



Kgshak Akec on writing powerful refugee stories

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- The difference you're making in Afghanistan and Uganda
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- Meet the humanitarian worker helping Syrians rebuild

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ON THE COVER:

Kgshak Akec is a promising young writer and former South Sudanese refugee.



© Australia for UNHCR/Adam Perry



Dear supporters,

Welcome to our second edition of *With You* for 2025.

I'm thrilled that South Sudanese-Australian Kgshak Akec agreed to be profiled for our magazine. Kgshak, whose image is on the cover, is a celebrated writer from the Victorian city of Geelong. As a young girl, she fled war-torn Sudan with her family. They lived in Egypt for a couple of years, before coming to Australia with the assistance of UNHCR. Kgshak is a firm believer in the power of stories to connect us all. I found her words deeply inspiring. I hope you do too.

Australia for UNHCR recently turned 25. In this issue, Naomi Steer, our founding National Director, reflects on this significant milestone and the impact that supporters like you have made over two-and-a-half decades. From the Boxing Day tsunami to the Syrian conflict, from the Rohingya crisis to the Ukrainian war, you've helped displaced people during their darkest hours. Your support has also enabled refugees to get access to education, employment and healthcare.

As the weather starts to warm up in Australia, our focus turns to winter in the Northern Hemisphere. This is a gruelling time for the people of Ukraine who have endured almost four years of full-scale war. Find out more about the winter emergency and how you can help save lives.

Some of the most moving stories I read are from people who choose to leave a gift in their Will to support refugees. Gottfried Klaus was born in Germany during the Second World War. As a young man he was separated from his family for many years, eventually making his way to Australia. Gottfried's experience meant he understood the hardships faced by people who are forced to flee their homes. His decision to leave a gift in his Will to UNHCR is a powerful statement about his values and will make a difference in the lives of refugees for years to come.

I hope you enjoy this edition of *With You*. Thank you for being part of a community of caring and compassionate Australians. We cannot do our work without you.

With gratitude,

Trudi Mitchell, CEO

Omwali*, 16, and her grandmother, Nia*, were reunited after fleeing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



© Australia for UNHCR/Hugh Rutherford



Reuniting refugee families in Uganda

With your support, UNHCR is helping unaccompanied children like Omwali* reunite with their loved ones and reclaim their childhoods.

This year, war in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has forced thousands of children to flee to Uganda without their parents or guardians. Orphaned, lost or cut off from their loved ones – these children arrive at the border in urgent need of assistance.

With support from generous Australians, UNHCR is there to guide unaccompanied children to safety and provide ongoing care and protection. Skilled teams work tirelessly to help refugee children like Omwali, 16, reunite with their families and rebuild their lives in Uganda.

Tragically, Omwali's parents were killed in the DRC. She fled with her

grandmother, Nia*, and her aunt and siblings, but became separated from them on the chaotic journey to the border.

In Nakivale refugee settlement, UNHCR and partners found a trusted foster carer for Omwali while family tracing began. Four months later, they were successfully reunited.

"We ran and hugged," says Nia. "We were so happy that we cried."

Omwali now lives in safety with Nia and her family. She is taking English classes at a local vocational training centre. When her course is finished, she plans to return to school.

"I love being with my family," she says. "After English class, I cook for my siblings, help with chores and spend time with my family." ■

*Names changed for protection reasons.

» THANKS TO GENEROUS SUPPORTERS, UNHCR IS HELPING UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN:

- 
FIND SAFE and loving foster homes
- 
REUNITE with their families
- 
COLLECT BASIC SUPPLIES like blankets, soap and clothing
- 
ACCESS healthcare and psychological support
- 
RETURN TO SCHOOL or enrol in vocational training

THE DIFFERENCE YOU MADE



© UNHCR/Alina Kovalenko

A new start for Nataliia and Hennadii

Your donations are helping Ukrainians survive and rebuild amid the horror of war.

When missiles rained down on Kharkiv in 2022, Nataliia and her husband Hennadii had just seconds to decide: stay or flee. They grabbed a few essentials, plus their favourite set of plates and cups and their two elderly cats, and fled in the night, unsure where the road would take them.

Four days later, they arrived in a quiet village in western Ukraine. A local woman, Iryna, welcomed them into her century-old house. But the roof leaked and the windows rattled, reminding them of the violence they'd escaped.

Thanks to your support, UNHCR repaired the roof and replaced the damaged windows, turning the fragile shelter into a safe, warm home.

"When the rain stopped coming in, we finally felt we could breathe again," says Nataliia.

Life is still difficult, but the village they're living in is peaceful, for now. The couple, who ran a small shoe business in Kharkiv, spend their time gardening and repairing their new home. Every time they set the table with their precious plates and cups, they are reminded of their old home and life before the war.

"Even after everything, we've managed to stay resilient," says Nataliia. "The part of me who wants to laugh, travel and dream is still alive – and keeps me going."

After almost four years of full-scale conflict, the situation in Ukraine is dire. But with help from generous donors like you, UNHCR remains on the ground, helping displaced families find safety and hold on to hope. ■

Helping Afghans find their feet

Australian support remains vital for Afghans who face crisis after crisis.

Just three months ago, devastating earthquakes in the country's east killed at least 2,000 people and injured thousands more. Entire villages were flattened.

Among those affected were Afghans recently forced to return from Pakistan or Iran. Over two million have been deported or pressured to leave this year. Many find themselves plunged right back into a humanitarian disaster.

In these difficult times, Australian donations are providing much-needed relief. With your support, UNHCR is providing emergency cash, tents, blankets and other vital supplies – making a real difference to returnees like Abdullah.

Abdullah lived in Pakistan for 17 years, but violence and harassment forced him to abandon his life there. As the eldest son, he is extremely worried about how he will provide for his family.

"My father is elderly and recently had back surgery," says Abdullah. "My biggest concern is my parents. I fear something might happen to them."

Thanks to you, UNHCR is providing returnees like Abdullah with emergency cash payments to cover immediate needs such as shelter, food and transport.

"If it weren't for this assistance, we wouldn't be able to do anything," says Abdullah.

UNHCR is also supporting Afghans in other parts of the country who are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. One of those people is 31-year-old Nasiba Khademi who is pictured below receiving aid in Kabul.

Nasiba and her husband suffer from a range of health problems. She is grateful for the assistance they receive from UNHCR, which includes basic supplies such as blankets, kitchen items and water containers. ■



© UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

Protecting lives in Syria

Lujain Al-Hasan (pictured) is a Protection Associate with UNHCR in Homs, Syria. In this interview, she shares the joys and struggles of her work with displaced Syrians – many of them now beginning to make their way home.



Why did you become a humanitarian?

I always dreamed of working with UNHCR because of its direct connection and support to people.

Growing up in Syria, I witnessed first-hand the hardship endured by vulnerable communities. I lived it, too. I was forced to flee my hometown of Homs with my family, escaping the bombing and violence to seek safety in Damascus. It was during that time I decided I would not remain silent. I chose to dedicate my life to helping others who, like me, were forced to flee from their homes and faced unimaginable challenges.

Simply put: I couldn't watch and do nothing, so I chose to act.

What does a typical day look like for you?

Mornings might start with case reviews, followed by field visits to assess child protection or gender-based violence risks. By late afternoon, I'm back at my desk tackling reports, planning interventions and, of course, managing the ever-growing mountain of emails. The unpredictability energises me!

A significant part of my role involves border monitoring, particularly for newly arrived refugees returning from neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye. We have now seen one million returnees to Syria. When you are meeting them, you see the hope in their eyes. They want to rebuild – not only their houses but the whole country. It's really time to support them, to try helping these people to build a life again.

What are the biggest challenges in your work?

Balancing urgent field needs with reporting and coordination demands can be intense. At times, I'm managing critical cases for refugees while simultaneously preparing strategic updates. My survival toolkit includes a sense of humour, resilience and never-ending coffee!

Is there a particular moment that has stayed with you?

I met a man, about 80 years old, sitting quietly and crying at the border after returning from Lebanon. He looked up at me and said I reminded him of his daughter, a student of medicine who had stayed behind in Lebanon. He told me he

was proud to see a Syrian woman helping others return home. Though his house was damaged, he said all that mattered was being back in Syria. That encounter reminded me of why I do this work – it's about dignity, belonging and human connection.

What advice would you give to someone starting a career in humanitarian work?

You need to build trust with communities and partners across cultural contexts. Organisational skills, emotional intelligence and the ability to stay calm under pressure are critical – especially when the phone rings at midnight.

Do it for the people, not the title. Be prepared for long days, complex dynamics and unexpected challenges. But also know that every action matters. And yes – invest in very comfortable walking shoes. You'll thank me later!

What do you do outside of work?

I recharge by reading, taking long walks, working out and occasionally bombarding my friends with psychology trivia. ■

THE DIFFERENCE YOU MADE

> Naomi Steer (centre) with refugee women from a craft group based in Kampala, Uganda.

Celebrating 25 years of support for refugees

We spoke with Naomi Steer, our founding National Director, about the remarkable difference donors have made since Australia for UNHCR was established in 2000.

Of all the projects Australia for UNHCR supports around the world, the one Naomi Steer is first to recall is the Technology Access Centre set up more than a decade ago at Nakivale, a remote refugee community in southwestern Uganda.

Refugee community leaders had asked for the centre to help connect them to the wider world and learn new skills. Funds raised in Australia went towards building an IT training room with 45 computers and an internet café.

Now the centre is self-supporting. It has trained thousands of refugees in digital skills and enabled some to find pathways to higher education,

employment and even resettlement through connecting to lost family members online.

“I can honestly say that without Australian donors, the computer centre would never have happened,” says Ms Steer, who resigned in 2022 after more than two decades at the helm of Australia for UNHCR.

The Nakivale project is just one of hundreds of practical projects that Australia for UNHCR has funded over 25 years.

When Ms Steer became the founding National Director in early 2000, she came from a career as a lawyer, diplomat and trade union leader. Over the next two decades, she built the organisation from a two-

person team into a 50-plus employee national organisation.

In 2004, she introduced face-to-face fundraising, a successful initiative that created a community of monthly donors, providing a lot of the sustainable funding needed for humanitarian emergencies. She says having refugees advocating for UNHCR was a wonderful testimony to the importance of the agency’s work.

“Many of our face-to-face team were themselves refugees,” Ms Steer says. “Working together at Australia for UNHCR gave them a sense of family and also new skills to prosper in the wider Australian community.”

Support received from generous donors provided life-saving



Your impact over 25 years

**FEBRUARY
2001**

AFGHANISTAN EARTHQUAKE

In 2001, a powerful earthquake struck Afghanistan, destroying villages and leaving many families homeless. Your support provided Afghans with emergency aid including tents, blankets and solar lamps.

**DECEMBER
2004**

BOXING DAY TSUNAMI

UNHCR played a key role in the humanitarian response to the Boxing Day tsunami, which devastated coastal communities across Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand. Your donations provided relief items, shelter and assistance repairing damaged homes.

**MARCH
2011**

SYRIAN WAR

Conflict broke out in March 2011, triggering a civil war lasting over a decade. Although the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 brought hope, the situation remains volatile. Australians have supported the people of Syria every step of the way, providing shelter, healthcare, emergency cash and more.

**JULY
2011**

HORN OF AFRICA FAMINE

In 2011, severe drought forced millions of people across Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia to flee. UNHCR provided families with life-saving food and water. Today, UNHCR continues supporting families fleeing drought in the Horn of Africa.

**AUGUST
2017**

ROHINGYA EMERGENCY

When violence erupted in Myanmar in 2017, over 700,000 Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh. Today, more than one million live in Cox's Bazar – the world's largest refugee camp, where UNHCR is assisting families with shelter, water and livelihood support.

**FEBRUARY
2022**

WAR IN UKRAINE

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, millions of Ukrainians have been forced to flee. Thanks to your support, UNHCR is providing essential supplies, cash assistance and psychological aid to communities under fire.

humanitarian relief such as shelter, therapeutic food to treat severe malnutrition, clean water, schools and health centres.

Today, individual donor support is "more important than ever," Ms Steer says, considering that 123 million people are currently displaced around the world.

As Australia for UNHCR continues to fundraise for people fleeing crises in Ukraine, Sudan and beyond, Ms Steer has a clear message to all supporters:

"I want to thank every donor who gives to Australia for UNHCR for supporting one of the most important humanitarian causes of our lifetime. They can be confident that their support has changed not just one, but many, many lives." ■

Kgshak Akec: Writing powerful refugee stories

Kgshak Akec is a rising literary star, drawing from her own family's refugee background to craft powerful stories of survival and belonging. We met Kgshak (pronounced 'keh-shâk') to learn more about her writing journey and what she hopes readers take away from her work.

Kgshak Akec bounds into The Book Bird, a quaint little store in the Victorian city of Geelong. She exchanges warm greetings with the manager before scanning the shelves. Near the front of the shop, she picks up a copy of her novel, *Hopeless Kingdom*. Shortlisted for the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award, it tells the story of a South Sudanese family searching for acceptance in their new home, Geelong.

"*Hopeless Kingdom* is a book that I wish existed when I was a little girl growing up," says 28-year-old Kgshak. "I wish that I could have picked up a novel and seen myself reflected."

The book follows the story of a young girl called Akita and her family. After being forced to flee war-torn Sudan, they moved to Egypt and then later to Australia. The novel reflects the journey that Kgshak's own family made.

Kgshak has no memories of life in her native country because she was so young when her family fled. "Those are burdens that my mother carries. Those are burdens that my father carries," she says. In Egypt, Kgshak's father sought the assistance of UNHCR, which helped the family get humanitarian visas to come to Australia.

They lived in Sydney before eventually relocating to Geelong, a move that Kgshak found difficult.

"In Sydney we were one of many South Sudanese families. In Geelong, we were *the* Sudanese family, so that was hard to wrap my head around."

It was during the COVID lockdown that Kgshak started thinking about her mother's journey.

"I started asking myself questions like, what were her dreams when she was a little girl? What was it like growing up in Sudan? What was it like coming to Australia aged 36 with five young children and not knowing how to speak the language?"

It was those questions that led to the birth of *Hopeless Kingdom*.

In Kgshak's South Sudanese culture, storytelling is important, but it is an oral tradition. There is no written form of the Dinka language.

"I was so fascinated with the notion of documenting stories down on a piece of paper and having that story be somehow immortalised."

Kgshak says she's been amazed by the positive reception the book has received, not only in the South Sudanese community, but the wider Australian community.

"I think it's opened my eyes to the power of storytelling, the power of truth telling, and the power that it has in connecting us all." ■

"I think it's opened my eyes to the power of storytelling, the power of truth telling, and the power that it has in connecting us all."



SUMMER READING RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are five recommendations for books by or about refugees to immerse yourself in this summer.



***Hopeless Kingdom*, Kgshak Akec**

Told through the interchanging perspectives of Akita and her mother, Taresai, this coming-of-age story shines a light on the generational curses of trauma, complex family dynamics and

how it feels to love someone unconditionally, even when it hurts.



***Freedom, Only Freedom*, Behrouz Boochani**

Kurdish-Iranian journalist Behrouz Boochani's first book, *No Friend but the Mountains*, was written on a smuggled mobile phone while he was detained on Manus Island for six years. Boochani now lives

in Aotearoa New Zealand and, with his latest book, delves deeper into his harrowing incarceration.



***Pomegranate and Fig*, Zaheda Ghani**

Ghani is not only an Australia for UNHCR Ambassador but also a talented writer. Her stunning debut novel tells the gripping story of three young Afghan people – Henna, her brother, Hamid, and

her husband, Rahim – and vividly illuminates the disruption, displacement and tragedy of war.

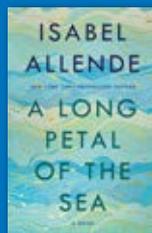


***Butterfly*, Yusra Mardini**

Mardini is a Syrian refugee and became the youngest ever UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador at just 19. In this autobiography, she

describes how she saved fellow refugees from drowning when their boat began sinking in the Aegean Sea – and how she went on to become an Olympic swimmer. Her story was turned into a Netflix film,

The Swimmers.



***A Long Petal of the Sea*, Isabel Allende**

From the author of *The House of the Spirits*, this epic novel follows two young people, Roser and Victor, as they flee the Spanish Civil War. Spanning decades and continents, this story follows the unlikely partners as they embrace exile while

Europe is engulfed in war.

In the community



^ Team UNHCR runners Nhan and Bernie at the City2Surf finish line.

» GOING THE DISTANCE WITH TEAM UNHCR

Forty people joined Team UNHCR in this year's City2Surf, raising an impressive \$51,500 to support refugees. Despite rainy weather, the spirit of positivity, teamwork and dedication was on full display throughout the event – all to help provide life-saving aid for people forced to flee their homes.

The momentum continued at the Sydney Marathon, where Team UNHCR exceeded its \$100,000 fundraising goal. This remarkable achievement was made possible by the commitment and determination of all the runners.

Among those who took on the 42km course were Australia for UNHCR Board Member Lynn Dang and UNHCR High Profile Supporter Asif Sultani, both of whom come from refugee backgrounds.

"I'm honoured to run for refugees and represent UNHCR," says Asif. "It's a privilege to stand for those whose lives have been on hold and whose futures remain uncertain."

The marathon also saw an inspiring victory from Sifan Hassan. Born in Ethiopia and forced to flee as a refugee, Sifan found safety in the Netherlands and has since become one of the world's top distance runners. Her triumph in Sydney, where she set a new women's race record, is a powerful story of resilience and hope. ■

» HEDAYAT OSYAN INSPIRES AT DLA PIPER

Corporate leaders from across the legal, health, education, finance and tech sectors gathered at DLA Piper in September to hear from Hedayat Osyan, a former refugee who has turned his experience into a force for positive change.

The event spotlighted the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, particularly its impact on women and girls, and explored the role of corporate partnerships in responding to global emergencies. Australia for UNHCR CEO Trudi Mitchell shared updates on current crises and the difference made possible through private sector support.

A highlight of the evening was the keynote conversation with Mr Osyan, winner of the 2024 Australia for UNHCR – SBS Les Murray Award for Refugee Recognition. Arriving in Australia alone as a teenage refugee from Afghanistan, Mr Osyan went on to complete his education and establish CommUnity Construction, a successful social enterprise that now employs and empowers fellow refugees. ■

» A FAMILY'S HIKE FOR HOPE

Moved by the experiences of families forced to flee their homes, Jess and Evan, together with their children Pax, 15, and Hearty, 10, combined their love of hiking with their desire to help. They took on a challenging 240km hike along the Heysen Trail in South Australia, using the journey to raise over \$1,400 for refugees and reflect on what it means to live without the comforts of home.

"Although nothing can recreate the circumstances refugees face, we wanted to understand, at least in some small way, what it might feel like to carry all our supplies across long distances and not know where we'd be sleeping or in what conditions," says Jess. "It was a way to keep the cause close to our hearts."

Throughout the hike, the family shared live updates with loved ones, raising awareness on the plight of refugees and provide them with life-saving aid. ■



» WORLD REFUGEE DAY

This year's World Refugee Day event brought together over 350 guests in a powerful show of support for refugee children, raising more than \$210,000 to assist unaccompanied and separated children in Uganda.

SBS broadcaster Kumi Taguchi hosted the event and led a compelling panel discussion with Fair Work Commissioner Oanh Thi Tran and human rights advocate Sajjad Askary, who shared their personal experiences of displacement and resilience.

Guests were also treated to a powerful performance from slam poet Huda Fadlemawla, also known as 'Huda the Goddess'. Ms Fadlemawla is the winner of the 2025 Les Murray Award for Refugee Recognition, sponsored by SBS, and delivered an electrifying performance. Another highlight was the live auction of a painting donated by renowned artist Ben Quilty, raising \$25,500.



Huda the Goddess performs at our World Refugee Day lunch.



During World Refugee Week, Australia for UNHCR unveiled a striking art installation in Martin Place in partnership with acclaimed artist Atong Atem. Her portrait *Three Women* invited viewers to reflect on ideas of belonging and identity, echoing Ms Atem's own journey as a refugee.

"I hope that when people see the collaboration between myself and UNHCR, that in some small way they're able to challenge the idea of what a good or deserving refugee is," says Ms Atem.

Ms Atem's work has been exhibited across Australia and internationally, and her piece left a lasting impression on all who came to see it. ■

« *Three Women* appears in Martin Place, courtesy of Atong Atem and MARS Gallery.

» MELBOURNE DONOR BREAKFAST

Australia for UNHCR supporter Anita Pahor generously hosted a warm and engaging donor breakfast in Melbourne in September. The event brought together a wonderful mix of long-standing supporters and new connections for an exclusive update on our work. Guests heard from keynote speaker Gillian Triggs, former UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, who shared insights into UNHCR's global response efforts.

The breakfast was a meaningful opportunity to celebrate the impact of our donor community, strengthen relationships and spark thoughtful conversations about the future of humanitarian support. ■



» WALK IN SOLIDARITY WITH REFUGEES

This November, you can take part in Stepping with Refugees, a month-long challenge to support people forced to flee their homes. Walk, run or dance while tracking your steps and raising vital funds for refugees around the world.

These funds will help provide emergency shelter, clean water and healthcare, as well as access to education and livelihoods for displaced families. Go solo or form a team. Every step and dollar you raise makes a difference.

Sign up now: steppingwithrefugees.org.au ■

Surviving winter

Winter is a life-threatening emergency for refugees in the Northern Hemisphere – and it's one they can't run from.

While the weather is warming up here in Australia, conditions are about to become even more perilous for millions of displaced people in countries such as Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan.

Ukraine is now facing its fourth winter at war. Critical infrastructure is under attack, cutting people off from heat, light and water. Meanwhile, conflict continues to kill ordinary civilians and tear families apart.

Natalia was asleep when a Russian missile struck Zaporizhzhia, badly damaging her home and injuring some of her relatives. She said that if they hadn't been in bed, they likely would have been killed.

"It was very loud. I jumped out of my bed, but then part of the ceiling fell down. There was so much dust inside the house that it wasn't possible to see anything.

"It's very cold, and now we don't have a gas supply, which was cut off during the missile attacks. During the summer periods, it would be much easier, but during winter, it is very difficult to keep warm."

Winter is also unforgiving in Afghanistan, with temperatures dropping as low as -25°C. In Bamyán, one of the country's highest and coldest provinces, people like Hakima urgently need more support to make it through the difficult months ahead.

Hakima is a widower and mother of six. Her oldest son works in the market to support the family, earning just \$1 per day, sometimes less. Hakima struggles to keep her family warm and dry every winter, but this year her humble shelter is on the verge of collapse.

"When it's winter, there is heavy snow and rain, and when the snow melts, the water comes inside the house. Our house is old. The layers of the walls have fallen off.

"We have nowhere else to go for shelter. Our biggest problem is this house, because we fear it might collapse on us."

UNHCR's dedicated teams are rushing to repair homes and deliver essential supplies before temperatures plummet. But once winter sets in, communities are at risk of being cut off from aid by heavy snow or landslides.

From protecting small children from hypothermia in refugee camps, to patching up homes between relentless attacks – your support can deliver the aid families urgently need at this time of year. ■

Will you share life-saving warmth with refugees this winter? Donate to our Winter Survival Fund now: unrefugees.org.au/deadlywinter



» YOUR WINTER DONATION CAN ASSIST VULNERABLE FAMILIES WITH:



SHELTER

Provide vulnerable Afghans with emergency shelter kits so they can repair their homes and protect themselves from the elements



CASH ASSISTANCE

Support Ukrainians with flexible cash grants so they can cover extra winter costs such as home repairs, heating, warm clothing and medicine



SURVIVAL KITS

Distribute winter supplies such as thermal blankets, sleeping bags, heaters, tarpaulins and winter jackets

>
Natalia, 45,
stands outside her
damaged home
in Zaporizhzhia,
southeastern
Ukraine.



The logistics of success



“

With all the odds stacked against you, you can either be a victim or you can try and fight.”

Madeleine, 27, is a Rwandan refugee living in South Africa. From a young age, she knew education was her pathway to a better future. A UNHCR scholarship enabled her to complete a degree in Operations Management and launch her career with Titan Cargo, a logistics company based in Cape Town.

Madeleine credits the scholarship, her mother's strength and her friends' encouragement for her success. Below, she shares her journey in her own words.

We came to South Africa in 2006. We went through Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. My mum had come first and then we joined her. At the time, she was staying in a shelter for women and children here in Cape Town. That place was amazing. It was heaven compared to where we were coming from.

It was hard at the beginning. In Rwanda, our schooling was in French. That said, I picked up English quickly. I didn't have a choice. I had to learn fast.

I was very good with numbers. On my school report you would see distinctions for maths, science, all the technical subjects. Our mother always emphasised that the way out of the life we were living was education. So we knew that we had to work hard and get to university and hopefully get a job.

I applied to Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and got accepted into Operations Management. I was excited. I loved the concept of operations management because it looked at every organisation in a holistic way. I didn't want to box myself into anything. I like the flexibility of being able to tap into different industries, to work anywhere in the whole supply chain.

The first year, I didn't have to pay my tuition fees upfront. But it was challenging when it came to assignments. Everything was online and I didn't have a laptop, so with a friend of mine, we used to sleep at the IT centre.

When the second year came around, that's when reality hit me that I didn't have the funds. CPUT would not allow me to enrol unless I settled the debt. I was working as a waitress, but it was far from enough. I owed a lot. I didn't have transport or books. Everything was going from bad to worse. I just wanted to be at university and study.

My friend Inès, who is also from Rwanda, was the one advising me to apply for the UNHCR scholarship. I did not believe in my chances and felt discouraged, but Inès pushed me. I was never going to graduate and obtain my qualification if I did not settle my debt.

My motivation came from knowing that, with all the odds stacked against you, you can either be a victim or you can try and fight. My mum is a single mum. She raised three kids on her own. She never gave up. Whatever it took, she would do it. I didn't want her to struggle like that, being constantly tired because she had to work nights just to make a little bit of money. I wanted to do something to change the circumstances.

When I got the news that I was accepted and I would be funded, my mum was ecstatic. I could finally be a fully-fledged student. I finally got a laptop. I got books for the very first time. I could focus on my studies full-time. I never missed any class. I completed my Advanced Diploma and then moved on to my Honours in Operations Management. UNHCR funded me all the way.

During the festive season, I was working in catering at a racecourse. One night the Titan Cargo company had an event there. The owner of the company gave a speech and I was moved to see how all the employees were getting recognised. They seemed genuinely happy to be there. I decided to go up to the manager and introduce myself. The following month, he called me and offered me an interview for a clerk position. I started in February 2024.

Having a degree, it's hope. It opens doors. Where I am from, people do see high value in education. A lot of people have changed their whole families' lives from going to school.

It's nice to hear about success stories. And then something as amazing as a scholarship comes in. It's also nice to *be* a success story, you know? ■

You can help more refugees like Madeleine access higher education and transform their families' futures. To find out more, please contact Sindy Dupagunta on (02) 9276 6824 or email sdupagunta@unrefugees.org.au

Gottfried's lasting legacy

Gottfried chose to leave a generous gift to refugees in his Will. His friend Carmen tells us about Gottfried's compassion for people forced to flee and the difference he wanted to make beyond his own lifetime.



My name is Carmen, and I had the privilege of being the executor of my friend Gottfried's estate. Gottfried passed away in 2024, leaving behind an extraordinary gift to refugees through his Will.

Gottfried lived a simple, thoughtful life. Born in Germany during the Second World War, he grew up under Hitler's rule and later under Russian occupation. In his twenties, he escaped East German army conscription by fleeing to West Berlin just before the wall that would divide the city was built, separating him from his parents for many years.

He trained in horticulture and later worked across the world, including in Sri Lanka with Catholic nuns, growing food for local communities. Gottfried loved nature, music and beauty, and eventually settled in northern New South Wales where he transformed a run-down dairy farm into a thriving forest.

Over 34 years, Gottfried planted more than 20,000 trees – even spelling out the words 'Love' and

'Joy' with towering Bunya pines that can now be seen from the sky. He nurtured orchids, cared for wildlife and placed most of his land under a conservation order to protect it for generations to come.

Despite living frugally – his front door never quite closed properly – Gottfried's generosity was immense. He left his estate to a number of charities, including UNHCR, reflecting his compassion for people forced from their homes, just as he had once been separated from his own family.

Gottfried's legacy is a powerful reminder that you don't need to live lavishly to make an extraordinary impact. His values of simplicity, care for the environment and concern for others will live on in the support he provides to displaced families worldwide, through his bequest.

I am honoured to share Gottfried's story. He will be remembered not only for the thousands of trees he planted but also for the lives of refugees he will continue to help for years to come. ■

How do you want to be remembered? One of the most inspiring ways to ensure your values live on is to leave a gift in your Will, like Gottfried. To find out more, contact Amara Khan in our Planned Giving Team on (02) 9276 6873 for a confidential discussion, or visit unrefugees.org.au/bequests

Cheque donations

Cheques are being discontinued. Can refugees still count on you?

You may have heard that the Australian Government is phasing out cheques by 2030. Australia for UNHCR will continue accepting cheques for as long as possible. However, some banks have already stopped issuing new cheque books or accepting cheques.

There are many other ways you can donate and continue your generous support of refugees.



Online: It's quick and easy to donate online at unrefugees.org.au/donate



Phone: Call us on 1300 361 288 and donate securely over the phone



Mail: Send back our donation forms with your credit or debit card details



BPAY: Our donation forms now include our Biller ID and your unique Customer Reference Number, making it easy to donate via your bank or financial institution.

Any questions? We're here to help. Contact our friendly team on 1300 361 288 or email us at info@unrefugees.org.au to discuss your donation options. Thank you for your support!