

## Compassion Story of the Month

### **Welcoming the Stranger in our Midst**

**Rev. Lise Sparrow**

*With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a “compassion story of the month.” The seventh of these is offered below. See details below for submitting your own story of compassion.*

The stories of neighbors helping neighbors are manifold in this compassionate community of ours. But with the holidays just past, I thought it might make sense to write about the hospitality we are able to show strangers in our midst. As we well understand, this is particularly challenging at present when the strangers are refugees – more than half of them children, and with the number of refugees now permitted entry to this country cut by more than half. In all, there are an estimated 11-12 million refugees in the world today, compared with less than 3 million in the mid-1970s.

One of these refugees, let’s call him Mwata, now in his early thirties, arrived in Brattleboro. He had lived in a refugee camp in Uganda since he had fled the perilously embattled Congo at the age of eight. As often happens in refugee camps, the refugees themselves organized schools and sports camps for their children to provide them both with education and with hope. Mwata, in time, became a leader in organizing such programs, although he himself had learned French and English not from classes but from other refugees.

But why should we find Mwata in Vermont? It’s often assumed that Vermont would be about the last place in the country refugees of different races and ethnicities would want to come. We are the second whitest state in the nation and our weather is far more forbidding than most of the southern and western states. Nonetheless, since 2013, nearly 300 refugees a year have been resettled here, mostly in the Burlington area where jobs are more plentiful and schools are prepared with ESL instruction. There also has been refugee resettlement in Colchester and now in Rutland with community groups in place to accommodate them. Still, many of those refugees slated to arrive in Vermont are still in European refugee camps awaiting release.

In Brattleboro, the SIT Graduate Institute recently granted scholarships to five students whose lives had been in danger. One of these students was Mwata. By time he was received here at SIT, Mwata had married another refugee and had a young daughter, so the three of them arrived from the warmest of continents to a place where the leaves were falling from the trees and the winds were growing cold. SIT granted Mwata tuition and helped the family find housing, but then it was up to them - and to their new community to find jobs, furniture and a school for the daughter.

They were soon welcomed into the life of a local church, and St Michael's Catholic Church School provided the young child with a scholarship. Hilltop Montessori and the Brattleboro Retreat both provided jobs to Mwata's wife, and individuals stepped forward to offer Mwata gardening jobs – although, being particularly adept at working with special needs children, he has been sought out to do that work when he is not studying to complete his degree.

And then, when it was discovered that Mwata and his wife were expecting another child, our compassionate community really kicked in. Friends organized a baby shower and people who barely knew the family came forward with a crib and infant care equipment that Mwata and his wife never knew existed. When the baby was born, a meal train was organized, providing the whole family with meals for a month. The child was born into the compassionate embrace of a community of strangers, not because of a government policy, not because a resettlement plan, but because the people of our town cared enough to extend love a family in need – a family which now loves us right back.

As we leave the darkest days of the calendar year, this is a story which reveals the essence of who we truly are: a “compassionate community”.

*Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: [compassionstory@gmail.com](mailto:compassionstory@gmail.com) or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.*