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### Stories of Solidarity: A Balancing Act of Love

UU Congregation in Iowa finds meaning, purpose in supporting those in migration.



By UUSC Staff on May 28, 2025

In this new blog series, *Stories of Solidarity*, we will be highlighting congregations and community groups that have welcomed newcomers to their communities through UUSC's **Community Accompaniment Program for Asylum-Seekers (CAPAS)**. Each of these groups has gone through a discernment process in partnership with UUSC to determine if offering solidarity to asylum-seekers fits with their social justice goals and capacities. They have then raised funds, arranged housing, and put together a core team to organize the

effort and coordinate volunteers. After welcoming the newcomers, they continue to receive support from UUSC and other CAPAS teams, as they work with the asylum-seeking individuals and families to help them establish their lives in their new communities. As you read these inspirational stories, we hope you'll consider if your community group or congregation could lead with love and provide welcome for those seeking-safety from so many tumultuous situations in our hurting world.

The Unitarian Universalist Society in Coralville, Iowa has a long history of developing relationships with immigrant families and has just welcomed its second placement through CAPAS. They are the recipients of a Dottie Mathews Congregation Action Fund Award, which provides a matching grant to CAPAS groups hosting new guests. The following contribution is from their team lead, Sally Hartman.

*"Fanny, one of our congregants who is from South America, was aware of other sponsorships in our church and said she and her husband, Tom, wanted to host one or two asylum-seekers. Six months later she got her wish with the arrival of a Cuban, middle-aged couple from Havana, Irma and Juan\*.*

*We figured that after the couple got their employment authorization, we would try to match them with a job similar to the ones they had in Cuba. That idea was short-lived in Irma's case because her work career consisted of rolling cigars! No cigar rolling in Iowa! We found out recently that Juan is quite a chef. He worked in a Cuban restaurant when the President of Panama arrived for dinner. The dinner Juan cooked was so well prepared that the President asked for seconds! Needless to say, now that Juan has his employment authorization, he will be investigating jobs in restaurants. I bet he gets a job soon, and I'll make sure to be the first to dine there!*

*We have continued to learn more about their lives in Cuba and their culture. We get warm hugs and a smooching sound when we arrive or when we leave! They are very kind, considerate, flexible, and grateful for our efforts to support them.*

*Recently, there was enthusiasm among our support group to head downtown for Saturday night salsa dancing with Irma and Juan. One of our group noticed their enthusiasm for dancing and took them to a square dance. They enjoyed the lesson of, "swing your partner and do-si-do" beforehand! They both love music, enjoy being with people, and are eager to learn new things, such as how to get around town. They have already been to Walmart, the library, the next town, and my house by bus. Other adventures in the first month of their stay include*

*shopping at thrift stores, visiting an Amish village, and hiking the grounds of our church, the 'greenest church in Iowa.'*

*Irma likes to work with her hands, and with beads from Fanny, she made a beautiful necklace. That prompted several of us to search our closets for some unused beads to give her. She got quite a haul! Juan loves to cook and finds the food pantries fascinating, especially when they have a variety of vegetables and meat. They are working on their first ever jigsaw puzzle, with Irma fixing some of what Juan had attempted!*

*Ever since my years as a school psychologist assigned to a school that was 1/3 Latino, I have been amazed by the courage, positive attitude, and hard work of the families from other countries that I have met. For years our church enjoyed relationships with Guatemalan and Sudanese families. When I heard about CAPAS, I thought it was a good match for us. Our first CAPAS match, three years ago, was with a Burmese environmental scientist. Before we knew anything about our guest, we had set up tutors, transportation volunteers, and a lead group of Spanish speakers. Having studied two years in Australia, our guest was fluent in English, he had the bus schedule worked out the third day, and easily found a group of friends his age. The University of Iowa Law School took on his asylum application, pro bono. He now works full time in his field, has a partner, and lives on his own.*

*We were so lucky the first time with CAPAS, as well as our co-sponsorship of an Afghan family through Sponsor Circles, so we thought maybe we were on a lucky streak! One of the main reasons we hosted again is that Fanny asked if she could be a host. One stipulation Fanny had was that the person or persons be Spanish speaking. I assured her that it could be arranged. Fanny is doing great with the Cuban Spanish, but most of us feel a little challenged. In my case, I speak to them in Spanish, and they answer me on a phone app!*

*The rewarding aspects of our sponsorship included watching the relationship blossom between our guest and the host and watching our guest's world expand. This included friendships, trips to nearby states, membership on our church Green Sanctuary Team, and celebrating birthdays and arrival anniversaries.*

*After years of working with families that are asylum-seekers or refugees, the amazing part for me is the growth and depth of caring that occurs in friends, colleagues, and acquaintances when they become involved in immigrant support. Miriam, age 85, loves being called "Grandma" by the Egyptian family we helped settle recently. The Afghan children—ages 4, 5, and 6—revel in all their extended "family" who never fail to show up on birthdays and Eid. Our first guest left four older sisters behind in Burma, but he has many "sisters" as well as "brothers" who are there for him, including some gentle teasing and joking.*

*While I keep track of all that is going on with our families, who have come here seeking safety, I also know that having too close of a relationship with any one family hinders my objectivity and may hinder their ability to gain independence. It is a fine balancing act, and it is one that requires constant learning. Love is the thing, and our guests need to feel that they are loved and cherished. So far, that has not been hard for us."*

If you would like to learn how your group can become a CAPAS team to offer much needed solidarity to those seeking safety, please read our **program handbook** and reach out to us at **capas@uusc.org**. Also, consider contributing to our **Annual Fund** to ensure the CAPAS program continues its powerful work.

*\*Asylum-seeker names have been changed for privacy.*

*Image Credit: Unitarian Universalist Society*

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