

## Holding on to Home

CULTURAL TRADITIONS BROUGHT FROM NATIVE LANDS PRESERVE HERITAGE —  
AND HOPE

**d**uring the winter of 1999, Sara Green stood at a crossroads. After 10 years as a professional dancer, she felt ready “to stop dancing and figure out the next step.”

The choice seemed momentous, even terrifying — until she turned on her TV and saw wave after wave of refugees trudging across snow-capped mountains, facing dangers real and unknown as they fled the war in the Balkans.

“I was struck by the images of these people crossing Kosovo in the snow and the cold,” she remembers. “I thought about the children, and how they had very much lost a part of their childhood they can never get back.”

She knew that lucky survivors would get food, shelter, and medical help from international aid agencies. But she also knew that ultimately survival depended on a lot more than those basic essentials. It was a realization deeply connected to her identity as a dancer.

“I’ve had traumas in my life, even severe ones,” Green says, “but I always had dance.” She remembers wondering what would happen to these families’ cultural traditions and thinking, “Wouldn’t it be great if these children had a way to express themselves and to work out the trauma and the fear in their own way?”



Photo: Getty Images

Suddenly, Green had a clear direction for her career leap. She would start a nonprofit to answer those questions and address the cultural needs of displaced people. There was only one problem. She was a dancer, not a social entrepreneur.

“I am always passionate about things in my life,” she says. “If this is what I decide to do, then the only question is, ‘How am I going to do it?’”

Green needed a new skill set and a business network, as well as credibility with lenders and donors. So she took a step few professional dancers before her had ever taken and earned her MBA at Columbia Business School. With the knowledge and network that education afforded her, she was able to found “Art for Refugees in Transition” (A.R.T.), a training program that empowers adults in refugee communities to teach children about the visual, performing, and creative arts drawn from their own cultures.

For centuries, holding on to cultural traditions has provided essential comfort and support for those striking out to build new lives and brighter futures, or leaving beloved homelands after natural or political disasters.

But how could this principle help those displaced both globally and here in the United States during modern times? That’s a challenge that Green, and many like her, has set out to answer.

### **BRIDGING BORDERS**

For over ten years now, Green has traveled the globe, working to find ways of helping thousands of refugees adapt to new lives in Thailand, Colombia, Egypt, and the United States.



Green and her A.R.T. organization come in after the initial crisis has passed and basic needs have been met. They build trust first, then listen — and learn. “We do what we call ‘bottom up,’” Green says. “We empower displaced people to help themselves.”

When the cultural exchange programs they help to institute become self-sufficient, A.R.T. withdraws. “It’s the old saying: If you give people a single fish, they eat for a day; if you give them a fishing rod, they eat for a lifetime,” she says.

If Green needed a sign she was on the right path during A.R.T.’s infancy, she received it during a mission to Thailand in 2003. Green was working in partnership with the International Rescue Committee to assist 12,000 Burmese refugees in a land-locked camp surrounded by minefields in the middle of the jungle.



The Karenni people, now living in a refugee camp in Northern Thailand, celebrate their customary Deeku Festival. Prior to an intervention by A.R.T., this tradition had been lost at the camp. Photo: Plu Re

Green knew that many of the refugees, who came from hill towns with no written language, traditionally shared lyrical stories all day long. Back home, the women used to sing as they traveled to rice paddies with their babies strapped to their bodies. But when they came to the refugee camp, the singing and the stories had stopped.

So when Green and her colleagues wanted to boost morale, they gathered hundreds of the camp’s elders in a clearing and asked: “Does anyone want to sing or dance?”

A single woman rose and sang a mournful tune. Before long, the clearing sprang to life with voices united in harmony. Everyone danced, cried, and sang in unison.

It was as if she had conjured a jungle flash mob. “What happened?” Green remembers asking.

The woman replied, “We have been in these camps for 15 years, and this is the first time anyone has given us permission to feel.”

“What displaced people have lost more than anything is their self-worth and self-dignity. The social fabric is shattered,” says Dirk Salomons, a former director of humanitarian affairs at Columbia University. This former senior director at the United Nations is a fan of the work A.R.T. is doing. “Sara goes to the old people and asks them to teach the handicrafts and songs and dances they used to know. And suddenly they no longer feel like leftover people, but people with dignity and culture.”

In an era when tens of millions of people seek refuge from all manner of disasters — natural, political, and economic — the tenets embodied by A.R.T. have become increasingly important, and not just in foreign lands. Across America, other organizations are finding ways to embrace the native cultures of newcomers, letting their instincts and curiosity be their guides.



Photo: Gabriel Bucataru/stocksy.com

## **HAVEN AFTER A HURRICANE**

In many ways, Ernest Timmons was not so different from those Burmese refugees who sang and danced with Green. The

New Orleans native also had to figure out how to build a new life in the face of displacement after Hurricane Katrina devastated his beloved city in the summer of 2005.

Timmons loved his job as a social worker in his hometown, and he loved his hometown's culture. He grew up connected to a world of blues music, crawfish boils, and front-porch hospitality.

But when Katrina hit, Timmons faced mandatory evacuation. Four days after the storm, he had to leave his home and his city behind, taking only what would fit in the plastic bags he could carry. He had no idea where he would go.

It wasn't until he boarded a plane with 600 fellow evacuees that Timmons learned his destination. "Where the heck is Salt Lake City?" he remembers asking.

At first, he felt angry and resentful. "I felt like I had been kidnapped," he says. "I had no choice in the matter."

But some 1,500 miles away in Utah, Pastor France Davis was already hard at work, trying to find ways to help people displaced by Katrina feel both safe and comfortable. It wasn't an easy task.

The flood victims settled in Camp Williams, a stark Utah Army National Guard training center at the base of the Rocky Mountains. With its no-frills, desert-like grounds, Camp Williams is a far cry from New Orleans.

"Our job was to make them feel as at home as possible," Davis recalls.

Pastor Davis, who leads Calvary Baptist Church, a historic African-American congregation in a 92 percent white state, searched for common ground. He knew that the Katrina refugees would never find solace or security in their new home if they didn't connect with it. The first common ground was close to his heart: faith. "The church has always been the center of community," he says. "It's the gathering place, and it provides a sense of identity."

**“It was eerie to see fellow Americans getting off the plane carrying a plastic bag with their possessions. Our job was to make them feel as at home as possible.”**

— Pastor France Davis, Calvary Baptist Church, Salt Lake City, Utah

He welcomed the New Orleans refugees during services at Camp Williams at first, but as the congregation settled in, he provided vans to bring Katrina refugees to services at Calvary.

Like Green at A.R.T., he built trust with his new neighbors and listened to their stories. "Many were homesick and



distressed and couldn't readily identify with the culture here," the pastor says. "We asked ourselves, 'What would we want them to do for us?'"



Crawfish boils helped Louisiana natives displaced by Hurricane Katrina feel more grounded in their new home of Salt Lake City. Photo: Jill Chen/stocksy.com

Embracing New Orleans culture seemed like the answer. Davis hosted a church crawfish boil, and efforts grew from there. "Pastor Davis thought of everything," Timmons recalls. "He even made sure we had barbers who understood how to cut black hair and had black hair products."

It turns out Davis' approach, like Green's, does more than raise the spirits of people who have been displaced. It helps them succeed.

"The great body of research shows that in reality it is the immigrants who maintain their cultural and social ties with their homeland who are most successful in integrating into their new society," says Miranda Hallett, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Dayton.

People who are able to hold on to home also tend to achieve greater economic self-sufficiency and educational success, Hallett says. While maintaining cultural traditions doesn't necessarily guarantee success, people with strong cultural identities often have better access to strong social networks, greater self-confidence, leadership skills, and family closeness, she explains.

That definitely proved true for Timmons. Thanks to the work of Davis and his congregation, Timmons began to feel more

at ease in his new surroundings. Eventually, the pastor hired him to work as a crisis counselor at Calvary Baptist, working with fellow Katrina evacuees.

“The things we tend to call cultural traditions are part of a larger package of social and cultural resources that help people survive and thrive,” Hallett says.



“If you grow up without traditions, you will be lost and have no identity,” says this recent refugee from Sudan. Photo: Nilou Mahboubian

### **A NEW LIFE IN THE LAND OF THE FREE**

The longer refugee groups live near and connect to each other, the stronger that package of resources can become. That’s the case in Minnesota, home to the largest Somali population in the U.S. More than 77,000 Somalis have resettled there since fleeing civil war in their homeland.

Shukri Hassan is one of them. Twenty-seven years ago, she escaped the threat of violence in Mogadishu with her husband and baby daughter. She planned to return home in a month or two, but instead, wandered from country to country before seeking asylum in the United States in 1999.

Hassan’s cousin encouraged her to move to the Twin Cities where there are abundant cultural resources and social support systems already in place. Somali restaurants, community centers, and mosques are now a familiar part of the Minnesota landscape.

“My kids have no memories of Somalia, but it’s important to me that they know their culture,” Hassan says. “That’s only

possible because we have such a large community of Somalis here.”

When the Hassan children were growing up, their parents regaled them with the songs, poems, and stories from their homeland. “My mom was a good storyteller, and that’s how we transfer our culture,” explains Hassan, now a mother of four. “We are in Minnesota now, but the storytelling goes on.”


It’s a familiar narrative to resettlement workers. “Somalis want their children to know who they are and where they came from,” explains Bob Oehrig, executive director of Arrive Ministries, one of five agencies in the Twin Cities that helps to resettle immigrants from Somalia and other African and Asian countries.

Embracing cultural pride has clearly helped Hassan and her family thrive in Minnesota. It has sustained Timmons through times of trauma in Utah. It has empowered refugees living in isolated camps far from their homes.

For them and for all of us, “home” transcends borders. It is an essential part of life, but it includes so much more than food and shelter. It is the common thread that binds us to one another as well as to histories we’ve vowed never to forget.

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