

LAUNCHING A COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER IN TOUGH TIMES

By Daniel Sturm, *RefugeeWorks*

The economic downturn has been tough on print media. Last March the world-renowned *Christian Science Monitor* printed its last daily newspaper edition. Recently, Detroit's two major newspapers — *The Free Press* and *The News* — started publishing just three days a week and *The Rocky Mountain News* (Colorado's oldest newspaper) closed shop altogether. Currently, *The Boston Globe* is also facing threats of a shutdown.



Henok Degefu waded against the tide of this media crisis when he launched an ambitious 60-page newsweekly out of his one-bedroom apartment last fall. His paper, *Ze Habesha* (Ethiopia), is funded by small ads and savings from his day job at a hotel. Henok had published a weekly newspaper in his home country of Ethiopia before being forced out of business and jailed for daring to cover the subject of racism.

The story of this young refugee journalist sends an important message to the readers of this month's issue, which covers the theme, "Finding Work in Hard Times."

This month we've invited employment specialists from across the country to talk about how they are helping refugees adjust to a very competitive job market. What are the best strategies for tackling job development during a recession? What are some creative methods for generating new employer partnerships and funding for

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CONSULTANT'S CORNER: *Jonathan Lucus*



Hello, everyone. So, I've heard that we are in a recession, and jobs are difficult to find. Well, I'm choosing to ignore this. You see, I have this slogan hanging up in my office that states, "I will not participate in the recession." And I am not!

I'm looking to McDonald's for answers to this employment dilemma we're currently facing. For good or bad, McDonald's is still making money in the middle of an economic downturn, meaning that we're still buying cheeseburgers and milkshakes. Why? There are two reasons. First, its products are cheap. This restaurant chain understands that offering food at low prices will increase the number

of buyers. The same strategy might also be utilized by employment services. Marketing free employment services that accompany your clients is an excellent way to create jobs at a time when employers are looking for cost savings.

Second, McDonald's own research suggests that they have to ask you seven times to buy a Filet O' Fish before you actually will. Job developers should learn from this and have persistence when trying to sell the idea that their clients are a good fit for companies that are hiring. By the way, believe it or not, companies are still hiring! Now go and enjoy a tasty Big Mac and save yourself the trouble of being asked six more times!

Jonathan Lucus
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OTHER NEWS

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR REFUGEES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

By Emily Lynch, Social Anthropology, The University of Texas at Austin



In recent years, Belfast and other cities in Northern Ireland have begun hosting a significant population of refugees from various African countries. As a social anthropologist, I focus on the cultural dynamics of resettlement and integration of these groups. In June 2008, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with a community of Somalis in the south Belfast neighborhood of Holylands.

Due to the 30-year internal conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the region has not hosted a substantial number of refugees and immigrants until now. The changing demographics have created tensions between established and newcomer populations.

Nearly all of the Somalis I worked with in Belfast had been granted asylum, a provisional status during which their application for long-term legal status in the UK is evaluated. During this period, refugees are prohibited from working, attending public university and participating fully in civil society. The speed of each application varies tremendously and the wait is racked with ambiguity. During this unstructured time, Somalis make future plans for their families and education, work and resettlement. Their daily life is organized around basic survival. In the absence of available work, and alongside state and non-governmental assistance, Somalis informally network to fulfill basic needs.

Informal social networks are critical for supporting refugees at the neighborhood, city and regional levels. Refugees' personal narratives offer insight into work and social integration obstacles they face, and how they encounter and assist one another. What follows are stories of the two informants who

relocated to Belfast from Mogadishu, and whose experiences exemplify these dynamics.

Irshi was relocated to Belfast from a refugee camp in Kenya. Six weeks before we met, she had given birth to a bright-eyed, healthy son who enjoyed the constant attention of two older sisters. Irshi described coming to Belfast as both a blessing and a terrific challenge. She had arrived alone with the children, and her daily routine revolved around caring for them. Irshi initially struggled to find her way in the city, but now she relies on a network of other Somali women who help her share the work of child rearing. She also receives assistance from the Northern Ireland Community for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS). Since 2002, this organization "by refugees, for refugees" has helped her get access to health care, including her pre- and postnatal care at local hospitals. NICRAS volunteers continue to help Irshi secure health care, schooling for the girls and a state housing assignment. Irshi is not yet interested in pursuing work. Instead, she is focused on establishing a home with the children and building friendships. Solidifying her legal status in the UK has been Irshi's primary way of making a new future, and a necessary precursor to finding work in Belfast.

Irshi introduced me to a man in his early 20s named Abdullah. Abdullah volunteered for NICRAS and assisted Irshi through her initial integration in Belfast. Through NICRAS he has helped numerous local Somalis with translation and navigating the social-service sector. His long-term goal is to pursue a degree from Queen's University Belfast, but in the meantime he continues to assist the Somali community in its



ACCESSING STIMULUS FUNDS

By Sabra Barnett, Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest

A group of voluntary agencies here have put together an Employment Working Group, which incorporates a partnership with a children's hospital, the City of Phoenix and local community colleges. The Working Group's success has enabled us to access stimulus money in order to set up new vocational-training programs.

In the fall, the local GateWay Community College will be accepting qualified refugees into a Certified Nursing Assistant program. They've reserved 25 slots specifically for our clients and the program is 100% tuition-free. Stimulus funds will pay for their pre-enrollment testing, background checks, drug tests, fingerprint cards,



CPR certification, the actual tuition, books, uniforms, shoes and stethoscopes. After the course is finished, clients will receive certification and job placement services for one year. We are currently working to put together similar vocational trainings in caregiving, phlebotomy and pharmacy tech.

These training and job-placement services will build morale especially among the most well-educated refugees. Increased competition for medium-skill jobs (such as cashiers, administrative assistants, etc.) has kept some of our best-educated clients in low-skill, entry-level positions, such as janitorial and food service. We hope that these trainings will help address that issue. Additionally, city job-placement services will help lighten the case load for employment specialists, who don't always have time for in-depth job searches in clients' fields of expertise.

How can refugees and asylees benefit from American Recovery and Reinvestment Act ("Stimulus") funds?

Stimulus program assistance ranges from providing funding for language and vocational training (i.e. green jobs and healthcare), to housing assistance, unemployment benefits and VISTA volunteer recruiting. A fact sheet with resources is available on *RefugeeWorks'* website at: www.refugeeworks.org/downloads/recovery.pdf

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everyday interactions with the state bureaucracies. But just as importantly, his work cultivates and extends local social networks among Somali households. Much of how Somalis get by revolves around informal social networking, favors and internal community solidarity. I frequently overheard Abdullah, Irshi and the other Somalis discuss passing on extra rice, a carton of vitamin D milk or some lettuce and carrots to others in need down the street, or across town. Their anticipation of the needs of other refugees fosters a sense of community and

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maintains a literal and symbolic support network. These forms of care and interdependence – although informal, outside of kin and fully voluntary – comprise a kind of “work” that is crucial to how refugees make do in Belfast's Holylands.

The social service sectors in Belfast claim to be aware of the needs of the growing refugee population. But there are also obstacles to gaining basic standards of living. Volunteers like Abdullah try to anticipate the impasses that interrupt access to social services. Discussing merely the official domain of work for refugees in Belfast obscures other forms of vital “work” —

FINDING INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC JOBS

By Lana Whiteford, The International Rescue Committee of Boise, Idaho

After months of fruitless searching, and with a rapidly growing client list, I realized I'd have to start thinking "outside the box" if I were going to locate new employment sources.

One day, my director handed me a newspaper article that focused on a protest against the recent political decision to not allow year-round H2A visas for operations employing non-U.S. workers. One of the most vocal protesters was the dairy industry.

After some background research, I came across a Cornell University study showing that the majority of New York State dairy workers were actually illegal immigrants. I also discovered that there had been recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in several industries, including meat-packing, manufacturing and dairy operations. Armed with this information I began researching my own state's industries. Idaho is one of the top dairy-producing states in the country. In addition, we have a fair amount of large food processors.



I began sending out e-mails to the state's dairy associations with a basic explanation of the services we offered. I highlighted the fact that refugees are a great labor force, that many come from agricultural backgrounds and – best of all – that they are WORK-AUTHORIZED. The dairy associations invited us to present at their meetings. This led to one dairy offering to hire refugees to staff a new operation it is building. Several other dairies have asked us to visit their locations to discuss hiring. Another dairy heard about us through National Public Radio and invited us to bring in 10 candidates to interview. Within two months, the dairy industry has already employed 30 refugees.

I also began contacting food processing companies in and near our state, and was invited to tour an onion processor and explain what we had to offer. They were very enthusiastic and offered us 10 positions on the spot, with the possibility of 30 more if the initial 10 performed well. Shortly thereafter I spoke with another onion processor, who said they were also interested in hiring 30-40 people. The person in charge of that factory also mentioned several additional leads.

I encourage you to research the manufacturing and agricultural industries in your state. Learn about their operations and needs. This way you can create effective presentations. When you present to them, I recommend mentioning these key points:

1. Refugees are permanently work-authorized due to their status.
2. Refugees have higher retention rates, which can save thousands of dollars in hiring costs (it's helpful if you can quote the one-year retention rate at your office).
3. Refugees are hard-working and resilient people, who want opportunities to prove themselves.
4. Many refugees qualify for the Federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit.
5. Refugees have an agency behind them that will help with training, paperwork, etc.

Create an effective marketing package for each industry. Some tools I've created include industry-specific brochures and PowerPoint presentations. You may only get one opportunity to present to a single industry. Know your selling points thoroughly in advance.

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WORKING WITH BIG-BOX STORES

By Kelly Barneche, Catholic Charities of Oklahoma City

Refugees new to the Oklahoma City area find that “big-box” stores (as large retail establishments are called) can satisfy many of their shopping needs. Chain stores such as Target and Wal-Mart are popular places for refugees to shop for groceries, children’s school uniforms and inexpensive household goods. Increasingly, they’ve also been a place to find another basic necessity: work.

On a trip to an Oklahoma City Wal-Mart you’ll see refugees from Congo and Iraq pushing carts and stocking shelves, smiling all the while. Down the road, at Target, Burmese and Afghani refugees serve in similar roles. In the past year alone, such retailers have accounted for nearly 20 refugee job placements. That’s about 20% of all client placements. While other industries in the area have made dramatic employee cut-backs, Target and Wal-Mart have continued to hire. *Newsweek* magazine recently cited Wal-Mart and other discount retailers in its list of businesses that tend to be unaffected by a recession.



Beyond being “recession-proof,” Target and Wal-Mart have proven themselves to be positive working environments for refugees, a fact that becomes apparent during the hiring process. A human resources manager at a local Target acknowledged that their company’s interview questions are notoriously difficult, even for native English speakers. As soon as a refugee shows some difficulty, however, usually without any prompting from the job developer who accompanies the clients, the interviewers will volunteer to make use of a telephone translation service (available to all Target locations).

Wal-Mart doesn’t offer translation services, but hiring managers have been very willing to allow refugees to bring their own interpreter — and sometimes a client’s friend who comes to translate ends up being hired. Shift managers and HR personnel seem to be well-trained in dealing with diversity within their worker pool. And refugee applicants understand that they are joining co-workers who are encouraged to be sensitive to cultural differences. “It’s the best place ever,” said Mohammed, originally from Syria, about the Wal-Mart where he now works as a cashier. “All people are equal – there is no discrimination related to color or religion or race. There are equal opportunities for every worker.”

Mohammed probably never imagined that his first job in America would be at Wal-Mart. A former consultant for Human Rights Watch in Lebanon, he plans to improve his English, get his law degree re-certified in the U.S. and eventually work for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. But after recently arriving in Oklahoma, he was eager to find something that would cover his living expenses so that he could focus on future plans. He said that his job at Wal-Mart does just that. His refugee co-workers agree that such jobs allow them to sufficiently cover their expenses while providing ample opportunities to practice English.

Experts disagree on just how long the American economy will be facing this downturn. But whether it begins to improve in a month or a year, refugees in Oklahoma City will likely continue to find good employment opportunities with these big-box retailers.

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RE-THINKING TEMP AGENCIES

By Rachel Gast, *The International Rescue Committee of Atlanta*

Today's economy has created a climate of fear among Americans. And it has been equally devastating for many newly arrived refugees who are seeking a safe and stable life. Arjun Gurung, originally from Bhutan, was aware of the economic situation, but it was worse than he'd predicted. "I'd read about it in the newspaper," he said, "but I didn't know it would take almost five months to find a job." What could have been a time of excitement and relief has instead become a period of worry and fear.

The unemployed are not the only ones feeling the harsh effects of the recession. Employment specialists struggling to help refugee clients reach self-sufficiency also share in the worry. Employers, overwhelmed by tight budgets and a sea of applications, are impacted as well. Refugee-employment specialists can capitalize on these feelings of uncertainty and use this time to build mutually beneficial relationships with employers, even when no jobs are being offered.

The International Rescue Committee of Atlanta has discovered that many employers we work with are talking openly about their struggles. They've shared with us the day-to-day pain of giving disappointing news, not to mention the countless applications and phone calls they receive.

Employment specialists usually look to the employer to solve employment needs. However, this relationship can also be reversed. We can also look for ways to ease the employer's burden while promoting our clients' interests. Employment staff can propose to simplify processes by offering flexible interview times, consolidating applications and providing job orientation and post-hiring support.

Recently, a major hotel in Atlanta had a limited number of openings in housekeeping. When we inquired about them, the human resources manager revealed that she'd an overwhelming number of applications. Masooda Omar, an IRC lead job developer, took the opportunity to offer help by bringing a solid group of clients to complete the application and interview at the same time, making the process convenient and efficient for the recruiting manager. The IRC clients were hired, and now a mutually beneficial system is in place with this employer.



The IRC traditionally has made it a priority to develop and maintain positive and trustworthy relationships with employers who hire independently. However, the poor economy has demanded that we diversify job-search tactics. Years ago, the option of a staffing group was never considered due to its perceived unreliability and short-term employment prospects. However, we recently have felt compelled to consider all options, and have discovered that there are advantages to working with a staffing group.

Such a service can offer many positions at once. Recently, we began working with a staffing group that had just landed a large, two-year contract. It hired 60 of our clients to fill its entire work lines. Adding to this success, we learned that the staffing group offered immediate benefits. Arjun and his wife Rita were both hired. They enjoy working together and are relieved to have found employment at last. Such success was a surprise and taught us to consider avenues of employment that we were previously wary of.

Clearly, today's economy poses challenges for employment specialists. At the IRC, however, we have found that focusing on communication and considering creative and alternative options helps us overcome many workforce barriers.

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BREAKING THE ICE WITH NEW EMPLOYERS

By Ken Frasure, Catholic Charities of Tennessee



Marketing labor in a time of poor economic growth is tough. The refugees we represent need to have advantages that help them stand out or they will be passed over, lost in a pile of applications and résumés.

In Nashville, Catholic Charities has worked closely with a laundry business called Shared Hospital Services, which serves several local non-profit hospitals. Although Shared Hospital Services receives many employment applications, it prefers our clients for a number of reasons. One of the greatest advantages we present to this employer is that all of our refugees have passed multiple background checks. Like many others, this business has passed rules against hiring anyone with a felony background.

I learned in conversation with Debbie, the Human Resources specialist at Shared Hospital Services, that a high percentage of the people who apply for laundry-service jobs do have criminal backgrounds. In any group of candidates, some who claim to have clean backgrounds must still be rejected because they turn out to have lied on their application. The fact that our candidates pass background checks 100% of the time saves Shared Hospital Services the expense of rejecting employees after incurring the cost of background checks. In addition, all refugees

are certified to work in the United States. There are no false ID cards and no lies that can create problems for an employer down the road. We also provide a variety of other valuable services. For example, I have provided rides to a number of our refugees who missed their buses.

Other businesses, such as the Doubletree Hotel and Fresh Point Tomato (a tomato inspection and packaging plant), prefer our clients for many of the same reasons. However, Shared Hospital Services has proven to be our most reliable repeat employer. The work there is tough, which leads to a fairly high turnover rate among non-refugee employees. And, although the company provides health insurance at no cost to employees, the starting pay is only minimum wage (currently \$6.55 per hour). In this environment, the dedicated hard work of our clients is immediately apparent when compared to many non-refugee employees. For these reasons, businesses who know us are enthusiastic supporters of our program. And we can use them as references to “break the ice” with new employers.

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PARTNERSHIPS THAT PAY OFF

By Carter Moody, Center for Refugees and Immigrants of Tennessee

During the worst recession since the early 1980s (if not the Great Depression), in Nashville, Tenn., refugees from Somalia, Burma, Burundi, Bhutan and elsewhere are facing a financial necessity to integrate into the local economy. This has meant taking jobs in production, cleaning, hospitality, landscaping, carpentry and anywhere else they can be hired. Layoffs at manufacturers such as Tyson Foods and Dell Computers have hit refugees particularly hard, since these are often the first jobs they've held in the U.S.



At the Center for Refugees and Immigrants of Tennessee (CRIT), formerly the Somali Community Center of Nashville, we are observing that large employers are sometimes no longer returning our calls and e-mails. If they haven't worked with us before, it's harder to get their attention.

In order to locate more potential job openings, in 2008 CRIT started to build working relationships with other organizations that are experienced in helping hard-to-place workers. We began hosting driver's-license classes for refugees and immigrants, taught by Workforce Essentials. Workforce Essentials is a multifaceted one-stop career center, based in neighboring Franklin, Tenn. The driver's-license program has led to other valuable collaborations with their organization.

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Another new partner is the Opportunities Industrialization Center of Nashville, which provides job coaching, training and placement of workers into "hidden jobs" (job fields refugees previously haven't reached). A grant is pending to allow us to expand this partnership. Recently, I also visited Goodwill Industries to work out a collaboration utilizing this company's strengths in training and placement, including in "hidden jobs." Goodwill will offer skills training and job placement, even in some cases offering temporary six-week positions for hard-to-place workers. In return, CRIT's bilingual deputy director will assist them by interpreting for Somali production workers, especially during trainings.

To better serve the rapidly-growing Burmese population, I initiated a collaboration with Belmont United Methodist Church (BUMC) of Nashville, where over 200 Karen and Chin minority Burmese refugees worship. About half of them are of working age (16 and over). Bilingual Burmese church ministers estimate that, as of yet, less than a dozen Burmese adults here are proficiently bilingual English speakers. Therefore, few adults have driver's licenses. Those who work usually carpool. Despite these hurdles, the church social worker and interpreter, Rev. Sandy Sakarapane, placed 32 Burmese workers with a book bindery, Bind Tech, in 2008. The bindery is located near where many of them live. A dozen have since been laid off, but about 20 still retained their jobs. After July 1, the wages will increase to \$7.25 per hour, thanks to an increase in the minimum wage.

Leveraging BUMC's Rev. Sakarapane (who speaks four languages) to help us better serve the Burmese refugees has been crucial. Our agency's multilingual staff, and several interpreters on stand-by, give us a strong ability to meet the needs of refugees with limited English proficiency. Linking them to our new mainstream partners is one of our key roles, as well as providing English as Second Language classes to improve refugees' employment prospects and help break the isolation that has enduring repercussions.

Despite economic troubles and the legislative efforts for "English-only" bans on government use of foreign-language interpreters, a wide cross-section of institutions has been willing to work in partnership with us toward common, positive goals.

RECESSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What is the most efficient use of a job developer's time? Meeting with employers, applying for jobs in-person or online, job trips, client meetings, etc.? There are so many avenues I try to go through to secure employment for my clients and I am not sure where the effort is most rewarding.

All three of these areas are important, but meeting with employers should be your primary goal. Without strong employer relationships, it is impossible to effectively prepare clients for the American workforce and assist them in gaining early employment. However, to make the most of limited time, job developers need to ensure that the employers are cultivated to represent a match with their current caseloads. (Ryan McDonnell, International Institute of Boston)

2. During a down economy, how do we compensate for the lack of English-language skills and a formal education when finding employment for refugees?

Many providers have found success in identifying companies that have high turnover in entry-level positions and are attached to growth industries. One of the biggest selling points for refugee workers is job retention. This can translate into thousands of dollars in savings. For example, a hospital's environmental-services department is responsible for maintaining sanitary and safety conditions – a very important job and one that does not require a high level of English or education. It is also an industry that experiences high turnover. Refugees are a solution for this need in many hospitals around the country. One added benefit is that you'll get a foot in the door at a hospital, where many training and job-advancement opportunities exist. (Rebecca Armstrong, *RefugeeWorks*)

3. Which industries offering entry-level positions are still going strong in this economy?

Food processing. Unlike other forms of manufacturing (such as electronics), food processing offers entry-level positions with simple functions that are less language-focused. Although American consumption goes down in a difficult economy, food processing remains stable. Focus on companies that manufacture food staples. (Ryan McDonnell, International Institute of Boston)



4. How can we help the many single mothers who are struggling to balance work and daycare?

One strategy that has worked well is to locate single mothers close to one another so that they can develop a support network. This seems to be especially helpful during the initial transition into work and starting a new life. Service providers report that it works best when they share a similar cultural background, but even when they do not, they've found that the commonalities of the refugee experience create understanding and sensitivity to one another. Mothers can also help each other with child care if they are able to work different shifts. (Rebecca Armstrong, *RefugeeWorks*)



5. How do we respond when employers say "hiring freeze?"

Keep the doors of communication open. Letting an employer know that you're interested in more than just a one-time placement is helpful in building long-term credibility for your agency. A hiring freeze won't last forever and you want to be well-positioned to respond to new job vacancies. (Ryan McDonnell, International Institute of Boston)

6. How can refugees and asylees benefit from American Recovery and Reinvestment Act ("Stimulus") funds?

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provides financial assistance to organizations receiving Work Investment Act support, as well as community groups and faith-based organizations currently serving low-income residents. Stimulus program assistance ranges from providing funding for language and vocational training (i.e. green jobs and healthcare), to housing assistance, unemployment benefits and VISTA volunteer recruiting. A fact sheet with resources is available on *RefugeeWorks*' website at: www.refugeeworks.org/downloads/recovery.pdf (Daniel Sturm, *RefugeeWorks*)

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BATTLING TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES: THE PROFESSIONAL MENTOR

By Sonja Ausen and Heather Schwitalla, Minnesota Council of Churches

In the current economy, refugee employment specialists face increasing difficulties. To deal with them, we need to implement new and creative approaches. Motivation, professional mentorship and strong networks (providing access to “hidden jobs”) should all be elements of the job developer’s repertoire.

What is a professional mentor?

Professional mentors are career-focused men and women who have connections within the community. They volunteer their time to meet with refugees who wish to reenter their original professions. Mentors must have compassion for the refugee experience and a desire to see refugees succeed.

For example, Jean-Claude, a refugee from Cameroon, came to the United States with more than 20 years of banking and finance experience. It was going to be difficult to reenter his field in the U.S. during the economic recession. To become self-sufficient, Jean-Claude took a position as an apartment caretaker. At the same time, he enrolled in our mentoring program to continue working on his long-term goal. He was matched with an asylee client from the former Soviet Union, Peter, who has been in the United States for 20 years. Peter started working as a dishwasher, but today is a certified public accountant at Xcel Energy.

With the help of his mentor, Jean-Claude feels several steps closer to reclaiming his banking career. “Peter makes me hopeful that I can one day work in a bank again,” Jean-Claude said.

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What does the mentor do?

Mentors commit to regular meetings with their partners, within a pre-determined time frame. The frequency and number of meetings are flexible and based on the needs of both parties. Mentors offer professional advice and experience, and help refugee mentees to better define their career goals. Mentors can:

- provide information about the recertification process
- assist with field-specific employment searches
- act as professional references
- help write a resume using field-appropriate terminology that reflects the refugee’s professional achievements

How does the refugee benefit from having a professional mentor?

Mentors connect refugees to the broader professional community. This provides opportunities to better understand the U.S. culture of their profession. Mentors explain “job lingo” and facilitate introductions to colleagues.

For instance, through one of our mentor partnerships, Qamar, a refugee from East Africa, has been able to return to the world of children’s theater. Currently Qamar works in a restaurant and attends certified public accountant classes. However, in her home country, Qamar performed nationally with a children’s theater. The mentorship involved an initial meeting with Qamar’s partner, followed by a meeting with the director of a local children’s theater company.

The theater director was impressed with Qamar’s experience and skill, and set up an interview. This relationship was integral in providing this refugee with the specific knowledge of how to reenter the theater field. “I am so thankful to have the opportunity to meet with these people and learn all about American theater!” Qamar said.

What benefits do the professional mentors gain?

Professional mentors find that, as they are sharing their knowledge, they are also learning. Working with refugee professionals opens up a whole new world of cultural experiences and gives them a broader understanding of their professions. Mentors often find themselves invited to participate in the refugee’s native culture through shared meals and family gatherings.

How does the professional mentor help overcome barriers?

Mentors can provide additional support in the job search and assist in practicing interview skills. These activities will sharpen the skills of refugees in a competitive job market. Additionally, peer mentors can open up an extensive “hidden job” market for both refugees and resettlement agencies. Because of the mentors’ connections to the broader community and interest in refugee issues, these professionals can act as liaisons.

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programs that help refugees find meaningful employment? How can refugees take advantage of stimulus funding to further their education and gain additional vocation skills?

Among other things, our contributors advise employment specialists to screen clients for “hidden skills,” to help them get first jobs quickly and to educate them about the specifics of American work culture. Clients should also be encouraged to make use of local networks that can connect them with peer mentors. Employment specialists also need to put in extra time by thoroughly examining labor market trends. After all, some sectors such as food processing, healthcare and small business are still experiencing stable job growth.

Our cover story is an interview with Henok Degefu. It covers the remarkable story of his newspaper start-up in Twin Cities, Minnesota. Henok launched *Ze Habesha* less than six months after being resettled through Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota. I reached him on his cell phone as he was enjoying lunch at a favorite Ethiopian restaurant.

Q: Can you tell me about your journalistic background, as well as your refugee experience?

A: I started my first newspaper in high school, when I was 13 years old. From 2001-05, I was the editor and publisher of an Amharic-language weekly, *Medina*, which was published in Ethiopia’s capital city, Addis Ababa. The government shut down my newspaper and sent me to jail after I wrote an article covering our country’s struggle with racism. In 2006, I fled Ethiopia to seek asylum in Ankara, Turkey.

Q: The U.S. newspaper market is in a deep crisis. Despite these odds you decided to launch a newspaper. Why?

A: When I first came to this country, my goal was to publish my own newspaper within the first few months. And I did just that. Today, 50,000 immigrants from Ethiopia call Minnesota home – that’s the largest Ethiopian diaspora in the world! This is a huge audience. As a trained professional journalist, I knew that this was an excellent market for someone who wanted to launch a community newspaper.

Q: Weren’t you afraid of the recession’s impact on your business?

A: The U.S. mainstream newspaper’s economic problems stem from the fact that people are increasingly getting their news from the Internet, which leads to a decline in advertising revenues and puts many newspapers out of business. The readers of my newspaper don’t access news online to the same degree as native-born Americans do. My newspaper is also published in Amharic, which is of great value to the Ethiopian community here. Another advantage is that it is entirely free. I’m working hard to increase advertising revenues. Currently, I make between \$50 and \$100 per advertisement.

Q: What type of stories does *Ze Habesha* cover?

A: I write about unity, peace and how to survive in America. I approach the subject of the recession from a news angle. I write about which businesses are still doing well in our community and interview successful business people. Schools and higher education opportunities are also featured in every issue. And, of course, there’s politics, sports and entertainment. Finally, *Ze Habesha* has a section with job openings, as well as information on how to search for a job.

Q: How many staff currently help publish your newspaper? And how do you finance it?

A: I do it all by myself. I have a laptop at home and use Adobe PageMaker and Adobe Publisher for design and layout. I have a day job working 30

hours per week at the Radisson Hotel in Bloomington, where I make \$10 per hour. Most of my savings goes straight back into financing my newspaper.

Q: That’s impressive. How do you manage to do all that?

A: Since I was young, people have told me that my blood was still hot. I am 26 years old now.

Q: What are your future goals as a journalist in the U.S.?

A: My dream is to produce a much bigger newspaper, serving Ethiopians in Minnesota and beyond. My paper’s current circulation is 3,000 printed copies. I would also like to attend journalism school to learn the ropes of U.S.-style journalism. My dream is not yet finished.



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NEWSLETTER 29 FINDING WORK IN HARD TIMES

“Create an effective marketing package for each industry. You may only get one opportunity to present to a single industry. Know your selling points thoroughly in advance.”

*Lana Whiteford, International Rescue Committee of Boise, Idaho
See “Finding Industry-Specific Jobs,” p. 4*



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