

Open For Business

catchy
headline

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THE DENVER FOUNDATION

scene
setting

It's tea time on an early spring day at the African Community Center, and nine women sit in a circle in a crowded sewing studio. Around the table, many of them don scarves and hijab; one wears a colorful cap that recalls fashions of the Republic of the Congo, the country she left years ago, ultimately bound for America.

The women lean in and listen as their teacher, Kristi Rogers, presents a lesson in English. They help one another decode mysterious words and concepts, translating into Arabic, Burmese, English, Farsi, Somali, and Tigrinya.

unique voice

"We are learning new things in this class, but I want to tell you, you are already wonderful," says Rogers, clasping her hands to represent two people joined together. "You are friends. This is a community."

Rogers is program coordinator for We Made This, a sewing program and social venture that brings women together every weekday. Founded in 2015 by the African Community Center (ACC), one of the state's three refugee resettlement agencies, We Made This is supported in part by gifts and grants from Denver Foundation fundholders and donors. The program invites refugees, most of whom have been in the United States for fewer than five years, into a safe environment where they connect with others who've had similar experiences, easing the isolation and uncertainty of facing a new culture all alone.

who, what,
when, where,
why

introduces
a strong
protagonist

"At first I was nervous here, but now I feel comfortable to have this safe place," says Naima Aryan, who left Morocco 20 years ago and now lives in Denver with her husband, a refugee from Afghanistan, and their two daughters. Before coming to We Made This, she felt isolated when her daughters left for school each day. "I was just sitting at home; it was lonely. It was boring. When I found this place, I came here to sew, but I'm so happy to learn the other cultures, to learn who they all are.

"It's very interesting," Aryan continues. "They want to know about you, and I want to know about them."

scene
setting

We Made This' cheerful workshop on ACC's second floor hums with the sounds of bobbins and needles, as the women work bright textiles through industrial sewing machines stationed around the room. They make tote bags and placemats, infinity scarves, and ornaments from bolts of donated fabric that are stacked floor-to-ceiling along the walls.

details

Goods from We Made This are mainly sold at local craft and farmers markets. Participants keep 55 percent of the profits; the rest covers expenses. At the end of the program, which lasts about six weeks, participants graduate with a certificate, a new set of skills, and a circle of connections and job referrals in a city that's now slightly more familiar.

For Tintin Pyone, We Made This has provided a career as well as a community. She first learned to sew in her native Burma, which she fled amid rising violence in the early '90s. She spent 20 months in a refugee camp in Thailand before she was approved to come to the United States. In 2011, Pyone joined her sister and brother in Colorado. She now works as We Made This' sewing teacher. "I want to help the refugees," she says in the same quiet, steady voice she uses to instruct the sewers in certain stitches and cutting techniques. "The ladies here, before, they never want to go outside. We told them, 'You can't stay home. You need to learn. You need to come to We Made This.'

example of strong protagonist

"I tell them, after you graduate, you can work anywhere. They can make money," Pyone continues. "Everybody need to try. Everybody need to try for their life." Aryan, one of the older women in the program, agrees. She serves as a kind of surrogate family member for fellow We Made This students, translating and explaining things, especially to newcomers.

shows refugee perspective

"It's not easy to move from one country," she continues. "Different language, culture. So much change. This place helps me accept people, and how they are different. It takes time to say: This is my country, now I understand."

Approximately 2,000 refugees come to Metro Denver each year, displaced by war, persecution, and natural disasters, uprooted from normal lives by crises not of their making. They leave behind conflicts in Burma, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and other countries. They also leave families, homes, and professions. Beloved people and pets, photographs and legal documents. Refugees live through one of the most difficult experiences a human can have. According to the United Nations, more than half suffer from long-term effects of trauma, including PTSD.

use of data to support story

Fortunately for those who resettle in Colorado, the long journey leads to a place known for openness as well as economic opportunities. Most new arrivals to Denver, Aurora, Greeley, and Colorado Springs find employment within three months, as their visas require. According to a study released in 2016 by the state's Colorado Refugee Services Program, 95 percent of refugees make steady progress toward integration within four years, especially when connected to resources for employment and economic sufficiency, social bonding, and cultural knowledge.

use of data to support story

Denver Foundation fundholders and donors have long helped immigrants and refugees build lives in Colorado. They've provided food and housing, even mattresses and housewares. They've underwritten language trainings and translation services, citizenship education, and internships and scholarship. Since January, Foundation fundholders have increased directed giving to organizations that advocate for refugees and immigrants, reflecting a national trend.

TDF connection

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