



**Lutheran
Social Service**
of Minnesota

Changing Lives



Thriving in
Community

SPRING 2024

Thriving in Community

At LSS, building community is an essential building block in restoring health and wellness in people's lives and an important part of the organization's mission and vision.

"A community fosters connections and has the power to guide individuals and families toward independence and resilience," said Alexis Oberdorfer, LSS vice president of community engagement and partnerships. "Community is a place where people get to know one another, experience fellowship and share knowledge and resources. At LSS, our objective is to empower individuals and families to grow and achieve their goals within their communities."

Theresa and Ojunie are individuals served through Guardianship Options and Refugee Services respectively, who forged different paths to wellness and dramatically changed their lives with help from the community.

THERESA ACHIEVES INDEPENDENCE

Theresa's parents moved her into a group residential home under state guardianship when she was still a teenager. Once she turned 18, Theresa spent several years addressing her mental health and building skills before she successfully petitioned for full restoration of her rights.

Today, Theresa is a newlywed. She just got her driver's license. She recently started working full-time as a personal care attendant in a group home allowing her to save money

toward the purchase of a house. She is also teaching her husband to cook in the air fryer he gave her for Christmas.

"My parents said I couldn't take care of myself, which wasn't true," Theresa recalled.

Theresa's first petition to have her guardianship status removed and her autonomy restored was denied. On top of mental health problems (diagnosed, at least in part, as post-traumatic stress from childhood trauma), she had a history of physical altercations at school, abrasive communication habits, and little patience for the legalities of the court.

"She was angry," said Darla Brede, LSS guardian and conservator assigned to help Theresa navigate the guardianship legal process. "She had a right to be angry, but getting through that was difficult."

After being denied the restoration of her independence, Theresa was shattered. Darla gave Theresa advice: "If you really want what you say you want, these are the things you need to do: Manage your medicine and medical appointments. Find an apartment so you can move out of the group home. And learn how to communicate more respectfully."

Theresa listened. "I give Darla a lot of credit for trusting me to make my own decisions. It was the motivation I needed."

A year later, Theresa returned to court a second time. The day before her court date, Theresa asked Darla, "Do you think I'm ready?"

"100 percent," Darla recalled. "She did everything on her list. She changed her ways."

Theresa thought so too, and this time, the judge agreed.

OJUNIE CREATES COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR OTHER REFUGEES

Ojunie and his family spent nearly two decades as refugees in Kenya before the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program allowed them to come to Minnesota.

Ojunie's journey started in 2004 when he fled from violence in his native Ethiopia. During his time as a refugee in Kenya, Ojunie met his wife, and they had a son. In 2022, the family moved to St. Cloud, joining Ojunie's sister-in-law who had settled there years before.

Their community expanded through the Circle of Welcome program coordinated by LSS Refugee Services. Circle of Welcome volunteers from congregations and community groups commit to providing six months of guidance and support to new Americans.

"When refugees arrive, it can take a while to get established and adapt to their new environment," said Lynn Mullin, community connections program manager for LSS Refugee Services. "It's a matter of just surviving at that point. The Circle of Welcome teams help refugees know they are not alone — thanks to the support they receive to navigate

unfamiliar systems, learn a new language, find employment and secure a place to live. The support each team provides is as varied as the families they walk alongside."

For Ojunie and his family, that support came from the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls. The team helped the family acclimate to their new environment, showed them about town and connected them to the local school where Ojunie's son is now a fourth grader.

"Being new in the country, it was very encouraging having Lutheran Social Service helping us," said Ojunie. "They showed us the human side — the welcoming and caring side."

"It's our shared goal to meet people where they are and help them thrive as they define it."

— Alexis Oberdorfer, LSS vice president of community engagement and partnerships

A nurse in Ethiopia, Ojunie was considering entering medical school when conflict forced him to flee to Kenya. There, he helped and advocated for newly arriving asylum seekers, refugees and others to access basic services and to navigate their new environment. Today, Ojunie contemplates whether to pursue medicine or preventive health and social work in his new country.

"In Africa, we believe a child is not a child of only their parents, but a child is a child of the community," he said. "Everyone is tasked to look after them, so they become a productive citizen."



*Abang Agid,
Ojunie's wife, sharing
coffee and cookies
with Sister Cordy
Korkowski and Sister
Clara Stang from the
Franciscan Sisters
of Little Falls.*

Ojunie worries the time it would take to go to medical school would short-circuit the time he could give to addressing preventive measures. For now, he is working as a refugee advisor for the Central Minnesota Community Empowerment Organization. Working with immigrants, Ojunie said, "I'm helping them get the best out of themselves, helping them regain control of their lives. It's incredibly fulfilling."

Lynn believes Ojunie demonstrates the wider benefits of building supportive communities so individuals can thrive. "Thriving is not just becoming self-sufficient," she said. "Refugees are also giving back to their community. They are employing others and becoming leaders in the community."

"Building community is a two-way street."

MOVING FORWARD

Theresa still checks in with Darla sometimes.

"I'm excited to hear what she has to say," Darla said. "I'm proud of her and what she has accomplished, but more, who she is becoming. She's in control of her life and feels connected to others. She is thriving."

Theresa says accomplishing her goal to have her rights restored is "the best feeling in the world!" Her personal community — her grandmother, godmother, husband and his family — is small but powerful.

"I believe everybody can get to where I am if you have the right support team. I worked day and night to get to where I am, but I didn't

do it on my own. If I didn't have the support I had, I probably wouldn't have been able to accomplish any of this."

Ojunie is grateful for the life he and his family have created in the United States. He knows there is work ahead to help others achieve the same.

"I have the opportunity to work and be paid like any other person," he said. "It is up to me to use those resources wisely and help others. I'm ready to be a part of this community because my family and I will not be the last ones to come here."

The spectrum of community is illustrated at LSS through the connections and resources provided to support individuals and families to achieve self-sufficiency and thrive.

"Those connections show up throughout LSS in different ways," Alexis said. "The meaning of community for refugees like Ojunie becomes the face of welcoming, of walking with them, and supporting them through the first challenging days and weeks in a new country. For people we support through guardianship and conservatorship services, like Theresa, thriving in community means learning the skills to successfully navigate life. It's our shared goal to meet people where they are and help them thrive as they define it."