

What is Home And How Do We Get There Amy Keller

“Home is the physical and internal space that is populated with the people that bring us joy”



During 2018-2019, about 486.62 million metric tons of rice was consumed worldwide. Arguably, it is the most important human food crop in the world, feeding more people than any other crop. Rice is so unique, because it can grow in wet or dry environments, where other crops would be unable to survive.

Rice provides health benefits that are widely necessary, including supporting metabolism, blood pressure, heart health, and keeping the nervous system

functioning properly. You are probably asking by now, “Why are you telling us so much about rice?”!

Restoring Dignity is fortunate to support many resettled refugee families in Omaha, and the staple food item for the majority is rice. When we see how important rice is to the families we serve, we also see how important these families are to Omaha. Incredible mothers, fathers, sons and daughters have come from all over the world, and from environments that we may not be able to fully grasp. But what binds us, like the starch in rice, is our shared human dignity.

Restoring Dignity is honored to work with these families to provide empowerment, education, and advocacy partnerships. And your awareness makes that possible, to provide culturally appropriate support and education. And that, that is why we wanted you to know so much about rice.”

This project gave particular focus to Refugee Rights and ensuring that home is something accessible to all people.

Refugees and Rights

The United Nations Explains that, “Every minute, 20 people leave everything behind to escape war, persecution or terror.” While there are several types of displaced persons, the focus of this project was on refugees resettlement.

According to the United Nations, “A refugee is someone who fled his or her home and country owing to “a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion”.

The 1951 Refugee Convention, along with the 1967 Protocol set a standard noting that “refugees deserve, as a minimum, the same standards of treatment enjoyed by other foreign nationals in a given country and, in many cases, the same treatment as nationals.” From this, came a list of rights including the following:

Rights

- ...To not be expelled, except under certain, strictly defined conditions.
- ...Not to be punished for illegal entry into the territory of a contracting state.
- ...To work.
- ...To education.
- ...To public relief and assistance.
- ...To freedom of religion.
- ...To access the courts.
- ...To freedom of movement within the territory.
- ...To be issued identity and travel documents.
- ...To housing.

Our dive will focus on housing, particularly for refugees in Omaha Nebraska, in the United States.

Why Omaha?

Since 2002, 11,949 refugees, from 36 countries, have resettled in Nebraska. Omaha is home to 6,390 refugees.

Nebraska is Central in the country, and between 1999-2020, refugees have predominantly been coming here from the following countries: Sudan, South Sudan, Burma (Myanmar), Bhutan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Burundi, Liberia, and more.

Omaha is one of the most attractive cities in the country for resettlement, as Omaha is typically known for being relatively safe, having decent schools, and fair prices for goods.

Challenges

For each family that makes their way to Omaha, NE, the challenges are great. Some challenges that take focus for many families include the following:

1. Self sufficiency is expected after 90 days of arrival.
2. Loss- Loss of familiarity, culture, language, family, and identity.
3. Acclimation to climate.
4. Computer skills limiting job placement.
5. Social and legal realities:
 - a. Where to find help with domestic violence.
 - b. Understanding the necessity of school attendance.
 - c. The effects of traffic and vehicle violations.

And finally, in the United States, one of the greatest challenges is the misinterpretation of freedom. The lofty thing we hear about the United States, is that it is the land of the free, and home of the brave. That is a nice phrase, but not indicative of reality. Freedoms here still have limits and boundaries for safety. But that place that you are most free to do whatever you please is in your physical home.

This is why there are organizations in Omaha, that are working to ensure that the transition here is positive and welcoming for our newest families.

Restoring Dignity- Home Is...

To address the needs of the Omaha Refugee Community, Restoring Dignity has been doing incredible work. I have been fortunate to learn from this organization during 2020, as I assisted with their volunteer initiatives.

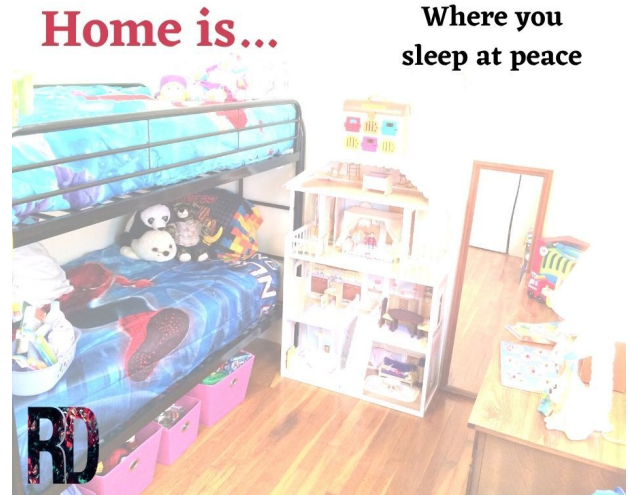
I am about to share with you some of the series of words and images that were used as the main strategy to bring in funding for Giving Tuesday, the day of the year when nonprofits seek to share their mission and bring in financial support. The words came from the refugee community when asked to respond to the prompt "Home is..." and the images are placed with each to convey the actions that Restoring Dignity has been taking to meet the needs of our newest neighbors.

These were the series of responses to the prompt "Home Is...", joined with photos that share the mission of Restoring Dignity.



Home is...

Where the water doesn't taste weird



Home is...

Where you sleep at peace



Home is...

Warm and cozy



Home is...

Loving



Home is...

Where I feel most comfortable



Home is...

A safe place to express yourself freely





Common Threads of Home

All of these shared quotes stirred something in me, as I started to wonder what home meant to me, as well as others in the larger community. I knew there must be similarities, but I wanted more responses, to see where there was overlap.

This leads to what I call our “Common Threads of Home” . I asked people in my life to complete the sentence as well. (“Home is...”) and the responses lead to 3 categories that everyone felt were indicative of home. The three categories look like this.

Physical/Tactile Structure of Home

- Physical House
- Food/Water Comforts
- Locational Patterns
- Safety
- Sleep/Temperature Realities

Internal Structure of Home

Feelings Including:

- Acceptance
- Peace
- Comfort
- Love
- Happiness
- Memories

People of Home

- Family
- Spouses
- People You Receive Love From
- Hugs/Affection

The responses gathered came from individuals who span the globe, from different countries and backgrounds. The majority of respondents identify as female. I am including all responses that were recorded, as they each tell an important story about the common threads of home. Some responses are tender, and some are slightly comical. But they were honest responses that informed the research of these three categories.

Physical (Home is...)

...locational patterns of reciprocity and refrains
 ...a safe, secure, and happy place
 ...cheese
 ...safe
 ...a house
 ...not so much a building, but a place where I feel safe

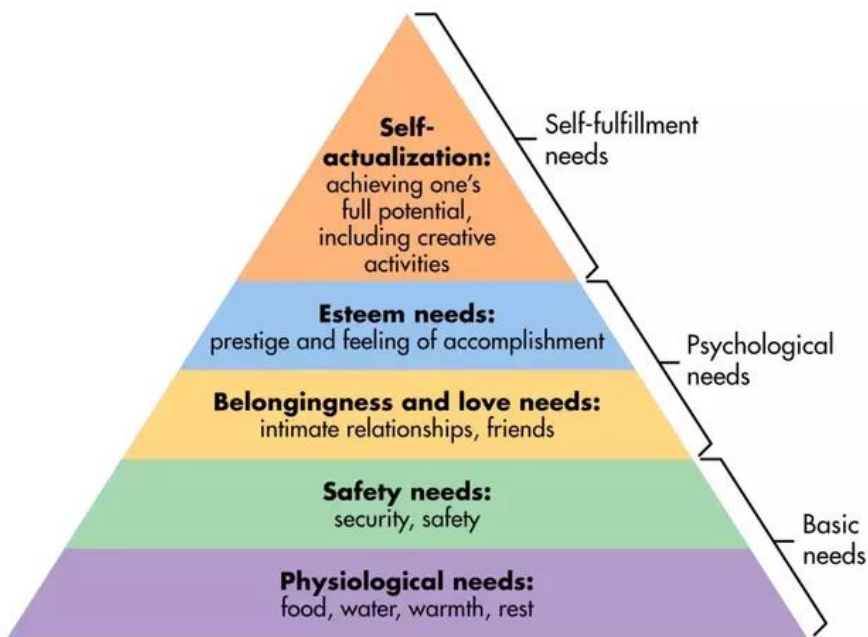
Internal (Home is...)

...a feeling of peace, contentment, and hope
 ...a place where you can be exactly who you are
 ...where I can truly rejuvenate and be accepted for the person I am
 ...where people feel comfortable being themselves
 ...where you can be your full self.
 ...not a place. It's a feeling
 ...knowing you are loved unconditionally
 ...cozy
 ...restoring
 ...where you can be snotty and eat all the Chinese and batter your heart desires
 ...where love resides, and memories are created
 ...a place where I feel loved
 ...where I can be ugly in peace
 ...where the heart is
 ...where I feel completely comfortable being myself no matter how crazy, silly, or weird,
 and the people (and puppies) who accept me for it
 ...where you can be yourself...and naked

People (Home is...)

...cultivated by the love of those with whom you live
 ...a place where you can deeply identify with those around you
 ...surrounded by the people I love
 ...community
 ...the family you choose, regardless of DNA
 ... a hug from my mom
 ...where my family is
 ...my family laughing during game nights
 ...my spouse/my person
 ...where family and friends belong, and laughter never ends
 ...where your family is gathered. Family can be anyone who makes your heart happy

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprised of a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid. From the bottom upwards, the needs are: physiological, safety, love and belonging needs, esteem, and self-actualization.

Needs lower down must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up.

Every person is capable and has the desire to move up the hierarchy toward a level of self-actualization. Unfortunately, progress is often disrupted by a failure to meet lower level needs. Life experiences, certainly including transitions in refugee experiences, may cause an individual to fluctuate between levels of the hierarchy.

While compiling these responses, I saw a correlation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs that we had looked at earlier.

There were responses focused on the physical home- safety, food and a physical structure for security. These were closer to the bottom level of the hierarchy.

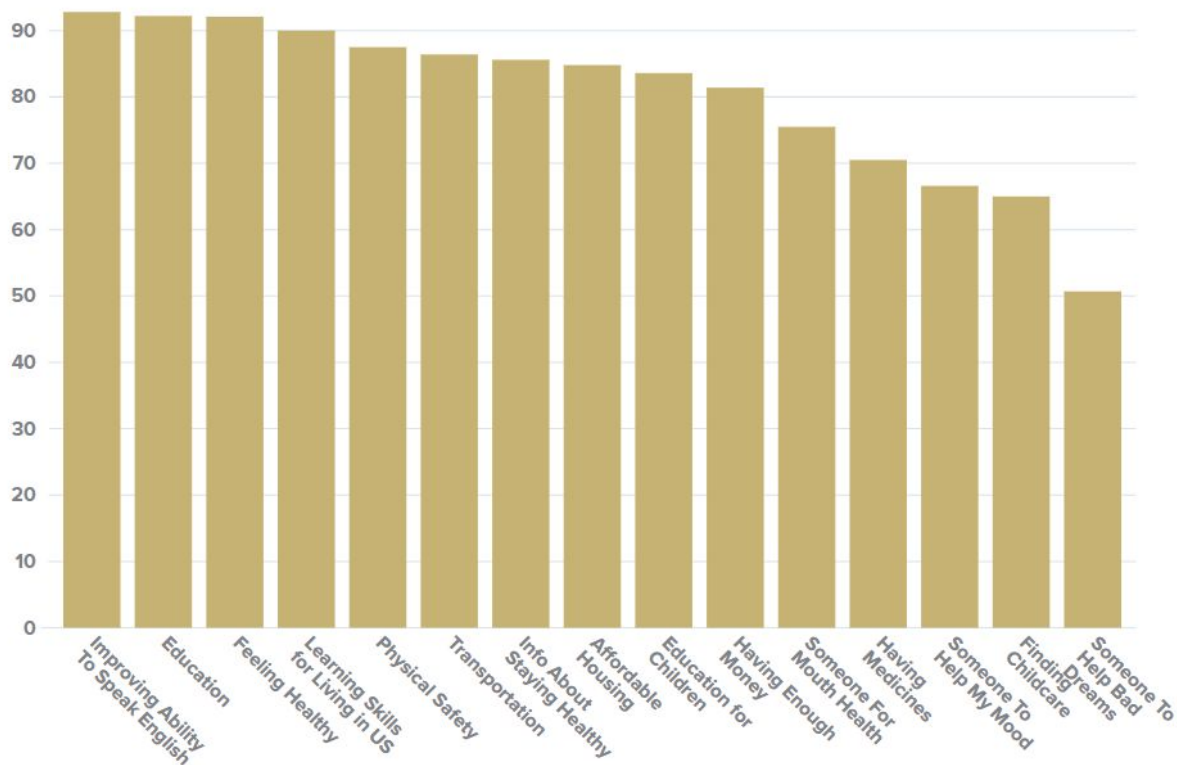
Then, the responses geared towards the people in our lives, were closer to the center, which meets our psychological needs.

The responses that focused on our internal home- feelings of comfort, peace, and positive memories fit higher up on the pyramid.

And the responses noting that home is that place where you can find self-actualization, (Ex- Home is...where you can be your full self) those were at the top of this hierarchy.

UNMC Survey of Needs

Self-Reported Importance of Issues



In order to know where to go with this information, it was important for me to see that surveys have been done, and the community had been asked about what needs are most important to thrive here in Omaha. The University of Nebraska Medical Center, a leading hospital and college, conducted this study and asked the Omaha Refugee Community what needs were most important for their families. Overall, 273 responses were recorded. These percentages were listed for high importance among the Omaha population.

As we look at this, home is a key component of several of the issues, including: health, skills for living, physical safety, affordable housing, and also finding people who can help.

According to these needs, and the Common Threads of Home, these are tactile ways to support refugees as they build up their new home.

Physical Advocacy

1. Be educated about renters rights. Advocate when someone is being taken advantage of.
2. Assist with temporary housing during the transition- by providing extra rooms, or covering the cost of hotels.
3. Provide financially or through goods, to the local storage units that support refugee families.

Internal Advocacy

1. Welcome families as they arrive at the airport.
2. Learn to say “Thank You” in native languages of the families nearest to you.
3. Erase the stigma of therapy, by showing you support this for your own health.

People Advocacy

1. Provide safe rides to school or work.
2. Support local refugee businesses to assist with the costs of resettlement.
3. Offer to assist with English tutoring, formatting resumes, and encourage businesses to hire our newest neighbors.

The final way I'd like to highlight is letting your government representatives know that you support refugee resettlement in your country, and raising the number of families that are welcomed in each year. The truth is- if you follow Christian ideals, and aim to live a life modeled after the Gospels, the idea of supporting this cause should not be challenging. In Chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew, we read that when King Herrod learned of the rumors of a newly born King, he became panicked and ordered all newborn babies in Bethlehem to be killed. An angel then warned Joseph and Mary, who fled to Egypt for several years during Jesus's early childhood. This family was displaced by a violent government and sought refuge in a foreign land. This is the definition of a refugee. When you bring this issue to your government representatives, particularly if you live in the United States, it is important to remember that 88% of our newly initiated Congress identify as Christian.

Driving this point home further is Father James Martin who has drawn this important comparison. The word refugee is literally in the Bible in Matthew Chapter 2. The angels that warned Joseph, used the word “pheuge” which meant flee. This is where we get our modern word “refugee”.

Conclusion

From the responses received to the initial prompt, “Home is...” and through looking at these responses through the lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, this is the definition I now have for home:

“Home is the **physical** and **internal** space that is populated with the **people** that bring us joy.”

Each person's journey to home will look slightly different. If you are feeling doubtful about any of your threads of home, my encouragement to you is this. Remember, refugees have 90 days to become self-sufficient in their new space, and then so many of their resources are cut off.

But there is no time limit for us as human beings to find joy and contentment. It may take you more than 90 days. Your track to getting home will look different from mine. But I wish you a safe and fulfilling journey as you work your way towards it, every single day.

And while you're at it, remember to eat some rice.

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