Voices of Sisters
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Migration



Mary's House, which serves refugees who are single mothers in Cleveland, throws a surprise party celebrating all of the moms' birthdays. (Provided photo)



by Sr. Margaret Cessna

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After hours and hours of travel, Jeanne stepped off the plane with her four children, one in her arms, into the waiting warmth and smiles of Catholic Charities staff. They rode in the van to her new apartment that had been set up the day before. Everything this family needed was there. Including beds. No more sleeping on a dirt floor. She could breathe normally again. Although she did not yet know it fully, she was home.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops resettles refugees in agreement with the United States through the federal Refugee Admissions Program. Throughout the country, Catholic Charities' Migration and Refugee Services have welcomed thousands of refugee families.

Ordinarily, nuclear families arrive together. Mother, father, children and often grandparents. It became clear to family mentors that families with single moms had a much more difficult time adjusting. Not having another adult in the home to help with child care, adapting to a new country, and employment creates special challenges.

These women have fled their home countries in fear of persecution. They are scared, tired and alone. The burden of caring for children in a new country, without speaking the language or having the knowledge of the culture, is daunting for all refugees, but more so for single mothers.

And so, an idea was born. A plan was needed to better serve single mom families. With the help of grants from the Sisters of the Humility of Mary, the idea became reality, and Mary's House in Cleveland was created. Along with the grant came sisters who volunteered to serve as family mentors.

One core tenet of the Humility of Mary community's mission is hospitality, the opening of hearts and homes, as well as the commitment to embrace the diversity of all peoples. The situations of each family are as diverse as the number of countries they hail from.

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We embrace the diverse strengths and needs of each family. Additionally, we are given the great opportunity to use our resources to meet needs, especially those of people who are poor. Single mother cases require extensive time and attention. The Mary's House program fills the service gap, providing services and emotional support for mothers and children.

Krishna is 18. She was born in Bhutan but spent most of her life in a refugee camp in Nepal before being resettled in Cleveland. She is physically mature. Mentally, not so much.

She is the elder of two daughters of her single mother and is a loved member of this refugee family that I mentor.

Krishna is cognitively disabled. But she is able. She is not paralyzed and can move her body. She can walk. She can voice pleasure or displeasure, but she cannot speak. She is not very social. She will let me rub her arm or her back, but she rarely touches anyone but her mother.



Krishna holds my hand. (Provided photo)

I was sitting beside her one day. When she reached out to hold my hand, I snapped this photo because I did not know if it would ever happen again. I caught a tiny glimpse of her generosity, of her spirit, when she touched me. I don't ever want to forget it. Skin to skin. Amazing grace. Thank you, Krishna.

And then one morning, Krishna died. Unexpectedly. Her only means of communication were her sparkling eyes, a smile and sometimes even a little giggle.

I often wondered what was going on behind that smile, that giggle. What I do know is that while her body and her brain were so compromised, her spirit never was. Her mom and her sister and all of us who treasured her were heartbroken. But in my wildest imagination, I picture her somewhere in the far beyond, singing and dancing and encouraging us to keep moving on. We will. But we will never forget or fail to appreciate her presence in our lives and her willingness to touch, to smile. And sometimes to giggle. Rest in peace, Krishna. Rest in peace.

There is a house that is used for meetings and on occasion temporary shelter for a family in need. But Mary's House is also a program with many services available for the single moms.

From the very beginning, one founding principle for Mary's House was to provide the opportunity for the single moms to get to know each other so that they would have the opportunity to bond, to share their journey. In the company of each other, these women who escaped from oppression and unspeakable indignities in their native lands come together to learn how to persevere and prosper. They get to know each other and voice their fears and concerns in a space free of judgment.

Single mothers are equipped with the knowledge and resources to enable them to truly succeed in their new life. They build support networks with one another and can reach out to each other in times of need.

One day we celebrated the birthdays of our single moms in one big surprise party! For some of them, it was the first time they had ever had a birthday cake. Joy all around.

Community happens around their common table. They experience a sense of comfort where together they can learn new ways of living in their adopted home. They find strength and encouragement in their relationship with each other. Bonding takes place with the staff and the family mentors as these women let go of fear and embrace the joys of their new freedom.



Some of the single moms gather at Mary's House to frame nature photos donated by a photographer and friend of the program. (Provided photo)

Personal bonding often happened at "the table." Rose, a photographer and a friend of the program, understands the power that a touch of beauty can bring in the space of remembered suffering. She donated nature photos and funds to buy frames. Several of the single moms gathered at Mary's House and framed the photos they had chosen. It was a happy day.

Due to COVID-19 this very long dining room table at Mary's House has been replaced with Chromebooks. Special funding from the Humility of Mary community was used to purchase the computers and to pay for Wi-Fi. A major benefit is that the women do not have to travel for these meetings and can participate in the evening. They have learned Zoom quickly and can also use it for other essential purposes, including conversations with their children's school office and with teachers.

Language classes, job preparation, culture introduction and more are part of the program. Mary's House empowers single mothers to attain self-sufficiency. Once the mother attains the ability to take care of herself and her family, she no longer needs this special program. As these women become more independent and leave the

program, new mothers arrive and begin the process.

In the six years since the beginning of the program, 401 mothers and 991 minor children from 13 different countries have been welcomed, cared for and served.

Grace. Hope. Redemption. *Mary's House*.

[Margaret Cessna is a member of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary. For the past 12 years, she has been a family mentor for Catholic Charities' office of Migration and Refugee Services. As a freelance writer, she has published in journals, newspapers and magazine, and has written two books.]