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Providence's Beautiful Day granola company offers refugees a way into workforce

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Pio Shabani, originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, slides a tray of hot caramel-apple-corn granola into a cooling rack at Beautiful Day, a granola-maker that employs refugees in Providence.
Kris Craig/The Providence Journal

Iman Diriye called Somalia home until 2010. That year, constant fighting fueled by a civil war spilled into his village, landing on his doorstep.

Springing into action, Diriye grabbed his niece and nephew, who is unable to walk, and fled.

By way of Ethiopia, the three eventually made it to the United States. In a snap decision, Diriye left behind his two daughters, believing they had a better chance at survival than his nephew. He was right. To this day, with the war still raging, one daughter is being cared for by her mother, and the other is being looked after by Diriye's sister.

In his old life, Diriye owned goats and camels for milk. That was until a drought left the ground barren; the goats and camels no longer had grass to eat, ceased producing milk and began to starve. Diriye would have sold them for slaughter, but they were so thin they were worthless. The armed thief who eventually stole them was perhaps one of the only people to whom they still had value.



Bags of muesli at Beautiful Day, a nonprofit offering refugees jobs and basic job training especially important to people who often have limited English skills and little understanding of a Western labor market. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

More than job skills — cultural skills, too

In his new life, Diriye spends three days a week stuffing newspapers with inserts at The Providence Journal. He spends another three days as a kitchen assistant at Beautiful Day, a granola company that sits in the quiet College Hill neighborhood of Providence. Its purpose is offering refugees

job training to prepare them for the American workforce, an often-confounding and challenging place for those who arrive without English-language skills and an understanding of how to navigate a Western labor market.

Idea sprang from experience in Vietnam

The idea began with Keith Cooper, executive director of Beautiful Day, who was born to missionary parents in the Vietnamese city of Saigon. Familiar with the scenes of a war zone, and with his family having worked closely with refugees, Cooper's mission traces back to his roots.



Keith Cooper, executive director of Beautiful Day, at the company's new home in Providence. Cooper grew up in Saigon and knows firsthand the lasting effects of war on a population. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

In his previous job, Cooper served as the administrator for the refugee education program at Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island, a nonprofit that works on refugee resettlement and now sends migrants to Beautiful Day as a path to employment. Cooper said the company now stands ready and waiting to accept Afghan refugees when they arrive in Providence. More than 1,500 evacuees may be resettled in New England in the coming months.

What propelled Cooper to launch his company in 2009, he said, was a natural interest in “the people who seem least likely to get a job.”

“There were just so few resources for them, and it was so clear that they really wanted to work,” Cooper said. “So that always just bothered me. If somebody wants to work and they love to work and they really enjoy working, why should they be deprived of that opportunity?”



Somalian refugee Iman Diriye prepares to compress a tray of caramel-apple-corn granola hot from the oven at Beautiful Day. Rebecca Garland, the nonprofit's director of strategic partnerships, says Diriye is the "glue" among the company's refugee staff. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

That year, reeling from the Great Recession, Rhode Island’s unemployment rate topped 11%, placing the state among the hardest hit in the nation. For refugees, then and now, the fight for a job was even tougher.

Immigrants face a steep path

Meggean Ward, director of operations and training at Beautiful Day, pointed to the difficulty of state-led job training programs that are not necessarily geared toward trainees from abroad. What drew her to the company, she said, was the realization “that there are so many people who want to work, but if they don’t have any kind of training and they have a resumé that has all work from abroad, or what [is not really] American-style work, no one’s interested in them.”

Among those whose job it is to make sure trainees are acquiring the skills they need to break into the workforce is Saad Awad, the company's production and training manager, who knows firsthand what it means to be in their position.

Born in the Syrian capital of Damascus, Awad fled in 2002, citing governmental oppression under President Bashar al-Assad, who cracked down on dissidents long before the civil war began. In making his escape, Awad paid a smuggler to guide his journey out — a common recourse among those seeking to flee dangerous or repressive regimes.

Among Awad's colleagues is Rose Ntirampeba, who left Burundi as a child. The country is among the world's poorest and continues to face a longstanding ethnic-based civil war. Ntirampeba found temporary shelter in a Tanzanian refugee camp, where she tended a garden from sunup to sundown, growing everything from sweet potatoes to corn, beans and rice.

"It's hard," she said. "If you don't work, you're not eating."



Liberian native Elizabeth Dickson wears oven mitts to remove trays of hot granola from the ovens at Beautiful Day. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

Having left the camp for the U.S. in 2015, Ntirampeba has gone from farming to farmer's markets, where she sells Beautiful Day-brand granola every Saturday in addition to packing deliveries.

Training covers more than basics

The training received by Ntirampeba and others cultivates skills that help refugees to maneuver through the complexities of America's working world. That includes how to handle office politics, ask questions when needed and apply for jobs online. That classroom learning is then combined with real-world experience such as kitchen training, job shadowing or mock interviews with Starbucks managers.

Not all stay with Beautiful Day permanently. For Yonas Dabi, a program graduate who as a child fled Eritrea by way of Ethiopia due to war between both countries, the training opened doors for him elsewhere.

Like Diriye, Dabi works at The Journal, packing newspapers for delivery, while also earning his bachelor's degree in graphic design from Rhode Island College. Aside from the particulars of finding a job, his time as a trainee taught him something even more basic — how to communicate.

“I really liked it because I'm a nervous person,” Dabi said. “I usually don't talk around people, but when we were selling granola, it helped me talk to a lot of people selling our product and just being comfortable around them, around my coworkers and the customers.”

Dabi recalled the days he spent with fellow trainees, exchanging languages and stories of how they landed here.

Newcomers find common ground

While trainees may not always share a common language, religion or home country, Rebecca Garland, Beautiful Day's director of strategic partnerships, noted that they find commonality in other ways.

“We have Muslims working with Christians, and women who are managing men, and people who would never know each other or have anything in common with each other in any other situation except here,” she said.

The “glue” among those many different workers, Garland said, is Diriye.

“He puts people at ease,” she added. “He laughs a lot, he jokes a lot, and he uses music and he dances. There's a lot of laughter that happens in that kitchen, and that's, I think, something really special.”

For Diriye, it's a way to cope with the reality that his loved ones are still in harm's way.

"Sometimes I want to forget all my stress," he said. "Because every time my children call me, they say, 'Father, here there's no life, no peace.'"

As Diriye describes it, the peace he has found in Providence is everything. "If you have peace," he said, "life is happy."



[Granola cools on a rack at Beautiful Day in Providence.](https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/local/2021/10/05/providence-granola-company-offers-refugees-way-into-workforce/5841723001/) *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*