

WELCOME H♥ME *Gala*



April 24th, 2025
5:45pm - 8:45pm

At the beautiful
Yates Illuminates
3260 Davenport Street

**RESTORING
DIGNITY**

*Relevant
Community Church*
Angel Award Recipient

Bridget Perry
Gala Chair

WELCOME
HOME  Gala

Sponsors

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DEVELOPMENT



CIRA Center for Immigrant & Refugee Advancement

Healthy. Vibrant.
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Gala Schedule

5:45pm - Doors open; buffet dinner begins; drinks available

6:00pm - Performances begin (buffet dinner open until 7:45pm)

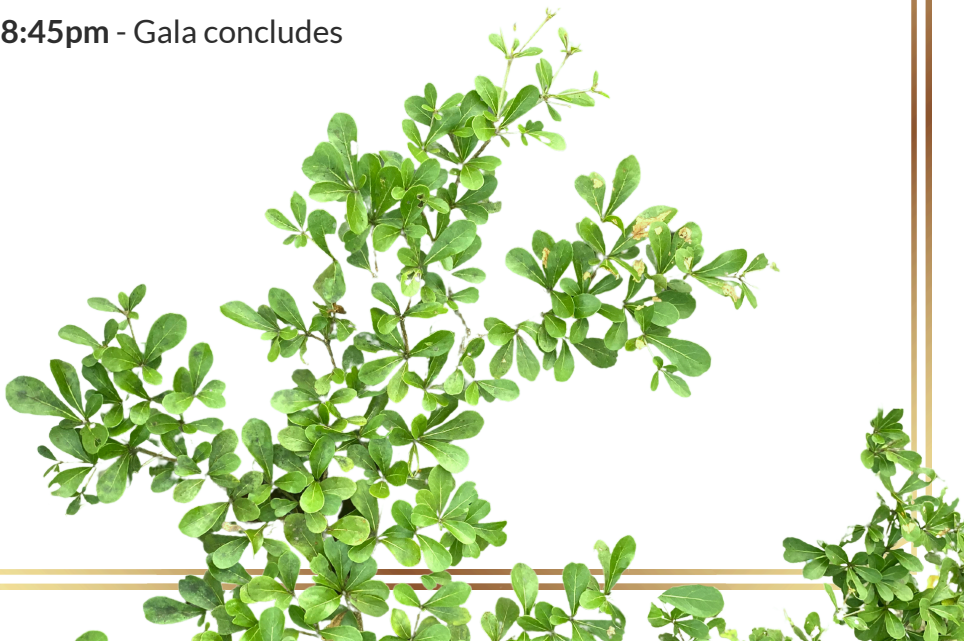
- **Performance emcee** - Thein Poe Poe Aung

7:40pm - Silent auction closes

7:45pm - Program starts

- **Program emcee** - Timon Gurung
- **Founder's remarks** - Hannah Vlach
- **Angel Award recipient** - Relevant Community Church
- **Restoring Dignity video** - Created by staff
- **Raise the Paddle** - Auctioneer Alex Pearson

8:45pm - Gala concludes





Relevant Community Church

Since opening in 2009, Relevant Community Church has focused on serving its local community and making a global impact on the Karen people from Burma. With a shared passion for supporting local refugee families, Relevant Community Church has partnered with Restoring Dignity to help meet the needs of hundreds of Karen families, beginning with Home Makeover #11 in 2014. Together, we have helped clean, repair and improve living conditions for individuals seeking refuge in Omaha – building a partnership that impacts families here and around the world.

In 2012, Restoring Dignity arose from a desire to provide much-needed home items and repairs to a family who had suffered the unthinkable loss of a child. We gathered as friends and family and completed our **first home makeover** – an act meant to create an environment where this family could **grieve in dignity**. Shortly after, we learned of a widowed mother and her children who were also in need. As a community, we responded, and kept responding, as more and more families emerged needing support.

It's hard to believe we started in a living room 13 years ago and then moved to a garage to store donated items. Our first garage had no electricity, no plumbing and no bathroom. In the dead of winter, we sat in our cars to stay warm, waiting for community members dropping off beds and dressers. There was no heat and no air conditioning – only a **vision fueled by love, grit and determination**.



*The garage where we stored donations,
donated by a volunteer (2015),*

Eventually, we moved into a neighboring garage that had electricity and heat (but no air conditioning) and a bathroom – although the door was just a large piece of styrofoam. Volunteers and community members rallied around us, filling the space with donations for refugee families. Every step, no matter how small, felt monumental.

Fast forward to 2018, when we were completing a home makeover and discovered the family had **no air conditioning**. The heat was so overwhelming that they had a hard time sleeping at night. A lightbulb went off in our heads at that moment, and we decided that in addition to providing home makeovers, we would also begin accepting donations of window air conditioning units and installing them in family homes that needed them. We launched our first-ever “**Window A/C Drive**” and community members were incredibly supportive and provided us with several dozen units. The summer of 2018 was busy with **volunteers installing air conditioning units all across Omaha!**



Volunteer Tony installing one of the first window a/c units of the summer (2018)

While this was an exciting time that expanded the scope of what we offered, it ended in a way that none of us could have anticipated in the fall of 2018. It was then that Restoring Dignity was turned upside down – launching us onto an **entirely new trajectory** from our humble beginnings as a small, all-volunteer, community-led effort.

While installing A/C units at an apartment complex in Omaha, tenants shared with us the **unacceptable and unconscionable housing conditions** they were enduring.

We documented collapsed ceilings, prolific mold and other serious conditions, then shared the images with local caseworkers, who escalated them to the City of Omaha. In a whirlwind of events, the city responded by shutting down all units in a single day after **discovering over 2,000 code violations**, including gas leaks, dangerous electrical conditions and a host of other serious issues. What started as an effort to bring relief from the heat quickly uncovered dangerous conditions that ultimately led to the displacement of 99 refugee families – more than 500 people.

With no formal organization, no budget beyond garage rent and no staff, we faced a critical question: how would we respond? Despite working other jobs, **we were committed to helping families start over.** We matched every displaced family with a sponsor—a local church, business or group of friends—who would provide mattresses, bedding, furniture, kitchenware, hygiene items and essentials.



Sponsors and families from the condemned apartment complex picking out furniture at our community donation center (2018).



Mattresses being transported to family homes after the displacement.

Hundreds of volunteer hours poured into this effort. Coordinating 99 sponsorships over a few months was like completing 99 home makeovers—almost one every day. **Out of this overwhelming challenge, Restoring Dignity the organization was born.** During this time, we applied for 501(c)3 nonprofit status, received angel funding to cover growing costs and hired our first employee. We turned crisis into calling.

In 2021, crisis broke out again, but this time it was in Kabul, Afghanistan. **As Omaha prepared to welcome over 1,000 Afghan refugees** in a few months time, we saw another gap: there was no centralized furniture donation center to help families rebuild their homes. While our community donation center was flourishing, it was not large enough to meet the growing needs of our city. We partnered with The Furniture Project to create **Omaha's first city-wide furniture bank.** In just four months, we transformed an **empty 18,000-square-foot warehouse into a thriving furniture bank**, thanks to the generosity of Omaha philanthropy, 1,520 individual donors and 519 volunteers. After managing it for two years, we handed operations over to our friends at The Furniture Project. Today, this furniture bank **remains a vital part of Omaha's social safety net**, and we are honored to have played a part in bringing it to life

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BEFORE: The empty furniture bank warehouse (December 2021)



AFTER: Within 3 months, the warehouse was full and a lot of shelving had been donated and built. Additionally, a "bed bug heat room" was built, in which all used mattresses were treated upon being donated (March 2022)

Since becoming a 501(c)3 non-profit, we have **grown from impacting a few hundred people a year to making a difference in the lives of over 7,000 people in 2024 alone.** We expanded from zero staff to 15 employees—six full-time and nine part-time—80% of whom are former refugees. We are not only providing services, we are creating jobs and building community leadership.

Our largest growth as an organization happened when **we shifted from solely focussing on emergency needs and started asking how to prevent emergencies altogether.**

Inspired by Desmond Tutu's philosophy: *"There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in,"* we began building programs that create long-term housing stability.

It was at this time that the **Welcome Home Program** was born: a unique, in-home education program where former refugees teach new refugee families the essentials of maintaining a safe and healthy home. Classes cover cleaning, food storage, fire safety, basic maintenance, and more – all taught in the family's native language.

The Welcome Home Program quickly grew from a **small pilot program** to a powerhouse initiative. In 2024 alone, our 10 family educators taught in 17 languages, reaching 32 ethnic communities. Since 2019, we have **delivered more than 6,000 in-home classes and impacted the lives of 7,365 children and 7,903 adults – a total of over 15,000 people.** We currently have over **3,000 families on our waitlist** for classes, highlighting the importance of our work and why we must keep going!



Families are taught how to maintain a healthy home in our Welcome Home Program. Instructors speak the native language of the families in the program and all products are labeled with translated, waterproof tags.

And while we are incredibly busy here in Omaha, we know that these classes need to be taught nationwide. **Our vision for the Welcome Home Program is national.** We are actively optimizing the curriculum so that refugee-serving agencies across the country can replicate it. We believe every refugee family deserves access to culturally relevant, high-quality education that empowers them to navigate life in a new country safely and confidently. We dream of a day when every city has a **Welcome Home team** – equipping families with the knowledge and tools they need to thrive.

Our work today lays the foundation for that future. We are refining training manuals, creating adaptable lesson plans and building partnerships beyond Nebraska. **We are not just building a program – we are building a movement.**



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on next
page**

At the same time, we are **meeting urgent needs on the ground**. In 2024, we hired a **part-time housing advocate** to help refugee families facing unsafe living conditions. Whether it's mold, water leaks, broken furnaces or unresolved safety hazards, our housing advocate now stands beside families, mediating with landlords, escalating issues when needed and **fighting for their dignity** when emergencies arise.

Over the years, our work has expanded to meet the needs of the moment. We have:

- Installed **273 window air conditioners**.
- Transformed **43 homes** through our home makeover program.
- Fought for and won **mandatory rental inspections** in Omaha.
- Provided **housing advocacy** support to over **500 households**.
- Created meaningful **volunteer opportunities** for over **2,000 people**.
- Hosted **five large community fairs**, connecting hundreds of refugee families with health resources, education and support.
- Rose to meet **urgent needs during COVID-19**, including delivering 12,540 cloth masks to refugee families; producing 424 multilingual COVID-19 videos and hosting 34 mobile vaccine clinics.
- Partnered to launch **Omaha's Emergency Language Alert Network**, sending out translated emergency alerts.
- Supported families through our **Family Support Fund**, assisting with rent, wheelchair ramps, appliance repairs and emergency flood aid.
- Completed Omaha's first-ever **Refugee Housing Planning Study**, our most recent proud accomplishment! This created a roadmap forward for how to better support our incredible refugee communities.

With over **60,000 refugees in Omaha**, the need is enormous. But, so is the hope. We are committed to serving every person who can benefit from the programs and services that Restoring Dignity provides, and to sharing what we've built far beyond our city. Thank you for joining us on this journey of a lifetime. We can't wait to see what the next chapter holds.

Sincerely,

Hannah Vlach

Founder & Executive Director



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At the **heart** of Restoring Dignity is our belief that something can and should be done to meet the needs of Omaha's refugee community through empowerment, education and advocacy partnerships.

OUR ORGANIZATION

- Started in 2012 by volunteers, first staff hired in 2018
- Incorporated/501(c)3 status in 2018
- Grassroots structure
- 80% of staff are former refugees
- Six full-time staff, nine part-time staff
- Over 33,000 refugees served since 2012



The best outcomes happen when we

BELIEVE

Learn more at ChildrensNebraska.org/Believe

REFUGEE
**WOMEN
RISING**



Advocating by, for & with
refugee women means
investing in their social
& emotional wellness.



Refugee Women Rising
3902 Davenport St. Omaha, NE 68131
www.refugeewomenrising.org

Baxter

**What matters
to Restoring Dignity,
matters to Baxter.**

When it comes to making a difference,
we're all in the driver's seat.



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Programs



WELCOME HOME PROGRAM

We acclimate refugees by teaching comprehensive, in-home cleaning; food storage; home and fire safety; and home owners maintenance education classes. Families learn how to maintain a safe and healthy home environment. Classes are taught in the native language of the family by former refugees. Over 15,000 lives have been impacted by this program since 2019.

HOUSING ADVOCACY

We believe safe and healthy housing is a human right. Families come to us for help communicating with their landlord, getting repairs made and resolving move-out charge disputes. We have worked with hundreds of families since 2018 and have established open lines of communication with landlords who predominantly have refugees as tenants. We also testify in support of housing bills locally and state-wide.

WINDOW A/C PROGRAM

Omaha gets HOT in the summer! Heat indexes of 95 degrees or higher are common. We provide and install window A/C units at no cost to any family who needs relief from the heat and has come to America with refugee status. All window A/C units are donated by community members. Several hundred units have been installed in refugee family homes since 2018.

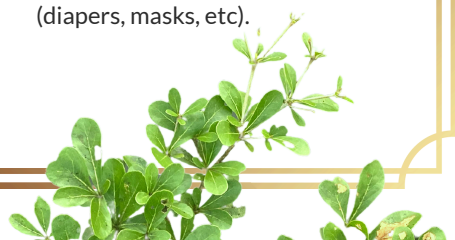
HOME MAKEOVERS

Our organization started in 2012 with a home makeover for a South Sudanese family who experienced unimaginable loss. Since then, we have completed home makeovers for 43 families and counting! These events bring together Omaha volunteers who transform a family's home over the course of one day.

RELIEF SERVICES

When crisis hits, our team responds quickly and efficiently. We work regularly with the Douglas County Health Department and the Department of Health and Human Services to get crisis messaging and emergency services to refugee communities:

- Family Support Fund to assist families experiencing a crisis
- Dozens of mobile vaccine clinics with interpreters on-site
- Over 400 videos in 14 languages produced on COVID-19 (over a quarter of a million views on social media platforms)
- Emergency language messaging provider for Douglas County
- Tens of thousands of items distributed during COVID-19 (diapers, masks, etc).





YATES ILLUMINATES

WE SERVE OUR COMMUNITY BY OFFERING
SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL
RESOURCES IN ORDER TO CREATE AN
INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT THAT UPLIFTS EVERY
PERSON'S POSSIBILITIES.

WWW.YATESILLUMINATES.ORG

To the many people, businesses and organizations who believe in us,
support our mission and made tonight possible...

THANK YOU!

- ACLU of Nebraska
- Anonymous (4)
- Aleisha Nabower
- Atlas Apartments
- Baxter Auto Group
- Beth Brown
- Betsy Timmerman
- Bonnie Mercer
- Burlington Capital
- Carol Gilbert
- Catie Koraleski
- Center for Immigrant and Refugee Advancement
- Children's Hospital
- Claire Herzog
- Douglas County Health Department
- Drs. Mary & Ashish Dhingra
- First National Bank of Omaha
- Gifford Park Neighborhood Association
- Gloria and Chuck Austerberry
- Hoppe Development
- Iowa Community Housing Alliance
- Janet Voelker
- Jennifer Herzog
- Jessica Turner
- Joan Shapiro
- JSS Charitable Fund
- Kate Mahern
- Kathleen Kersey
- Katie Heithhoff
- Katie Weitz
- Leah Baker
- Leslie Wilson
- Linda Duckworth
- Mandy and Matt Wood
- Marcia Shadle-Cusic
- Maryanne Stevens
- Metro Area Tobacco Action Coalition
- Michael and Mary Ferzley
- Nancy Miller
- Nancy Paul
- Natalie and Eric Petersen Foundation
- Nicky Clark
- Nuer Community Development Services
- Refugee Women Rising
- Roselyn Volkmer
- Smarty Plants
- Thrasher Basement
- Vicki Wehrmann Sorensen
- William Kirby
- Yates Illuminates

We are deeply grateful to all of our incredible supporters. Every effort has been made to ensure this list is complete; however, if your name was inadvertently missed or if you joined after the program went to print, please know how much we appreciate your support.



Partnering for Stronger Communities

We are proud to support Restoring Dignity's mission of empowering Omaha's refugee families through education, housing advocacy, and community connection. Together, we are building brighter futures—one family at a time.

Burlington
CAPITAL



ATLAS



The Atlas Apartments

theatlasomaha.com

A Tradition of Trust



Natalie & Eric Petersen

PROUDLY SUPPORT
RESTORING DIGNITY

Helping older adults (ages 50+) stay active and connected through our programs and services.

www.interculturalseniorcenter.org

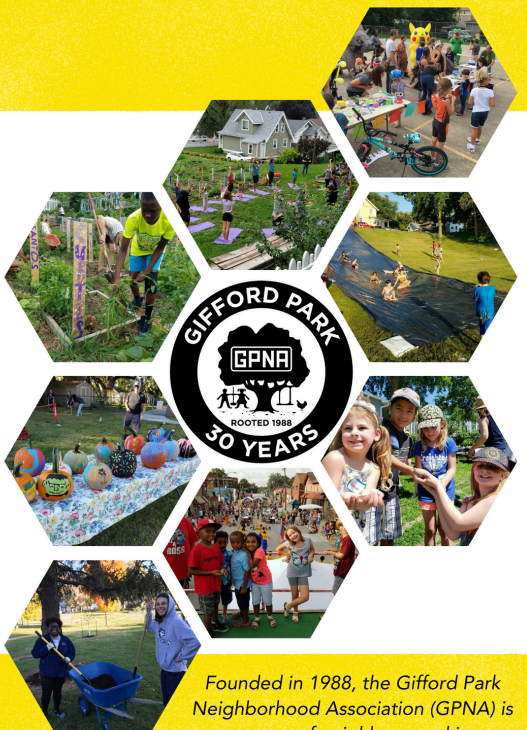


Special Thanks



- **Atlas Apartments** – donated parking lot for shuttle service
- **Bonnie Mercer** – donated silent auction items
- **Douglas County Health Department** – donated event room at Yates
- **Drybar** – donated silent auction items
- **Gifford Park Neighborhood Association** – donated community room at Yates
- **Intercultural Senior Center** – donated shuttle van
- **Liz Hagestad** - donated silent auction items
- **Lotus House of Yoga** – donated silent auction items
- **Mary Zlomke** – donated silent auction items
- **Ning Zar** – donated photography services (Ningzar.live@gmail.com, 531-225-6043)
- **Refugee Women Rising** – donated event room at Yates and setup support for tea station
- **Sandi Cihal** – donated silent auction items
- **Smarty Plants** – donated floral labor for the event
- **Yates Illuminates** – donated space to host gala





Founded in 1988, the Gifford Park Neighborhood Association (GPNA) is a group of neighbors working together to improve our community.



smarty plants

FLORAL DESIGN

ELKHORN, NEBRASKA

@SMARTYPLANTSINC



HOPPE
DEVELOPMENT



**IOWA COMMUNITY
HOUSING ALLIANCE**

METRO & RURAL IOWA COMMUNITIES
Council Bluffs, IA

Gala Volunteers

*"The world is hugged by the faithful arms of volunteers."
-Terri Guillemets*

- Allie Caldwell
- Ann Thrasher
- Anna Mlnarik
- Becky Landolt
- Bonnie Mercer
- Cassidy Hale
- Christine Kramer
- Christine Stewart
- Cory Nelson
- Courtney Jennum
- Eh Kalu Htoo
- Elias Wyble
- Ezekiel Wyble
- Elise Jennum
- Emily Bryan
- Gia Thrasher
- Htoo Shee
- Jessica Turner
- Joyce McArthur-Johnson
- Karen Burns
- Kathleen Kersey
- Kathleen Valle
- Kayla Brannen
- Kaylee Greeb
- Maha Farid
- Makenzie Schmitt
- Mike Burns
- Puja Rai
- Renee McArthur
- Richard Perez
- Sandi Cihal
- Sarah Copeland
- Steve Landolt
- Wynne Lake
- Zach Perry

Special thank you to Joyce McArthur-Johnson, Renee McArthur, Bonnie Mercer and Richard Perez for helping coordinate and lead the food and beverage logistics!

We are deeply grateful to all of our incredible volunteers. Every effort has been made to ensure this list is complete; however, if your name was inadvertently missed or if you joined after the program went to print, please know how much we appreciate your support.





THANK YOU
RELEVANT
FOR BEING OUR LONGEST STANDING
COMMUNITY PARTNER!



relevant
COMMUNITY CHURCH

Staff & Board of Directors

Staff

Hannah Vlach
Founder and Executive Director

Isabelle Bamogo
Family Educator

Paw Bway Htoo
Welcome Home Program Director

Melody Beethan
Family Educator

Chloe Ray
Director of Operations

Sumiran Diyali Kochari
Family Educator

Bridget Perry
Volunteer Coordinator

Thierry Mazimpaka
Family Educator

Elizabeth Ajongo
Housing Advocate

Sarah Al-Heahom
Family Educator

Chit Thel Oo
Family Educator

Habibo Abdille
Family Educator

Shrijana Rasaily
Family Educator

Jaceta Pu Meh
Family Educator

Hamida Sahak
Family Educator

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Voting Member



by Warsan Shire
former refugee from Somalia

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages

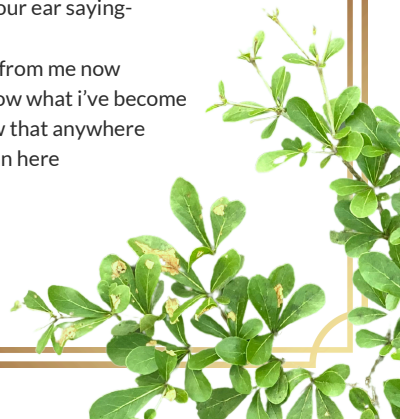
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of
a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.

no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied

no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching

i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hunger
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important

no one leaves home until home is a sweaty
voice in your ear saying-
leave,
run away from me now
i don't know what i've become
but i know that anywhere
is safe than here



RESTORING DIGNITY



3260 DAVENPORT STREET #215

OMAHA, NE, 68131

RDOMAHA.ORG

INFO@RDOMAHA.ORG

402-370-9777



We apologize for any inadvertent errors or omissions in this program, as we sincerely appreciate everyone's support of our second gala and Restoring Dignity's mission.