



## Resettling refugees in a time of uncertainty

*Makenzie Brookes travels the country helping refugees make a home.*

Connie Berry

February 21, 2017

It was the dead of winter in 1995 when Makenzie Brookes, a junior in high school then, moved to Martha's Vineyard, and she didn't come without protesting.

"I had never been here," Makenzie remembered during a conversation with The Times a few weeks ago. "I lived in Maryland, and I didn't know this place existed. We came in January, on the last ferry." She said she imagined the Island being so small that if the school were to have a snow day, "one horn would blow and everybody on the Island would hear it." Makenzie said she didn't speak to her mother during the entire ride from Maryland. Her stepfather was a serious sailor, she said, and her parents wanted a major change when they decided to move to the Island. "My mother still tells that story. Once I started school, though, I fell in love with it," Makenzie said.

After high school, Makenzie managed to convince her mother that she should go to college in Missoula, Mont., even though her mother had insisted she attend in-state. Makenzie did her research, found a university in the same price range as an in-state school, and packed her bags for one of her first solo adventures. She studied abroad while at the University of Montana, traveling to Tanzania for what would become a life-changing experience.

"I wanted to travel," Makenzie explained, "and I became interested in other cultures when I studied in East Africa. That's where I learned what a refugee was."

She moved to New York City, and through a friend from her time in Tanzania, she eventually landed a job with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), one of nine nongovernmental agencies that have cooperative agreements with the State Department to help resettle refugees in the U.S. She met her husband, Christopher Anderson, a writer and an educator, when she volunteered to develop and teach a creative writing class for refugees. Christopher volunteered with refugees, especially with afterschool programs.

Makenzie worked for six years for the IRC; the couple spent a couple of years in Bangkok, where her job was to help Burmese refugees through the resettlement process. Their daughter March was born in Thailand.

Since 2011, Makenzie has been a contractor for the State Department, auditing some of the many agency affiliates that resettle refugees all over the U.S. She travels every few weeks, leaving her husband home with their two young children. They moved back to the Island in 2012, and bought their house in West Tisbury in 2014. Their son Hartwin was born after their move back to the States.

“It’s been interesting to live here and do this work,” Makenzie said. “My husband is an incredible single parent when I’m gone.”

### **Refugees by the numbers**

Each agency she visits gets only two weeks to prepare for her arrival, so at the time of our meeting, she couldn’t say where she would be headed next. And the turmoil surrounding immigration and new President Donald Trump has led to some uncertainty.

“It’s all very unclear right now,” Makenzie said. “The president determines every year how many to resettle.”

President Barack Obama’s target for fiscal year 2017 was 110,000 refugees; President Trump reduced the number to 50,000 in his January executive order.

“The fiscal year begins in October, and from October 2016 to Jan. 25, 2017, we resettled nearly 30,000 refugees, leaving 20,000 more to go this year. Best case scenario, they’ll decide the vetting process in place is as good as it gets, or they’ll decide on another way to do it; we’ll have 20,000 to resettle before October 2017.”

During fiscal year 2016, approximately 85,000 refugees were resettled in the U.S. through the State Department’s contracts with domestic resettlement agencies. Most of the agencies have religious affiliations, but they are not allowed to proselytize, Makenzie explained. These nine agencies have offices all across the U.S., and it is those offices that Makenzie monitors for the State Department, making sure that they follow the strict guidelines set forth by the federal government. She said she usually visits four families at each agency, and those families must have been in the U.S. for at least six months.

“I’m not an employee of the State Department, but I work on behalf of the State Department, I report to the State Department, and my reports are published by the State Department,” Makenzie explained. “It requires a lot of traveling to different sites every few weeks. I was in Philadelphia last week, before that Long Island and Jersey City. Last year I was in Chattanooga, San Diego, and Amarillo, Texas.”

### **Once they arrive**

Makenzie said each refugee gets approximately \$1,000 from the State Department when they arrive in the U.S. The State Department doesn’t provide any financial assistance after that initial

\$1,000. The refugees are expected to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. “The \$1,000 is supposed to pay for their apartment, food, clothing, bus passes — everything,” said Makenzie.

The agencies that resettle the refugees get approximately \$900 for administrative costs for each refugee. “The agencies use their funds to pay for their staff, running the office, finding employment for the refugees, enrolling the children in school,” said Makenzie. “The department requires that the agencies assist the refugees with basic essentials — meeting them at the airport, applying for Social Security cards, registering their children in schools, arranging doctor’s appointments and connections with any social or language services they require.”

Refugees go through an intensive vetting process, Makenzie said, taking approximately two years to complete. By definition, a refugee is someone who has fled his or her home country and can’t return for fear of persecution. Refugees typically register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and go through rigorous checks by the Department of Homeland Security well before arriving in the U.S., Makenzie said.

“When their persecution story is real, their names and fingerprints are all checked, their stories are checked, then they are bona fide refugees,” Makenzie said. From that point, the agencies involved determine where the best location in the U.S. might be for that particular refugee and/or their family.

“For example, Martha’s Vineyard would not be a very good place to settle refugees,” Makenzie said. “The cost of living is too high; there are few employment options. Every refugee gets the same amount of support, whether they’re a doctor or someone who grew up in a refugee camp. It’s a very thoughtful process. We’re not just sending refugees out in the dark.”

### **Resettlement provides a path to citizenship**

Makenzie said refugees are hard-working and grateful for the opportunity to begin a new life. When you come to the U.S. as a refugee, it provides a path to citizenship.

“Within a year they’ll get a green card, and within five years they can get citizenship. We don’t bring them here to try it out. We’re giving these people a new chance at life. Our refugee program is a beacon of Americanism,” Makenzie said. “Every employer will tell you they are lucky to have them. Refugees want to work, they want to take care of their families, they want their kids to go to school, and they want to be safe. Many of them are so happy just because they can sleep at night again.”

Makenzie said that she’s sat in the homes of hundreds of newly settled refugees.

“Most refugees wished they could have gone home, but couldn’t. And only a tiny percentage have the opportunity to resettle to safety — half of one percent of the world’s refugees resettle,” Makenzie said. “In 2015, of the 21.3 million refugees worldwide, only 103,000 resettled, and 70,000 of them came to the U.S.”

She cited a study that was recently highlighted by a Democratic California congressman, Ted Lieu. In a press release issued after President Trump's halting of the refugees coming into the U.S. for 120 days, the congressman wrote, "The chance of being struck by lightning twice is 1 in 9 million. The chance of being killed by a refugee committing a terrorist act is 1 in 3.6 billion." Mr. Lieu's statistics come from a study by the Cato Institute, <https://object.cato.org>.

With the future murky about the immigration issue, staff of the small agency offices around the U.S. are likely anxious about their jobs, Makenzie said. Even though the ban was halted by a district judge in Seattle on Feb. 3, there's still a sense of unease.

"Notoriously, people helping refugees resettle are overworked and underpaid. Many were refugees themselves," she said. "Once refugees stop coming, they get no funding. They'll have to rely on funding from other sources, through afterschool programs, health services."

Makenzie said she's trying to keep the current situation in perspective; there have been ebbs and flows with the numbers of refugees coming into the U.S. before.

"My favorite story, and this one makes me cry, was when I was in [Vice President Mike] Pence's state, Indiana, and a Jewish synagogue had written a check to a Catholic agency to help resettle Muslims," Makenzie said. "There are so many people who support refugees. The majority of Americans are in support of refugees, but you wouldn't know it if you just watched the news."