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World Refugee Day in Austin to be celebrated at the Bullock Museum

Festival celebrates new American citizens with free food, music, family fun

JUNE 10, 2014 (AUSTIN, TX) — Join us June 14 as 27 refugees from 18 different countries reach the pinnacle of their journey to receive American citizenship. Saturday is World Refugee Day across the globe and in Austin, and a celebration will be held at the Bullock Texas State History Museum from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. with an official naturalization ceremony and children's activities that will focus on learning about the journey of a refugee.

Sponsored by Interfaith Action of Central Texas and member organizations of the Austin Refugee Roundtable, World Refugee Day highlights the plight of those fleeing their home country due to religious or political persecution. More than 1,000 refugees from nearly 30 countries come to Austin each year to start a new life.

One such refugee recently shared his story with volunteers at Caritas of Austin, an organization that is part of the Austin Refugee Roundtable and promotes self-sufficiency by providing housing, employment, education, and food services to thousands of families and individuals in each year, including international refugees.

Born and raised in Iraq, Sezar worked as an interpreter for the United States military in his home country. This was a good career until the war began and his life and the lives of his family members were at risk due to his ties to the United States. Sezar said they feared for their lives every day.

“Whenever I said goodbye to my family each morning on my way to work, I feared it would be the last time,” Sezar said.

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Opposition groups kidnapped and killed Sezar's brother, and eventually the U.S. government determined that Sezar and his wife needed to flee Iraq before they were killed. In September 2009, he received a call that his family would have to leave in three days. They had just 72 hours to sell their possessions, say their goodbyes, and gather what they could take with them on the plane.

While Sezar's journey was expedited due to ties to the U.S. government, the majority of refugees wait in refugee camps in neighboring countries for years prior to being resettled. Regardless of their journey, all refugees experience significant challenges transitioning to a new country and culture very different from their own.

"When I arrived in the United States, I told myself that I would be willing to pick up trash for a job if it meant that my family was safe," Sezar said. He said it was helpful for him to know that other refugees who were doctors and engineers also had to start over working low wage jobs. "I knew I could work hard and move up."

Caritas helped the family by providing lessons in how to use public transportation, shop for groceries and open bank account, and volunteers also helped by getting them to and from appointments.

After several jobs over the past five years, Sezar now has a career in the oil industry. "Now I am living the dream. I have a good job, my family is safe, and my kids are going to good schools," he said.

His is just one of the many stories told by refugees who resettle to the Austin community. World Refugee Day is a time for refugees from all over the world to gather and share their experiences with one another and celebrate their newfound freedom and citizenship. This year, refugees from Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burma, Cameroon, Colombia, Cuba, Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Laos, Nepal, Nicaragua, Russia, Sudan, Venezuela and Vietnam are expected to receive citizenship during the naturalization ceremony that begins at noon in the museum's Texas Spirit Theater. Arrival by 11:45 a.m. is recommended.

The United Nations established World Refugee Day to recognize the courage, resilience, and strength of refugee families and individuals who have fled their home countries because of conflict and persecution. The Austin celebration will be held from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Bullock Museum, 1800 N. Congress Avenue.

Entertainment will be provided by SeVana Marimba and X8 Interactive Drumming. Refreshments will be free and have been donated by Rosemary's Catering. A passport educational activity will allow children to learn more about the journey of a refugee. Admission to the Bullock Museum's exhibits will be free all day.

The Austin World Refugee Day celebration is free and open to the public. For more information, visit www.TheStoryofTexas.com or call (512) 936-8746.

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About the Bullock Museum

The Bullock Texas State History Museum in downtown Austin tells the unfolding story of the history, culture and people of Texas. One of the most popular attractions in Central Texas, the Museum has welcomed over 6 million visitors since it opened in 2001. The Museum and IMAX Theatre are located at 1800 N. Congress Avenue, between the State Capital complex and the University of Texas campus. For more, visit TheStoryofTexas.com or call (512) 936-8746.

About the Austin Refugee Roundtable

The Austin Refugee Roundtable enhances collaboration between agencies, community groups and individuals who serve refugees, with the aim of making Austin a welcoming and supportive resettlement community. The coalition is comprised of a number of local agencies that work with refugees including: Caritas of Austin, Interfaith Action of Central Texas, Refugee Services of Texas, Multicultural Refugee Coalition, Amala Foundation, Center for Survivors of Torture and others. For more, visit www.austinrefugees.org or call (512) 386-9145 x 304.