

THE UNIVERSAL JOY OF A BUNK BED

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By Leila Darabi

On a recent Sunday afternoon, Park Slope Food Coop member Katherine Fennelly logged into her Zoom account from a desktop computer in her Park Slope apartment to speak to Djenebou (not her real name), a recently arrived refugee from Cote D'Ivoire. Djenebou joined the video call from a mobile phone, sitting on the floor of an empty living room in the Bronx.

Fennelly began by introducing herself as a volunteer for the nonprofit organization Ruth's Refuge and spent the next hour helping Djenebou review and select items from a shopping website of both new and donated items for her home. By the end of

the call, Djenebou had selected a couch, lamp, dining table and chairs, pots, pans, plates, glasses and flatware for her kitchen and three pieces of decor, including a framed poster of the Paris skyline.

According to Ruth's Refuge cofounder Leah Cover, the nonprofit furnished 114 homes in 2024 alone, providing essential furniture and homeware for 340 individuals from 30 different countries. Since its inception, the organization has served people from 56 countries.



Clara Goetz (left) and Kayla Schwartz (right) show the beautiful new quilt donated by the Brooklyn quilt guild, a group actively participating in the program by donating many brand new quilts.

When asked about a memorable client, Cover recalled being asked to help a young girl who had been separated from her parents while escaping the fall of Afghanistan. The child was pulled from her parents' arms in the rush to board planes in Kabul. Upon arrival, an uncle she had never met picked her up. He had a daughter the same

age as her. Since the cousins would now share a room, the family needed a bunk bed. So Cover's team bought one and helped them assemble it. The girls were thrilled, and the uncle sent Cover a photo of them in their new bed.

"It's one of those things you can think of like this enormous trauma that happened to this child. And yet here, this bunk bed caused this huge smile," she recalled.

"PEOPLE WERE ARRIVING WITH NOTHING. MANY WERE JUST SLEEPING ON THE FLOOR FOR MONTHS AT A TIME," SAYS RUTH'S REFUGEE COFOUNDER LEAH COVER.

FROM TASK FORCE TO STANDALONE NONPROFIT

Cover, a former legal services attorney, and Fennelly, a retired professor of immigration and public policy, first met through Congregation Beth Elohim's (CBE) Refugee Task Force.

"I was one of the cofounders and cochairs of the CBE Refugee Task Force, which we started in October of 2016," Cover shared. "That was in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. At the time, there was just a very, very strong sense that we should be doing something."

In speaking to organizations serving refugees and asylum seekers arriving in New York, Cover quickly noticed a gap. While these organizations could help secure housing, many were not equipped to help individuals and families furnish their new homes. And none had the physical space or staff bandwidth to store and distribute donated furniture.



Lisa Kleinman works to put together a night stand for a delivery. She learned about the volunteer opportunity from the Kane Street Synagogue.

“People were arriving with nothing. Many were just sleeping on the floor for months at a time,” Cover recalled. “It was clear that there was a gap in services. It really made sense, in a place like New York City, to have a separate organization that could just dedicate itself to those logistics. And so that’s how Ruth’s Refuge was born.”

By 2018, Cover and her cofounders had grown Ruth’s Refuge from a grassroots initiative into a vital resource. Cover is one of the four staff members (two full-time and two part-time) who manage a network of volunteers. Together, they raise funds; purchase beds, bedding and air conditioners to be shipped to clients; accept donations of new or excellent-quality furniture and homeware; rent and organize storage lockers to hold the donated goods; and coordinate moves and furniture assembly. Clients are referred to Ruth’s Refuge by dedicated refugee service organizations.

“IT’S ABOUT GIVING PEOPLE THE TOOLS TO CREATE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN DESIGN,” SAYS VOLUNTEER KATHERINE FENNELLY.

A DIGNITY-CENTERED MODEL

Unlike traditional aid models, Ruth’s Refuge emphasizes dignity and choice, allowing clients to select items that reflect their tastes and needs.

“Our whole model is entirely choice-based. So not only are people choosing everything they want for their home, but also we’re giving them the choice of, ‘Do you want people to help you set things up in the home? Or would you rather people just drop things off and go?’” Cover continued, “It’s about welcoming people with respect and recognizing that they are not just starting over, but rebuilding their lives.”

This model of empowerment is what drew CUNY professor Elizabeth Chaney to Ruth’s

Refuge. She got involved after seeing a volunteer notice during the first Trump Administration. “Things felt really hopeless,” she recalled. “[Volunteering with Ruth’s Refuge] was just this really concrete way to help people. So I signed up for a move.” Elizabeth now joins move-in crews once or twice each month. Of her first day as a volunteer, she recalled: “It was just such a powerful experience to see firsthand the impact that it was having on people’s lives. I knew I wanted to keep coming back.”



Elizabeth Chaney working at the center. Courtesy of Ruth’s Refuge.

Elizabeth continues to be inspired by Ruth’s Refuge’s approach. “I think it’s really amazing that they let people shop for what they want, not only just the basics like beds and dressers, but we have artwork, we have decorative things, lamps.” She continued, “You can just see a place really starting to turn into a home. ... It’s more than just giving things; it’s about restoring dignity.”

Fennelly has similar reflections on her role as an intake volunteer, connecting Ruth's Refuge clients with the items they need. Fluent in Spanish and with extensive experience working with immigrants, she supports several clients each week. Of her work leading clients through the organization's shopping site, she said: "It's incredibly powerful to watch people pick out the things that will help them feel at home. It's about giving people the tools to create a life of their own design."

RUTH'S REFUGE SUPPORTS REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS FLEEING VIOLENT UNREST IN THEIR OWN COUNTRIES AS WELL AS LAWS CRIMINALIZING THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR GENDER IDENTITY.

REFUGE FROM WAR AND CRIMINALIZATION

Ruth's Refuge supports refugees and asylum seekers arriving in New York fleeing violent unrest in their own countries as well as laws criminalizing their sexual orientation or gender identity.

"We work with LGBTQ folks. We work with folks from very traditional backgrounds," Cover said. "Basically everything you can imagine. It's a testament to the diversity of New York City and the resilience of the people who come here seeking safety and a new beginning."

Exposure to new New Yorkers of diverse backgrounds brings purpose and reward to volunteers like Elizabeth. "It's really special to meet the people you're helping," she said. "You get to hear their stories and see the impact firsthand. ... It's such a privilege to be a part of this."

CHALLENGES ON THE HORIZON

Despite their impact, Ruth's Refuge faces ongoing challenges, particularly in keeping up with the large volume of need. Cover acknowledged: "We haven't been able to

keep up with the demand. ... It's heartbreaking to know that there are people out there who need help, who need a bed to sleep on, and we can't always get to them."

Looking to the future, she envisions growth through collaboration and dreams of others replicating the Ruth's Refuge model. "My dream would be to have a network of smaller groups sharing resources ... a network of support that is woven throughout the city, so no one falls through the cracks."



Cover registers new items on the listings of the Ruth's Refuge website, where one can find desirable home necessities from cookware to sofas to artwork.

Fennelly also shared a sense of urgency following the 2024 elections. "Many of the agencies we partner with are being severely downsized or even completely defunded. We have fewer and fewer partners who are fully staffed. It makes our work doubly important because we are one of the few organizations still standing. And we are here to say, 'We want to welcome you to New York.'"

Members interested in contributing or volunteering can visit the Ruth's Refuge website.

Leila Darabi often posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients on Instagram (@persian_ish). She also cohosts Cringewatchers, a podcast that uses binge-worthy TV and current events as a lens to discuss sex, politics, and culture.