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They fled war in Kosovo, found hope in Utah

By Kathryn Jones
Close-Up Correspondent

When Nazif Kamberi, his wife Shefinaze, and their two young children were forced from Kosovo in 1999 during the Kosovo-Serbian war, they had little to call their own except their clothes and a good, strong tent.

"We had to leave; it was war," said Shefinaze.

The family spent seven weeks living in the tent, eating donated food - nothing that needed to be cooked. "We had no way to cook; we had nothing," she said.

The International Rescue Committee eventually sponsored the Kamberi family, helping them not only get to Utah but to cope once they arrived.

They were set up in an apartment in West Valley City. In sixteen months Nazif had a job, the family had Social Security cards and they had a bit of money. They moved from the apartment to a rented house.

Though tile and construction work was all new to him, Nazif was willing to do it. "I just started working," he said.

Complications arose, like a police officer once mistaking Nazif for someone else. But the police chief later returned and gave them a free dinner for their trouble. Nazif continued to work, learning the language as he went.

Shefinaze tried going to school, but it was difficult and the children cried for her the entire time she was away. She learned to speak English by listening to television.

"Language was the hardest thing about coming to America," Nazif said.

"You go to the store and you do not know how to explain [what you want]," Shefinaze adds. "We didn't know nothing; just 'Hi' and 'Goodbye,' nothing else. It was scary."

After renting a house for three years, the Kamberis were able to buy a home in West Valley City.

"Here's a country [where] you can do what you want, you have choices, good ones or bad ones. If you work you can have everything," Nazif said, stating that he plans on one day owning his own business.

Nazif and Shefinaze believe in work and are more than happy to do their share.

"You have to work to be smart. People who like you will help you to go up," Shefinaze said, adding that being smart also meant becoming American citizens.

"You have to know how to read, to write English," said Shefinaze, who practices reading with her son and allows him to critique her. He is very honest, she says, and doesn't always give her the highest marks.

"I say, 'Did I read good?'"

"He says, 'Kind of.'"

Nazif admits that reading and writing English are important and that his son knows more than he does. But he feels strongly that to live in America means "to be American."

And yet the tug of family and their way of life before coming to America fills Shefinaze's heart with fond memories of a time before the war.

"Right now I just want to go back to see my family," she said. "It's been [a] long time . . . and I want to go back."



Shefinaze and Nazif Kamberi sit in their West Valley home. (Kathryn Jones/The Salt Lake Tribune)