A soft landing in Montana

by Amy Frykholm in the December 21, 2016 issue

Ava Parsons, 12, plays with three-year-old Bertha Joel Makeci outside their homes in Missoula, Montanta. Photo © Jeremy Lurgio.

“When I arrived in Missoula, I felt very cold,” said Joel Makeci Ebuela, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Before coming to Montana in September, Ebuela had lived in a refugee camp in Tanzania since he was 11. Ebuela, his wife, Bikyeombe Abwe, and their five children are now settling into a new life in the United States.

Their journey to Missoula began more than a year ago when Ebuela and Abwe applied for resettlement. In August 2016 the International Office of Migration, which works with governmental and nongovernmental partners, sent a bus into the red dust of the Nyarugusu refugee camp to pick up the Ebuela family. The couple piled

their children into the bus, not knowing where they were going. “You haven’t any choices,” said Ebuela. When I asked him at what point he knew he was coming to Missoula, he said it was when he got off the plane. “I got off the plane and asked, ‘Where am I?’” The day they arrived in Missoula it was damp and rainy. “They told me that after a month or two months, there will be snow! . . . I have never seen snow. I will see it.”

The Congolese refugees have arrived at a time when the situation of refugees is politically precarious. In August, President Obama pledged before the United Nations General Assembly to increase the number of refugees admitted to the United States—but that pledge was met with domestic rancor. An anti-immigration and antirefugee wave fueled the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, and Trump’s election has cast uncertainty over refugee resettlement programs.

During the campaign, Trump railed against the “flood” of refugees coming to the United States. Voicing concerns about terrorism, 30 governors—including Mike Pence of Indiana, Trump’s running mate—told the federal government they would not accept refugees from Syria. (A federal court later determined that Indiana did not have the right to accept or reject refugees based on national origin.) In October, three men were arrested for planning to set off bombs outside an apartment complex in Wichita, Kansas, that is known as a home to refugees. Their aim was for the bombs to go off the day after the national election. The political rhetoric about refugees has become heated and potentially violent in a way that will extend far beyond Election Day.

But some Americans have mounted a very different response to the plight of the 65 million people who are displaced worldwide. In the fall of 2015, at the same time that Ebuela and Abwe were submitting applications for resettlement, newspapers, computers, and TV screens around the globe were showing the heartbreaking image of a drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee, Alan Kurdi, who lost his life trying to reach Turkey along with his family. One of those who saw the photo was Mary Poole, a longtime resident of Missoula. She and her friends found themselves discussing the photo.

“I didn’t even know what a refugee was,” Poole recalled. “But the feeling that I needed to do something did not go away.” Poole had recently become a new

mother, and the photo of Kurdi haunted her. She still tears up when she talks about it.

Poole started making phone calls to organizations that resettle refugees, learning far more than she ever knew there was to learn about the process of resettlement. One agency she called was the International Rescue Committee in Seattle, which ran an office in Missoula until 2008. The man who answered the phone was Bob Johnson, who had opened the IRC's Missoula office in 1979.

Just four days from retirement, Johnson agreed to help Poole reopen the office in Missoula. Missoula is the only community that has ever requested the opening of an IRC office on its own. In conjunction, Poole founded the organization Soft Landing Missoula to help welcome immigrants.

The work of the IRC and Soft Landing Missoula quickly became controversial. Greg Gianforte, the Republican candidate for governor—who lost narrowly in November—sent out a mailer showing a man in a turban carrying a Kalashnikov rifle. The text promised that Gianforte would "stand up to dangerous refugee programs" and refuse entry to "unvetted refugees." After the election, it is not clear what effect this kind of antirefugee rhetoric will have, but it is clear that many people in Montana and nationally resonated with it.

Protesters against the refugee program showed up at meetings of the Missoula city council and the county commission in numbers that surprised Poole. Volunteers, politicians, and clergy who supported the resettlement effort have all received death threats.

Right after the city council signed a letter of support for Soft Landing and the IRC, councilman Jon Wilkins started to receive letters, calls, and e-mails against the proposal to bring refugees to the area. "It's just fear," he said. "People are afraid of what they don't understand."

Wilkins showed me a letter he had received from Ed Kugler, founder of the ACT for America chapter in Lake County, Montana, north of Missoula. ACT for America has been one of the most vocal opponents of refugee resettlement.

In the letter, Kugler asserted that there is insufficient vetting of refugees, and that the Department of Homeland Security cannot guarantee the identity of the people who are coming to the United States. Echoing Trump, Kugler claimed that the

country is being “intentionally flooded with refugees from Muslim countries.” He called the arrival of refugees an “invasion being forced on us.” Kugler also said that there is too little housing for refugees in Missoula and that the IRC is a self-interested organization.

In October, ACT for America sponsored a lecture in Missoula by Shahram Hadian, an Iranian who travels around the country speaking about what he calls the “true face of Islam.” Linda Sauer, cochair of ACT’s Lake County chapter, told those gathered for the lecture that the event was not a response to recently arrived immigrants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, like Ebuela, who are mostly Protestant Christians. As Sauer and Hadian held forth inside the hotel where the event took place, Poole and others from Soft Landing gathered outside with members of Standing Alongside America’s Muslims to offer a counter message. They carried signs that said, “My Missoula includes Muslims.”

Kugler sees immigration as a battleground. “The battle today is no longer Republican or Democrat, but a battle for our nation and our great state.”

Despite much criticism, efforts to resettle refugees are on the increase in the U.S.

Indeed, Poole and Kugler seem to have two opposite understandings of what it is to be an American. ACT for America, which calls itself “the NRA of national security,” was founded in 2007 by Brigitte Gabriel, a Lebanese American. By 2016, it claimed to have more than 300,000 members and 1,000 chapters nationwide. In the season of Trump, the group found its voice and platform. It views all immigrants with suspicion but is especially worried about Muslims. ACT for America exists, according to its website, to protect “Western civilization against the threat of radical Islam.”

By contrast, Poole sees America as a place of abundant resources and hospitable people who are willing to share what they have. Everywhere she looks, she finds resources and ready volunteers. “Yes, we’ve received death threats,” she said, “but for every one of those there are 30 volunteers.”

Soft Landing has organized teams of five volunteers to coordinate help for each refugee family. It has over 400 people ready to serve on those teams, and more than 1,000 on the mailing list of people willing to help with supplies, donations, and other forms of support. She envisions creating a community center where refugees and Missoulians can cook together, celebrate holidays together, and teach each other languages and traditions.

Shaun Casey, special representative of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the U.S. State Department, sees Poole's work being replicated nationwide. He said that even in a political environment that has turned negative, people at the grass roots have responded to refugee resettlement with an "amazing" level of innovation and collaboration. He is struck by how much of the collaboration is interreligious.

He recalled going into the office of a resettlement center in Jersey City, New Jersey. "This is going to sound like a bad joke," he said, "but sitting at the table was an imam, a pastor, and a rabbi." The three had met each other through the relief agency Church World Service.

"Something is afoot at the grassroots level," Casey said. Part of it is the desire to increase the amount of aid to refugees, "but there is also the ancillary benefit of a new form of interreligious interaction."

In the refugee resettlement communities that he visited last year, he said, reports of political vitriol would lead to an increased number of calls to refugee centers saying, "How can we help?"

Molly Short Carr heads the Missoula office of the IRC. She believes that the United States takes the right approach to refugee resettlement and that it is a process other countries can learn from. Specifically, she praises the United States for its community-oriented approach. Communities are carefully screened and selected for resettlement efforts. Refugee resettlement relies on volunteers to help refugees make the transition to American life, and this provides the opportunity for faster and more thorough integration between refugees and their communities.

"What we do is a measured approach that involves public-private partnerships, where core services are provided, but integration happens through volunteer support," said Carr. "We can't make refugees integrate. The community has to provide that support."

Poole has started receiving phone calls about how to take the resettlement program to other communities. Fledgling groups in Helena, Billings, and Bozeman have contacted her asking how they might follow Missoula's lead.

“Missoula has a chance to be a leader—a national and an international leader when it comes to being a welcoming community,” Poole told a class in the basement of the First United Methodist Church in downtown Missoula.

She went on to talk about the benefits of refugees in the form of economic growth, cultural literacy, and enriched lives. “Refugees are also customers in our stores, small business owners, taxpayers.” She paused over this point. “They pay taxes just like the rest of us.” The group broke into laughter. The day before the event, the *New York Times* had printed pages of Donald Trump’s tax returns that suggested he may not have paid income taxes in a number of years.

At four o’clock on a Monday afternoon, Joel and Bikyeombe are waiting for their 11-year-old son to come home from school. On the wall of the dining room in their apartment is a clock, a calendar, and a large map of Missoula, all evidence of their struggle to orient themselves to their American environment. These items are also evidence of the constant flow of support from volunteers.

As the younger children eat plates of rice and chicken, Joel tells me that he decided to apply for resettlement because of his distress at the problems he faced in both his home country and Tanzania. He lists them: crime, war, ethnic violence, lack of education and opportunities for his children. “I asked myself, ‘How can I start to live? What can I do? How can I give my effort to my children so they may eat and have a house?’ So I decided to start the process to come here.”

In just a few weeks, Joel will be expected to pay the $925 rent for his apartment. He expects to take a job—it will be any job that he can get. Bikyeombe is starting work cleaning hotel rooms. Joel’s dream is to go to school and study to be a teacher or a nurse. Both he and Bikyeombe are musicians who have recorded their music together, and he is eager to share these gifts in America.

After eating, the children put on coats and go outside to play with six-year-old Brittany, daughter of Amy Lee, who lives in the apartment downstairs. Lee said that when she first heard that refugees were coming to Missoula, she was opposed to the plan. It was hard enough, she said, to make ends meet for her own family and to get access to the health care they need. What good would it do to bring in more needy people?

Her view changed when she met the family and heard their story. Lee has become an important friend and ally. “I like the whole family,” she said on an afternoon

outside their apartment building while the children played. “But that one,” she pointed to Joel and Bikyeombe’s three-year-old daughter Bertha, “I already love.”

The next day, I sat with another refugee family at a card table in their apartment. Joseph Bazungu and Vanis Nyiraburango and their 15-year-old daughter Sifa had arrived just three weeks before from a refugee camp in Uganda. Like Joel and Bikyeombe, they were born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and spent some of their childhood there but had lived in a refugee camp for almost two decades. Also like Joel and Bikyeombe, they had no idea when they left Uganda that they were headed to Missoula. Soon after they arrived, a celebration broke out. Joseph’s cousin had arrived from the same camp to the same city. The two men danced in the airport.

The room was sparsely furnished, with just a couch and a lamp on a side table. A few days earlier, a load of furniture from the Holiday Inn had arrived for the family at the parking lot of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Scores of barely used tables, chairs, and other furniture were unloaded by volunteers for use in refugees’ homes. I couldn’t help looking around the room to see what else the family might need. I noticed that the only book in the room was a Bible, open on the side table.

With the help of Google-translated and pieced-together English, we talked about their hopes and concerns for life in Montana. I learned the Swahili word for *worry*. “My *wasi-wasi*,” Joseph said, “is to learn English.” The couple shook their heads at the difficulty. “English is hard,” Vanis said.

What did they hope for? There was a discussion among the three at the table, searching for the word in English. Joseph said finally, “We hope here to experience life.”

When I left Vanis and Joseph’s apartment, it was again rainy and cold. I looked up at the mountains that surround Missoula and saw that they had snow.

A version of this article appears in the December 21 print edition under the title “Welcome to Missoula.”