," he said. His two sisters also died in Africa. One was killed in 1972 in Burundi; the other died after an illness in Congo. "I don't have parents. I don't have anything. That's why U.S. government says 'Alli, you can come here,'" he said.

Alfani's wife, Tausi Havyarimana, 30, who was born in Burundi, left that country in 1996 after her father was killed. She fled to Tanzania, where she met her husband. She doesn't know if her mother, who also fled to Tanzania, and siblings are still alive.

"We have a bad life, tough life," she told the church audience through the interpreter. "Eating the same foods 11 years. ... The criminals were so many, come to the camp, rape women."

The couple's son, Kudra, 8, and daughters, Aisha, 5, and Ikra, nearly 19 months, were born in Tanzania.

Each member of the family has a different surname.

"There's no sense of a family name; that's just not part of their culture," Porter said. Alfani and his family belong to the Hutu ethnic group.

He and his wife speak Kiswahili and Kirundi; the children speak Kirundi. But now, all are learning English.

Although the family is Muslim, Alfani told the audience, "Wherever they preach God, I'm there."

The family is being sponsored by First Presbyterian Church. Church members have been furnishing them with household items, money and English lessons.

"We're basically helping them assimilate into life here in Lexington," said Sharon Chrisman, a member of the church who is helping the family.

Alfani and his family live in an apartment on Liberty Road, where they are adjusting to things they never had in Africa, such as a television and other electronic devices and household appliances. The family usually gets around town by bus.

Alfani works as a custodian at Kirwan Tower on the University of Kentucky campus; his wife is not employed, but would like to be. The two older children attend Julia R. Ewan Elementary School.

Kentucky Refugee Ministries' Lexington office would like to see more organizations sponsor refugees that are coming into the area, Porter said. So far, First Presbyterian Church, Christ the King Cathedral and the Church of All Nations are each sponsoring one 1972 Burundi family, she said.

Currently, Kentucky Refugee Ministries in Lexington is assisting about 79 refugees, most of whom are 1972 Burundians and Congolese who have been here less than six months, Kleine said.

"Normally we pay three months' rent and have them paying their own bills and rent by the fourth month," Porter said. But, she said, finding everyone a good job has been tough lately, making self-sufficiency a problem.

"We have people who have been here five and six months who are not employed yet," she said.

And, donations to the organization are very low right now, she added.

The U.S. State Department provides one-time funding of \$425 for each refugee, she said. Since it opened in 1998, the Lexington office of Kentucky Refugee Ministries has helped about 700 refugees from throughout the world resettle in Central Kentucky.

A large number of 1972 Burundians are coming because the State Department requires that they not be ethnically isolated, Kleine said. The requirement also goes for refugees from other places, as well. Thousands of 1972 Burundians have been moving to cities throughout the United States, including Chicago and cities in Texas and North Carolina.

Some of the 1972 Burundians coming here have had more exposure to modern conveniences than others. Some have attended universities, Kentucky Refugee Ministries officials said. But for many, coming here is a big adjustment.

"I need help," Alfani and Havyarimana say often about adjusting to their new lives here. But the family is getting used to Lexington.

Havyarimana has learned to bake brownies.

They even have a UK basketball poster and a UK football poster on their apartment