

Sunday, June 17th, 9:30 am

Opening Remarks by Jim Olson

“The Story of a Refugee Grateful for a Second Chance”

This coming Wednesday, June 20th, is World Refugee Day. It has been designated by the United Nations as a time to recognize and celebrate the contributions, strength, and resilience of refugees, now numbering over 20 million worldwide mostly women and children.

The term “refugee” has a very specific meaning in international law. A refugee in international law is someone who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion who has crossed a national border to seek refuge.

But the legal definition does not include many millions of people who have been forced to leave their homes. The definition does not include internally displaced people such as civilians caught in the cross fire in Syria and Yemen. It does not include economic migrants in search of a way to support their families. It does not include people displaced by climate change. It does not include victims of gender-based violence or human trafficking. It does not include the families at the southern borders where children are separated from their families and kept in detention. Our guest this morning, Jean Paul Mugemuzi, is a refugee in the strict legal sense. But I would like to use the term today in a broader sense to include all those who have fled their homes due to violence, oppression, poverty, or climate change. Collectively all of these migrants may number nearly 250 million people, an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

These numbers are staggering and numbing. Today we will hear one refugee’s story and move beyond the statistics and deafening political debate about refugees and immigration. I first met Jean Paul two years ago. He attended an annual event called Night of 1000 Dinners, an international dinner organized each year by the local chapter of the United Nations Association of the USA. The day after the dinner Jean Paul stopped by the UNA office in Old Brick. He began to share his story and his dreams, and eventually he invited me to participate in the Refugee and Immigrant Association, a self-help group created by and for refugees and immigrants to provide support especially to newly arrived African refugees.

Jean Paul is one of a growing refugee community in Johnson County, including people from all parts of the world, but especially from Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other African nations. Nobody knows exactly how many immigrants and refugees there are in Johnson County, but it is probably more than 5,000.

So welcome Jean Paul, and could you please share with us your background, your home in the Congo and why you fled your home and how you eventually arrived in Iowa.

Describe your experiences in the United States

What does being a refugee mean to you?

What is your dream?

In listening to Jean Paul’s story, I am reminded that we are all on a journey, a quest for truth. The quest is not necessarily planned, deliberate, and intellectual. The quest is more often unexpected, accidental, incremental, and experiential. Our quest is the result of a lifetime of experiences, reflections, relationships which we human beings, as

pattern makers, put into some kind of order that makes sense to us. Meeting Jean Paul has been part of my quest, has enriched my life, has allowed me to learn something about a totally different life experience.