

Dance performance March 29 to raise funds for Afghan and Syrian refugee families in Gloucester

Monday

Posted at 12:41 PM

Updated at 12:41 PM

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Go spend 10 years — starting immediately — in a foreign country, a strange one, where you don't speak the language. And you can't bring anything — you're a refugee.

But just 10 years. Then you have to move again — not just you, but your family of five, again without anything — to another country, even farther away, across the ocean.

Now you've done what one Afghani family has just done to get to Gloucester.

The issue of immigrants is dividing communities along political lines, and causing anger and concerns all over the world. But the stories of immigrants, told one family at a time, are not controversial at all. These people have no choice. And they need our help.

There are two recently settled families in Gloucester, the Afghani family who arrived here just before Thanksgiving after 10 years in Turkey, and a Syrian family who arrived in October. Both families were vetted and placed by the Refugee Immigration Assistance Center, and were aided greatly by Gloucester resident Peggy Russell, who took it upon herself to coordinate the subsequent care for the families.

Both are families of five: the Afghanis include father and mother, a 24-year-old son (the only one of the entire group who speaks English), and two daughters, 20 and 18. Besides the parents, the Syrian family includes three boys, 21, 17 and 16. Most of them are attending ESL classes at Gloucester High School, and are looking for jobs or internships to start them on the path to independence.

"The crisis is sort of over," Russell says, "but these families need to assimilate. They need jobs, they need money, they need to learn English and they need to make contacts."

Many volunteers have offered assistance, and many organizations — area churches especially — have been donating clothing and furniture. This Wednesday evening, a dance performance from the Trident Live Art Series will also serve as a fundraiser, to try to boost awareness of the families' needs going forward.

The dance piece being performed is "Towers and Other Thoughts," which was choreographed by TLAS director Sarah Slifer Swift last fall to accompany a Trident Gallery exhibition by Susan Erony.

"We made this piece in November, motivated by Susan's work," Swift says. "The work speaks to the struggle to understand each other, and we really thought it was relevant."

Erony's own work departs from texts by Franz Kafka, which retells the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Slifer's dance responds to Erony's artwork, and in this particular setting the confusion and misunderstanding at the heart of the Tower of Babel story seems particularly apt.

"The issue of language itself is a struggle," Swift says. "Being a refugee would be difficult enough, even without the language problem. It's about the struggle to connect. The piece itself was created on its own merit, but it has greater meaning in this context."

"If we can get community participation, we can get the community involved in integrating diversity. That's what we hope we can share."

There is an ongoing GoFundMe site (gofundme.com/RefugeesGloucester), or donations can be sent to the West Gloucester Trinitarian Congregational Church (WGTCC, 488 Essex Ave., Gloucester, MA 01930, with "refugees" in the memo line), for those who cannot attend the fundraiser.

Russell says that soon an online task-sharing site will be active, to help coordinate the families' practical needs for transportation and expenses.

"Towers and Other Thoughts," a dance performance fundraiser for two recently resettled refugee families, will be held at Floating Lotus, 169 Main St., Gloucester, on Wednesday, March 29 at 7 p.m. \$15 suggested minimum donation. Visit floatinglotus.net/products/fundraiser-for-refugees-in-gloucester or call 978-394-5797.

Dance performance March 29 to raise funds for Afghan and Syrian refugee families in Gloucester

Monday

Posted at 12:41 PM

Updated at 12:41 PM

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Go spend 10 years — starting immediately — in a foreign country, a strange one, where you don't speak the language. And you can't bring anything — you're a refugee.

But just 10 years. Then you have to move again — not just you, but your family of five, again without anything — to another country, even farther away, across the ocean.

Now you've done what one Afghani family has just done to get to Gloucester.

The issue of immigrants is dividing communities along political lines, and causing anger and concerns all over the world. But the stories of immigrants, told one family at a time, are not controversial at all. These people have no choice. And they need our help.

There are two recently settled families in Gloucester, the Afghani family who arrived here just before Thanksgiving after 10 years in Turkey, and a Syrian family who arrived in October. Both families were vetted and placed by the Refugee Immigration Assistance Center, and were aided greatly by Gloucester resident Peggy Russell, who took it upon herself to coordinate the subsequent care for the families.

Both are families of five: the Afghanis include father and mother, a 24-year-old son (the only one of the entire group who speaks English), and two daughters, 20 and 18. Besides the parents, the Syrian family includes three boys, 21, 17 and 16. Most of them are attending ESL classes at Gloucester High School, and are looking for jobs or internships to start them on the path to independence.

"The crisis is sort of over," Russell says, "but these families need to assimilate. They need jobs, they need money, they need to learn English and they need to make contacts."

Many volunteers have offered assistance, and many organizations — area churches especially — have been donating clothing and furniture. This Wednesday evening, a dance performance from the Trident Live Art Series will also serve as a fundraiser, to try to boost awareness of the families' needs going forward.

The dance piece being performed is "Towers and Other Thoughts," which was choreographed by TLAS director Sarah Slifer Swift last fall to accompany a Trident Gallery exhibition by Susan Erony.

"We made this piece in November, motivated by Susan's work," Swift says. "The work speaks to the struggle to understand each other, and we really thought it was relevant."

Erony's own work departs from texts by Franz Kafka, which retells the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Slifer's dance responds to Erony's artwork, and in this particular setting the confusion and misunderstanding at the heart of the Tower of Babel story seems particularly apt.

"The issue of language itself is a struggle," Swift says. "Being a refugee would be difficult enough, even without the language problem. It's about the struggle to connect. The piece itself was created on its own merit, but it has greater meaning in this context."

"If we can get community participation, we can get the community involved in integrating diversity. That's what we hope we can share."

There is an ongoing GoFundMe site (gofundme.com/RefugeesGloucester), or donations can be sent to the West Gloucester Trinitarian Congregational Church (WGTCC, 488 Essex Ave., Gloucester, MA 01930, with "refugees" in the memo line), for those who cannot attend the fundraiser.

Russell says that soon an online task-sharing site will be active, to help coordinate the families' practical needs for transportation and expenses.

"Towers and Other Thoughts," a dance performance fundraiser for two recently resettled refugee families, will be held at Floating Lotus, 169 Main St., Gloucester, on Wednesday, March 29 at 7 p.m. \$15 suggested minimum donation. Visit floatinglotus.net/products/fundraiser-for-refugees-in-gloucester or call 978-394-5797.

*Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](#);
email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com*