

Refugee Stories transcript

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) Mina isn't afraid to speak her mind. That's not a problem at her Lincoln restaurant, the Papiilon Grill. It was a problem in her homeland, Afghanistan.

(Tobias) Do you think your family would have been in danger if you had stayed?

(Mina/Refugee from Afghanistan) Yeh. Because I'm not woman like quiet woman. My mouth is so bad.

(Tobias) Mina grew up in Kabul - Afghanistan's capitol - when it was OK for women to speak out, go to school and work. She graduated from college, became a teacher, got married and had five kids. Life was good...until extremist regimes and eventually the Taliban took over in the 1990s.

(Mina) I lost my position, I lost my job, I lost my family, I lost my house.

(Tobias) She also lost her brother-in-law, a soldier.

(Mina) He was in Army place. And he have one child, like son. The son was birthday and he tried to come home. About the birthday party. And they take him and kill him.

(Tobias) The Taliban closed her school in 1996. But they couldn't stop her from teaching. She fled to Pakistan with her family and started a school for children in a refugee camp.

(Mina) It was small mosque and I talk with people and say, please give a hand together and make it small school for children. Because don't think about the stomach, don't think about that we don't have food, we don't have power. But our power is right there. (points to head). Think about the children.

(Tobias) Now chopping tomatoes has replaced grading history papers in Mina's life. She came to Lincoln in 2001 after several years in the refugee camp. She's proud of the restaurant she's opened with her friend - an immigrant from Iran.

(Mina) I'm so happy and I'm glad. I'm glad. And especially about my restaurant. And I'm right now in honor of this restaurant. I feel so good and I'm enjoy about this job. And I also applied for a para. Like assistant teacher. But my reading, writing was not good. I hope one day I'm coming in school. Because I like student. (Tobias) So you'd like to teach again? (Mina) It's like my love.

(Tobias) Khamisa loves flowers. They're a focal point of her art work. Pieces she creates remind her of the beauty of the Nuba Mountains of Sudan - where she used to live.

(Khamisa) A lot of trees. Nice weather, Rivers. Beautiful nature. Also they have peaceful people.

(Tobias) Other pieces tell the story of a country that's no longer peaceful.

(Khamisa) This woman lost one of her leg by the bomb. And you know in the Nuba Mountain most of the work is done by the woman. She cooking, she take care of the kids, she bring the water. She still do all that work, even she's lost one of her parts. You see she take care of her baby because there's no babysitter in

Nuba Mountain. And the most of the work like I said done by the woman because all the men go to the war or most the men are killed.

(Tobias) Khamisa's husband is alive, but living in Kenya. He left Sudan and his job as an air traffic controller when he refused to direct planes to bomb his region.

(Khamisa) After he get from Sudan I get a lot of trouble. Because they come and destroy my home. I come from the school and find all my home is down, destroyed.

(Tobias) Khamisa also feared for the safety of her children, mostly boys. Thirteen of her male cousins were taken from their homes, never to be seen again. Her oldest son was taken away for Army training. He smashed a finger and suffered other injuries trying to handle a heavy weapon.

(Khamisa's Son) Who knows, like during the training you might come back or you might not. Because the training was just like a real, like a real war. It was really bad.

(Tobias) What do you think would have happened to your family if you would have stayed in Sudan? (Khamisa) I think I can lose them, especially the boys. They can take all of them to the war.

(Tobias) Khamisa left her village and teaching job, took her family and fled to Egypt. A year later they came to Lincoln. With a little help from their mom, her kids are doing well in school. Khamisa's found some work as a translator for the Lincoln Public Schools. Khamisa misses her husband - who she hasn't seen in a decade. They may be reunited in the next few months. She misses her mom - who's still in Sudan. And she misses her homeland. Painting helps her remember her homeland and people.

(Khamisa) Special people in Sudan. They are friendly people, they are nice people. But we have a horrible and terrible government.

(Tobias) Reporting for Statewide, I'm Mike Tobias.