

# *I Never Go Alone- We Always Go Together*



Ashrafu Mussa (left) and  
Kidane Biri (right)

He had been imprisoned, impoverished and harassed by police in two African countries, but good fortune began to smile on Kidane Biri at the airport in Nairobi.

The fact that the former school teacher was at the airport in the first place, holding a one-way ticket to a new life in some place called Syracuse, N.Y., was in itself miraculous. Although Kidane was leaving behind in Ethiopia his wife, his mother and possibly a brother, who may or may not still be alive, he nonetheless understood he was one of the lucky few. He'd been approved by The United Nations' refugee resettlement program to move to the United States. A lonely sojourn awaited, but freedom was finally within reach.

Or maybe not so lonely a journey, after all.

Striding past a pay phone at the airport, Kidane heard a familiar sound. The man on the phone was speaking Oromo, Kidane's tribal language. Kidane said hello to the man in Oromo, and they quickly discovered they were both headed to Syracuse.

"I was so happy, he was so happy," Kidane recalled with a huge smile.

The man on the pay phone was Ashrafu Mussa. He also was Ethiopian, from the town of Machara, about 600 miles from Kidane's home town of Ginchi. The two had come of age in famine, civil war and relentless political oppression, eventually fleeing across the border to Kenya only to find conditions there just as bad, in some ways worse.

"Kenya was the same as Ethiopia," Kidane recalled. "Arrested every day without reason. You show papers and they rip it up, and take what you have from your pocket. Because you are a refugee, they don't care."

Ashrafu, 35, lived in Kenya as an "urban refugee" for eight years, Kidane, 29, for two. Kidane's misery included two years in prison in Ethiopia on what he says were trumped-up charges that he belonged to an outlawed opposition party. He says he merely taught tenet of democracy to high school students, who in turn observed that there was no democracy in Ethiopia, a point Kidane acknowledged to them. For that, someone reported him.

"When you teach children, you have to tell them the truth," Kidane said with a shrug.

But suddenly all the fear and scarcity felt like a long time ago as Kidane and Ashrafu sat across the aisle from one another on a jetliner and gabbed the whole way. They learned they were even assigned the same Interfaith Works caseworker in Syracuse and to the same house on Bear Street. Now Syracusans for about a year, they are the closest of friends. Having someone who understands what the other went through has made all the difference, they say, as they tackle the challenges of assimilation, homesickness and survivor's guilt.

The sadness comes and goes. Kidane has no idea what happened to his brother, Abera, who was arrested in 2010 and has not been heard from since. Ashrafu left behind five brothers, seven sisters and his mother. Kidane has started efforts to get his wife, Nanis, approved to move here.

Sounding a note that might sound strange in today's political climate, Kidane says he's actually happy when he sees police here "because they stand for peace."

Both men work, a lot. Kidane operates a forklift and performs other jobs at the Post-Standard print plant. He's also a solderer/welder at JMA Wireless. His dream is to earn enough money to help support his extended family and to someday open a school for children in refugee camps. Ashrafu aspires to attend college and open an auto parts store. He works as an in-home senior care aide. Of course, they're both fascinated by snow, which neither had ever seen prior to moving to Syracuse. "Sometimes it's funny," Ashrafu said, laughing.

"Sometimes, not so funny."

Remarkably, Central New York's inclement weather may have saved Kidane's life. Soon after arriving in Syracuse, he was beaten and robbed while going to buy bread for Ashrafu. His assailant tried to stab him in the back but Kidane was wearing so many layers it stopped the blade.

"God saved my life," Kidane said. "After that day, Ashrafu and I never go alone. We always go together."

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