

Project Elf Family – 2014

Each family that we choose for Project Elf is very special. This year's family in particular is one that will change the hearts and minds of those who are participating.

It is this family that alone touches my heart in ways that no other family has in the past, and this is my 13th year of personally helping and holding hands with thousands of stories.

This year's family is not only in culture shock, but also in deep trauma. Because of this, there will be some very specific guidelines that we as a group need to pay attention to.

Our family comes to us from a refugee camp in Ethiopia where they stayed after fleeing the war in Somalia.

War stories are never kind or gentle. This family has been through militias pounding down their doors, killing of their friends and neighbors, executions, and the total decimation by bombing of their house, with no regard or kindness as to whether they are inside that house or not.

This is the case of the family that we have this year and their story is more than tear jerking; it is a story that will most likely chill all of us to the bones and make us more thankful for the beautiful lives we live.

Miraculously this mother has kept each of her seven children alive. They have been living under a plastic tarp and some sticks, waiting for a chance for a better life, for seven long years. What that also means is during those seven years they had to abide by the rules of the refugee camp, whatever those rules were. Those rules are just as heartbreaking as the war stories, especially if you have five girls.

So the guiding words to the team for this year's family is comfort, kindness, and gentle.

They do not know or understand American culture, they are struggling with the weather, and they are struggling to make sense of their own religion in a place like Minnesota. The children are afraid to be in areas that are open, like walking to a bus stop, because they only know it as “not safe.” They are afraid to sit by the light of the window because they've been taught to stay away from windows to avoid gunfire, and they have slept on the floor as a group for their entire life.

Our gift to this family will indeed be the very first beds that they have ever slept on in their lives. They have never had choices about things like colors, where they could live, or what they could eat. They have never heard music on the radio, they have never been to a movie, and they only recently have learned what a chicken McNugget is. We had a difficult time even figuring out what a favorite color is to these children because any color is a blessing.

The smell and taste of processed food makes them physically ill, so when they run out of food, the food shelves are not an option for them, because the majority of items that are in a food shelf are things like macaroni and cheese or foods that have unknown animal proteins in them.

So the team that works on this house must focus on not too much! We have some constraints that everyone who chooses this family must understand.

They do not like guns, they do not like camouflage, they do not like toys that have violence, they do not know music, they do not know video games, they do not know cartoon characters, *they do not know enough.*

Giving a family like this too much will actually keep them in trauma. This family also gives us the opportunity to not have to deliver on Christmas Eve.

We are searching for the final details on their housing. They will be going into a Somalian-owned home that has rent which will be very difficult for this mother of seven to manage. This is the year to ensure cash donations that we can give to the nonprofit that sponsors her, and will keep it in safekeeping for their rent.

This family has been adopted from the Somali Women and Youth Center in Minneapolis. For those of you who have worked with us a very long time, you'll remember that their guide, Fatoun Ali, is one of the families that we have grown over the last eight years.

Fatoun herself has suffered through many tragedies with half of her children dying, government sanctions, and racism from her American community and her Muslim community. She has also lived through the awful parts of the war on women, including the rules where women covered themselves head to toe and other rules that have not yet begun to change.

War on women in the Muslim community is alive and well every day.

The generations that grew up knowing that they had no right to education and that they should hide behind their long scarves is now deeply embedded. The young American girls who grew up in public schools and are Somali pride themselves on looking different. But that's because they have the rights that an American girl has.

Fatoun Ali is the guide for these families and these girls in the old world and the new American world.

Her strength is her own but her ability to continue forward and be a pioneer in her community is because she was and still is adopted by our community. She has fulfilled what is the greatest wish that we could ever have as a group—that those that we help will stand tall and strong and help those who are coming after them.

Know that your thoughts and help actually transform not just the lives of the people that we help, but the lives of all of the people that they can help.

For me that is the purpose of prosperity - the efforts that you and I put forward actually magnify in the world.

If you want to know what makes me spend my free time gathering the extras of so many, my time teaching to those who are in the greatest need, and coordinating all of our efforts, it is because *we are growing something much bigger than helping someone who doesn't have enough*. And it is also

my wish that we help them enough so that they can in turn help as many as they can to grow as well.

This year we saw Latonya Benion come forward and choose to stop believing that being a young black man in North Minneapolis was a death sentence, or at least an educational death sentence. Not only did she fight the odds to make sure that all of her children graduated from high school, she now pioneers a party that invites all the young kids from the neighborhood to get on board and get excited about school by making sure they all have school supplies. Her boy Jimmy, who was nearly beaten to death, is now working with a community program to teach other young black men how to work in the trades and build homes, instead of the other awful choices that are available for them on the street. The educational chances of a non-native English speaking black male in North Minneapolis receiving high school diploma on time is only about 21%.

So in telling the story of this year's family it is important to me to remind all of you why you gather, why you give up your free time, and why it's not just a pair of jeans or some laundry change that you're sending in. The resources that you have that are extra are the only resources that are going into these families.

The ability to have nice clothes and school supplies for your children means that they may get treated better, thrive in school more, and have a fighting chance.

Every item that a community can give towards the sometimes insurmountable amount of resources that are needed to raise these kids increases those children's chances statistically of breaking financial poverty and educational poverty, mostly because someone cares and someone is available to pay attention.

When I talk about Project Elf I remind people that we are just a group of average people who choose to use our free time and our resources in a meaningful way to try to help those in poverty.

People ask me what am I here to do—I tell them I am a prosperity leader—I choose to do the amount of groundwork and planning that it takes to gift in

a very different way. I'm not willing to move forward without magnification and just doing a small act does not change lives enough. *But combining hundreds of small acts by many people does create great change.*

For those of you who are participating this year our list is much smaller and is very defined. We need bunkbeds, we need large carpets, we need rent money that can be held by the nonprofit for this family. We need to be aware of the unique needs that a family in trauma and a family with very specific religious needs requires.

We do not know the actual sizes of the girls because the size that they are is not going to be the size that they choose to wear. It's important to know the girls never want the outline of their body showing because it keeps them safe. Focus on how to keep someone with a very tiny body frame as warm as possible. If I were going to guess what is their actual size it would be a size 0 through a size 6, but they may choose to have a different size. The girls will only wear long sleeve no matter what the season is. They will layer their clothing so look for cotton. When choosing undergarments look for a small and an extra small if you are choosing things like bras this is a very new concept for them. Soft pullover bras may be the most appropriate.

This family is being introduced to new things every hour and that is very fatiguing. We are hoping to create a space that will allow this family comfort while they heal, and figure out what is the way that this next set of generations will live.

Individualism is a freakishly horrifying item to have to learn. There is no context for being an individual with likes and dislikes and goals and dreams from any part of their life.

This will be the first time in their lives that we actually separate these children from sleeping all together. So having their own bed and their own space means that we must take care make sure that the beds and the bedding and the things that go in their space on the bunk beds can be only for them, because they will be getting to know themselves for the very first time.

We are looking to create a space inside their bunk beds that would be equivalent to having their own healing space, and a space that is safe for them to perhaps sketch, read, be introduced to music, in a place that is safe for them process what has happened.

For all of you who are great space designers think about how to engage a group to create space better than IKEA. The personal space of these individuals is our number one critical point. This is also a family that has no ability to deal with non-hot desert dry conditions. They will be constantly cold because their body will not have the ability to generate enough heat to make itself warm EVER in their first two years here in Minnesota. So we are really looking for twin size down comforters that can be placed inside a duvet cover. Brightly colored beds will be our focus. One in purple, one in pink, one in yellow, one in teal, and one green.

For the boys we are focusing on toys that will help them choose ways to play that are non-violent. We are really looking for things like Legos, building blocks, and two bikes. The girls will not ride a bike, please do not send a girls bike.

Our second and third critical areas are that the eating area must be large enough to seat not just their family but another family as well, because these families who are new to America will often host another family who is new, even if it is just to share a meal. So part of the design in the dining room must also have a way to manage additional chairs.

We will need a set of matching dishes for 24, silverware and glasses. But we will set the table for the smaller family size.

When you are living in a refugee camp water is a critical resource, so you have learned to only drink small amounts. This is a family that will want physically smaller drinking glasses and they will most likely never use ice. They would never choose to drink out of a giant tumbler.

It would also be preferable to have a smaller plate as well. And this family will use bowls a lot!

Food storage is going to be critical for this family, they will need a large bin that can hold 100 pounds of rice, and another that will hold the same in flour, sugar and lentils. It must be able to seal completely.

The area in the living room will require not just couches but a large floor pillows. The colors that we are hoping for our neutral tones that can be mixed with black.

This family is in ESL and they will really benefit from multiples of children's dictionaries that show language and pictures, all spectrums of reading books, and books that speak, if they are not at the age appropriate level of these children.

These communities pass items in between each other often, so higher quality items are better because the family that we give to will be passing them on to the next new family when they outgrow these items.

They would like to have a television but the chances of them having cable TV or quality TV is pretty slim, so I would focus on a way for this family to watch movies.

There is an extraordinarily large need for bus passes. This parent already is involved in a job program that will put her to work almost immediately and she will have to take two buses a day. Every ride to work that she pays for takes away from her ability to use her paycheck to pay the rent. The way we can help is to focus on transportation. A mother like this will choose to work as many hours as she can, because her oldest children can also take care of the youngest children. This parent may choose to work 6 to 7 days a week, so she will need bus assistance rides worth almost \$600 in a year just for her to go to work.

Another item of transportation though that is critical for this family is that they will always choose to travel as a group to do things outside of the home. So going to the store or a family outing where they would take the bus requires paying bus fare 16 times! Everyone needs a bus pass both going out and again on the way home. So for us as a group to offer them a chance to go to school shopping, take all the children in for a physical, to go

see friends, and just to do that once a month is almost \$200 for passes on the bus.

The nonprofit is also willing to hold those bus cards in safekeeping for her. And Project Elf is also willing to hold them for her.

This family has already been using the closets that we host at Headstart and has been spending time with all of our team players and Project Elf. We also have pictures of some of her family because of the other things that we have done with the Somali women and youth center.

We had a two hour interview with this mother, Fadoum. When we talked to her through our translator about getting permission from her to let our team into their lives this mother could only weep, her hands shake in a prayer position and she says thank you.

One other item that this brings to light, is why we make sure to leave the premises when these families come home. Many times when they walk across the threshold of the home that we dress for them, they will have a huge personal response. It often changes the entire direction of their life. For this family it will be the uncomfortable and yet beautiful moment of actually being seen, and also of being valued.

I appreciate all of you have chosen to work with us on this family, I will keep information flowing.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Kelly' or similar, written in a cursive style.