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For Bantu Refugees, Hard-Won American Dreams

By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON

For Abkow Edow, a Bantu refugee from Somalia who now lives in Tucson, the Fourth of July was just another day. Though fireworks on the mountain and a reggae concert were scheduled, Mr. Edow was washing dishes at the Westin La Paloma Resort and Spa, wearing a baseball cap and thick rubber gloves that came up to his elbows. His wife, Madina Idle, was folding sheets and towels several corridors away in the vast underground complex below the desert views, the fountains and the valet golf carts.

But work is good. If the Fourth was just another day, it was a day in an extraordinary year for the couple, their two children and a grandson.

Mr. Edow, 57, and Ms. Idle, 42, have found themselves, after 12 years in refugee camps, at the end of the rainbow: America.

"In Somalia, I dreamed of the United States, even though I didn't know anything about it," Mr. Edow said, speaking through a translator like the other Bantu adults interviewed. America represents opportunity, Bantu refugees say, which involves hard work, struggles with English, discarding cultural ways — like the physical disciplining of children and arranged marriages — and a wary assimilation with Americans and other refugee groups in Tucson.

For them, independence is not a holiday but a daily engagement.

Mr. Edow (pronounced EE-doh) and Ms. Idle (pronounced EE-dalay) are part of a continuing resettlement of 13,000 Bantu people from Somalia, descendants of people kidnapped from southern Africa by Arab slave traders two centuries ago. As part of one of the most ambitious relocations of political refugees by the United States in recent history, the Bantu couple arrived in Tucson in May 2003 from a Kenyan camp. They were uneducated, unemployed and unfamiliar with basic facts of American life like electrical appliances and indoor plumbing.

Now Mr. Edow and Ms. Idle drive themselves to work in their own car, a Ford Escort they bought in September. They shop at 99-cent stores. They pay the $635 rent for their three-bedroom apartment. The children, a 15-year-old and two 8-year-olds, are in school, earning good grades and, like other Bantu

children, school officials say, outperforming the general student population. Mr. Edow is saving money to buy a house.

"Every month I pay rent," he said, sitting in his kitchen with a bare foot propped on his seat, a cellphone in his hand and a videotape of "Shrek" entertaining his children in the next room. "It's good to own a house. It belongs to you."

Mr. Edow, who could not read numbers a year ago, knows what a down payment is. In May, he applied for a green card, celebrating his application with a red, white and blue cake.

The availability of entry-level jobs in the hospitality industry has made Tucson a popular destination for the resettlement of Bosnians, Afghans and Liberians. There are 71 Bantu people, and more than 100 are expected by the end of the year.

Mr. Edow and Ms. Idle escaped from Somalia to Kenya on foot, a 10-day walk without food. In Somalia, Mr. Edow said, he watched as his father was executed with a hammer and nails.

Now, in life-skill classes that supplement daily English classes, Bantu parents learn that hitting their children is discouraged, though that was how they were disciplined in Africa. They make a wary peace with African-Americans at home and at school who consider them foreign. They learn that Fourth of July fireworks are exploded to entertain not kill, and that being hit by a water balloon, as Bantu children were in one incident at school, is a game and not a hateful fight.

At work, the Bantu refugees learn how to prepare hotel amenities, like placing courtesy soaps and folding the tips of the toilet tissue, though they used pit latrines in Kenya and Somalia and had never seen a toilet.

But caseworkers, school officials and employers say the Bantus are making the most remarkable progress of the refugee groups in Tucson, given that they arrived with the most remarkable disadvantages: the trauma of tribal war in Somalia, where the Bantus were considered low-caste and denied opportunities for education and employment, and a rural ignorance of Western culture and modern life.

The Bantu refugees had to be taught to tell time, an accomplishment that fills them with pride.

Wall clocks and calendars decorate many Bantu homes in Mission Vista, an 80-unit apartment complex where many, including Mr. Edow and Ms. Idle, live.

"I adjusted to time," said Makai Osman, 38, a Bantu friend of Ms. Idle's who lives in Mission Vista with her husband, Mudey Libange, 36, and their five children. "I was scared but I'm punctual now."

Though job training required professional coaches, Karen Vallecillo, the director of human resources at

the Westin La Paloma, gave the Bantu refugees high marks.

"They were a group that had been through pretty atrocious things, probably more than any other group," Ms. Vallecillo said. "Learning to trust authority again probably took them a little longer."

Twelve languages, including four Somalian dialects, are spoken at the hotel, which has g 500 employees, 25 percent of whom are refugees.

"We'd be lost without our partnerships with refugee agencies," Ms. Vallecillo said. "We don't seem to be able to raise American citizens to want to take these kinds of jobs."

The federal government organized the relocation effort but contracted with agencies, like the International Rescue Committee in Tucson, to provide financial support and social services to the refugees in each city.

At Mission Vista one Friday, Ms. Osman's son, Abdullahi Osman, 15, sat at home at the dining table, homework assignments and an English-Somali dictionary in his lap

Several Bantu friends have taken jobs when they turned 16 to help their parents. Older children like Abdullahi's sister, Halima Osman, who is 13, run the home while their parents work, taking care of younger brothers and sisters and the children of other families as well.

"Until I finish my education, I don't want to do anything else," said Abdullahi, who dreams of becoming a doctor. He said that books were his most valued possessions, though he checks them out of the public library. Abdullahi's girlfriend, a Bantu he met in Kenya, was relocated to Salt Lake City. They speak on the telephone.

"If I stay for a long time and I have money, I want to go and meet, and see how she is," he said.

As Abdullahi spoke, children from other families entered or left the apartment, or opened the door to peek. Each Bantu family has its own apartment, but as is most familiar to them as villagers and camp internees, they visit frequently and without formality.

"I know in American culture, if someone is going to visit you, he's going to call, `What time are you going to visit?' " said Ms. Osman, sitting forward with determination, legs apart, elbows on her knees, her sandaled feet embellished by designs in henna. "For us, it's not a big deal. People can visit us anytime."

Ms. Osman gave a brief tour of her apartment.

"I have a lot of stuff," she said, with a small laugh. "I don't want to move it somewhere."

Ever present is the memory, still as strong as reality, of the long relocation route. With arrival in America has come miles and miles of documentation, regulation, offices and appointments. In speaking with the Bantu refugees, in the patient looks in their faces and in the acceptance in their attitudes towards caseworkers, teachers, employers and even strangers, there is a palpable sense that the stop in Tucson could be a stage in an unending journey if they do not acquiesce to the bewildering bureaucracy.

"With most refugees, until they've gotten their citizenship, there's always that feeling that it's just not real," said Karen Bailey, the community resource coordinator with the International Rescue Committee.

Ms. Osman, who became eligible for a green card in July, said forcefully, "I want to be Tucsonian. I don't want to go back, no way. I don't dream at all of going back to Somalia."

But forgetting can be hard.

Outside, as the cool of the evening descended and the clouds above the desert blossomed in the sunset, four Bantu girls sat in a circle on the sidewalk playing shabko, a traditional game of tossing stones. Ms. Osman's daughter, Halima, who was shepherding the children, chased Mr. Abkow's son, Ahmed, 8, with a stick when he angered her by disobeying. Ahmed, crying, disappeared into the shadow of a building corridor, then returned silently to the group, like a shy dog, and sat behind a bush.

"In Somalia, we didn't know America," said Hamadi Musse, 16, whose best friend in Tucson is Hakim Rahimi, a 14-year-old Afghan boy.

Hakim and his family lived in Pakistan before being resettled here six months ago. Hakim worked from 4 a.m. until 8 p.m. laying floors in Pakistan.

"We saw on TV, the American people," he said.

Hamadi, who goes to school and helps his brother at his job at a Boston Market restaurant, said of his new life, "I don't have time for watching TV."