



**IMMIGRANT HERITAGE MONTH 2016  
WORLD REFUGEE DAY 2016  
HONORING REFUGEES THAT HAVE  
CALLED HOUSTON THEIR HOME**



- **Layth Lafta, Iraq:** Layth Lafta is a small business owner from Iraq. He is a former Financial Opportunity Center (FOC) client of Alliance who received financial coaching and technical assistance to begin a business. Mr. Lafta received \$10,000 to launch a carpentry and woodworking company in Houston, Texas. The business has thrived and now has contracts with major companies in and out of state. Mr. Lafta's story has been such an inspiration that he serves as a speaker during Alliance's Entrepreneurship Speaker Series last spring. Since arriving in the U.S., Mr. Lafta has seized the opportunities available and has had great success in accomplishing his goals.
- **Mustafa Faiz, Afghanistan:** Mustafa Faiz and his family resettled in Houston as refugees in November 2002. This was the third time within ten years that they had to start their lives over since they left their hometown in Kabul, Afghanistan. His mother had to support three children on her own, while attending ESL classes and was able to secure a job at a packaging company. Mr. Faiz and his sister participated in Alliance's after-school program while in high school, benefiting from academic tutoring and computer classes. Later, they worked as tutors at the after-school program and encouraged other refugee youth to give back to the community. Both Mr. Faiz and his sister graduated from Sharpstown High School. After high school, he attended Houston Community College and started working part time at the Alliance as an assistant in the same ESL program that assisted his mother three years before. Mr. Faiz worked at Alliance for almost two years before transferring to the University of Texas at Austin where he studied Government and History. He graduated from the College of Liberal Arts in 2010 and was immediately deployed to Afghanistan as a Department of Defense civilian to serve alongside the U.S. Army and Marines as an interpreter. In 2013, Mr. Faiz moved back to Houston and started a career in real estate.
- **Stephen Le, Sr., Vietnam:** Stephen Le, Sr. arrived in Houston in 1975 from war-torn Vietnam. After arriving in the U.S., he worked various jobs from dishwashing to welding. In the late 1980s, Mr. Le started Greatland Investment, Inc., one of the largest real estate agencies in Houston. As a self-taught businessman, he began acquiring one property at a time, learning from each project. Over time, Greatland Investment has grown to over 30 residential and commercial properties. Mr. Le expanded the company to include development, leasing, and management. He also helped establish another real estate company, SCL Realty Investment, Inc. and Greatland Leasing & Management, Co. With 20 invaluable years of experience, the company is recognized among the commercial real estate community in Houston.
- **Sendet Seremba, Congo:** Six years ago, Sendet Seremba left Congo-Kinshasa with his wife and seven children to start a new life in the United States. When they arrived, Mr. Seremba and his family knew very little English and struggled with the language barrier. He started taking ESL classes at Alliance and Houston Community College, and before he knew it, he was fluent in English. Mr. Seremba also participated in one of Alliance's computer technician classes and received an A+ as the top

student in his class. When Mr. Seremba first moved to the United States, his family of nine lived in a small apartment. He knew that someday he wanted to purchase a house to live comfortably, so he enrolled in Alliance's IDA program to learn about the home ownership process. Mr. Seremba was constantly being told, "You can't buy a house! It's too expensive." He proved them wrong when he purchased his first home in May of 2015. Now that Mr. Seremba bought a house for his family to live comfortably, he says that his main priority is seeing his children "finish college and serve this country and their family."

- **Ahmed Badr, Iraq:** When he was eight years-old, Ahmed Badr's home in Baghdad was bombed by militia troops. He and his family relocated to Syria as refugees for two and a half years before receiving approval to move to the United States. After moving to the U.S., they continued to face many challenges. Ahmed had to teach himself English and four years after moving to the U.S., his parents were still unable to find jobs in their fields. Even after facing many setbacks, Ahmed is now the Executive Director and co-founder of Narratio, an online platform for young artists who are facing adversity to share their stories, art, poetry and photography with the world. Narratio's mission is to diminish childhood illiteracy by empowering youth through art, poetry, photography, and storytelling. For his work with Narratio, Ahmed was recently selected as one of thirty Global Teen Leaders by the We Are Family Foundation. Ahmed is also a published writer, and his work has been featured on Fusion, the Houston Chronicle, and UNICEF's Voices of Youth. Ahmed is currently finishing up a book that will encompass his experiences during his family's journey to America.
- **Omer Okanovic, Bosnia:** As an eleven year old boy growing up in war-ridden Bosnia, Omer saw devastation every day. His family lived in constant fear that they would be tortured or killed, so they decided

to flee to Germany. At the first check point in Croatia, it seemed like the journey was going to end fatally. Serbian soldiers pulled his family off of the bus and lined them up to be executed because of "improper documentation". First, they took Omer's father into an interrogation room to find out the number of undocumented people on the bus. After the interrogation, the soldiers announced that everyone would be sent back to Bosnia. This was worse. Everyone would have rather died than gone back to their homes to be killed. Suddenly, a car pulled up, and a man stepped out who remembered Omer's father from their childhood. He cleared everyone and allowed the bus to cross through the checkpoint. Omer's family finally made it to Germany and after a few years, he enrolled in culinary arts school. Omer had always dreamed of owning his own restaurant. When he was a little boy, he loved watching his mom cook and eagerly helped her prepare food. He moved to Houston when he was 20 years old and still dreamed of opening his own restaurant. He took ESL classes at YMCA and HCC while he worked at many restaurants trying to learn as much as possible about the business. Finally, he opened his own restaurant, Café Pita, in 2006, and after having so much success, he opened another location. Café Pita has been featured on Food Network and recommended by the Houston Press as the best Bosnian restaurant in Houston. Café Pita is celebrating its 10 year anniversary this year!

- **Hanny Omar, Somalia:** Hanny has been in Houston little over a year, she has been resettled by the YMCA International Services as a refugee with her family from Somalia. Hanny has strong personality, friendly, humble and likes helping her community, she speaks Somali, Kiswahili and very good English. She learns fast and always willing to take a challenges. Hanny is a Resettlement Case Manager at YMCA International Services and is dedicated to giving back to refugees in Houston.

- **Asinja Badeel, Iraq:** Asinja was born and raised in Iraq, but was forced to flee after her husband's name was found on a list of people to be killed for working for an American company. Her family immediately left for Turkey. "I booked a flight to Istanbul right away, but the terrorists did not want anyone to leave Iraq, so they would hide in the hills along the side of the road leading to the airport. When he picked us up, our taxi driver said, 'As soon as I tell you to get down on the floorboard, do it. Don't get up until I tell you to.' We drove a little, and then I felt the car slowing. The driver whispered, 'I think they're here.' That's when the terrorists opened fire onto the road." It took Asinja's family three tries to make it to the airport, and eventually they were able to land in Turkey. Once in Houston, Asinja enrolled at HCC and received an honors degree in Science. She is now a student at the University of Houston, majoring in Petroleum Engineering and expects to graduate in two years. She is also a teacher at the Arabic Immersion Magnet School in Houston.
- **Judy Le, Vietnam:** Judy is a former refugee from Vietnam, who worked her way through school and higher education to teach at Rice University and now own her own leadership consulting company, Go Take Root: <http://www.gotakeroot.com/> She is an incredibly talented and organic public speaker, and inspires whatever audience she addresses. She is a passionate advocate for refugee youth and their development into confident, successful leaders in American society.
- **Lucy Mulezi, Rwanda:** Lucy is from the Republic of Rwanda. Lucy, her mother, and her four siblings became refugees in 1997 because of the political instability in Rwanda at the time. Her father was killed, and her family lost everything and was forced to start over. Lucy's family lived in a refugee camp in Zambia for 13 years before being resettled to Houston in 2010. In May 2013, Lucy received her Associate's Degree from Houston Community College,

and worked part time at a nursing home. In 2014, Lucy was accepted to Prairie View A&M's College of Nursing, and is graduating this May with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. Lucy hopes to one day work with HIV and other infectious diseases in a major hospital, and plans on obtaining a Master's Degree in Public Health.

- **Wazhma Azeemi, Afghanistan:** Wazhma came to Houston as a refugee from Afghanistan with her mother and her three siblings. Since then, Wazhma has successfully graduated from college, and is now running her own fashion design business, drawing inspiration from traditional Afghan designs but with a modern twist. Wazhma continues to inspire the refugee community and those around her.
- **Thomas Tedla, Eritrea:** Thomas studied conflict resolution and was devoted to keeping peace during his career. These beliefs led him to disagree with the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Even with his respected position as First Secretary of State in Eritrea, he was seen as a traitor and had to flee with his wife and two toddlers. Thomas and his family were resettled in Houston in 2005 within three weeks of the growing hostility the government showed towards him. Thomas recalls Daniella, the Director of Resettlement at Catholic Charities, playing a pivotal role during his transition in the United States. She provided him with employment support, which helped him find a job as a fifth grade teacher. Additionally, she assisted him in his first five months, making her one of the first people here that guided him through the integration process. He is grateful for her constant support. When Thomas describes the contrast between the adversity and blessings he has received in life, he says "the sun has been three time off and three times on in my life."

## **Honoring Immigrant Entrepreneurship, Service and Contributions to the Houston Community**

**Dr. Abdul Raheem Bello:** Dr. Bello was born in Lagos, Nigeria. He was inspired to study astronomy from gazing at the night sky, and aspired to become an astronaut. In February 2006, he moved to the U.S. and graduated from Westbury High School in spring 2008, and enrolled in college at University of Texas at Austin. At UT Austin, Dr. Bello worked in the magnetism and superconductivity group for 2 years studying “Thermal conductivity due to magnon heat transport.” He graduated from UT Austin in spring 2012 with a Bachelor of Science in Astronomy and a Bachelor of Science in Physics with honors. He enrolled at University of Texas at Arlington in Fall 2012, and conducted research at the Aerodynamics Research Center (ARC). He later earned a Master’s of Science in Aerospace Engineering in December 2012. Dr. Bello began his Ph.D. program in spring 2013, and later graduated in spring 2016 with a dissertation titled “Exergy Analysis of a Pulse Detonation Engine Linear Power Generator”. Through his tech startup Afthon, Dr. Bello is commercializing detonation engine technologies in order to help enable a world of abundance.

**Marshal Sulayman:** Marshal Sulayman is a Tax Principal specializing in Fuel Excise Tax in the Multistate Tax Practice of Deloitte Tax LLP. He was admitted into the partnership of Deloitte US firm in 2015. He is a leader in the excise tax practice of Deloitte Tax LLP. Marshal migrated from Lagos, Nigeria to Houston in 1997 to begin a new life and pursue the American dream. His initial plans were to continue to pursue an academic career as a college professor. Marshal changed his career path in 2000 when he started focusing on fuel excise tax, a niche area that has become his specialty and passion for 16 years. Marshal has experience serving large clients with large fleet of trucks, vehicles or equipment purchasing, selling or using regular and alternative fuels in both public and private sectors. His industry experience includes but not limited to transportation, sanitation, logistics, construction, manufacturing, airline, and oil and gas. Marshal’s deep experience

includes: tax accounting, tax planning, fleet management, compliance management, cash flow management, risk assessment, tax credits and audit defense. Marshal completed his post-baccalaureate program in accounting at the University of Houston in 2005. He became IRS Enrolled Agent, certified to practice before the IRS and state taxing jurisdictions in 2006. He served on Mayor Bill White and Mayor Annise Parker’s Advisory Committee on International Communities and led many initiatives for the benefit of the immigrant and international communities. Marshal is married to Aishat and both of them are blessed with three beautiful daughters – Iman, Amarni and Hiqmat.