**Hometown Interview with Salemu Alimasi, Season 7, Episode 8**

Kendall Martin: Thank you so much for joining us today, Salemu. As you know, the name of this podcast is Hometown, and we adopted this title because we really wanted to understand what home means, especially for people who've been forced from their home and find themselves making a home in a new land. We know that you and your family are originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo. And you were born in the early 1990s and spent your early childhood in a town called Uvira, which is on the shores of Lake Tanganyika and close to the border with Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania. So could you tell our listeners a little bit about your childhood growing up in the Great Lakes region of Eastern Africa at that time?

Salemu D Alimasi: Yes. Thank you for the opportunity, by the way. My name is Salemu Alimasi, as you mentioned, and my hometown is called Mulongwe. It's one of the little towns in Uvira. I'll just call it Uvira for the easy access of everybody. And my childhood was excellent. I loved Uvira when I grew up. It was just a beautiful place to be, next to the Lake Tanganyika, the blue water. I remember moments spent at the shore or just in the sand when it's hard, just rolling and playing football with friends and the camaraderie. And the piece I love about it that stuck in my mind is the Sunday School moment. Going to Sunday School was like a competition. I can't miss! I have to go and mostly when they initiated the idea of question and answer, and I couldn't miss. I was loving those moments to go there and answer questions. They used to give us some brochures. We called them “shahidi awatoto.” Like those were just small brochures, like a biblical story and character that was just lovely to read and to have. And candies. So those were my favorite parts of the Sunday school. And another part maybe I never mentioned, it was when they start training us to become servants of God. They give you like, this Sunday you will be the one who preached to your fellow kids. And I was like, I can't wait [for] my turn. I love that moment. And I love the video.

Janet Morford: So to be a servant of God was to preach? That was the main role?

Salemu D Alimasi: That's a good question. To be a servant of God, was it to preach? I can say in our understanding that was the case. For you to serve God, you have to be a preacher, you have to be there. And it was just the way everybody wanted to go. Because myself, I joined the Sunday School Choir. We call them “chipukizis,” like nursing. And it was just good to be with friends and sing those old songs.

Kendall Martin: I love that. And what made your home feel like a home?

Salemu D Alimasi: Home is what shaped me. Home is what gave me value. If I might be accepted somewhere else, it's because of home. If somebody will accept me, give me, or honor me the way they may or she might, it's because of home. Home gives me value. Home shapes me, and home prepares me for the world. That's what I say, that's how I feel home.

Kendall Martin: I love that. We understand that your father was a pastor and a human rights activist. Could you tell us about that?

Salemu D Alimasi: Yes, yes, and that's the guy I look [up to]. Because he, ‘til now, he's still a servant of God, and he was a human right activist of this organization called Héritiers de la Justice. It's a French word. Like, I remember just in my very early age when I was growing up, I see him sleeping late, like writing all night. I was like, what is this guy doing all night? What is the problem? And he’d go to bed and I could overhear him -- if he's not reading the Bible, he's reading a report. If he's not writing by the telegraphy machine [typewriter], he's writing by hand. And I was curious to know, what does he do? What is this? And as I was growing up, I see the traffic at home, people coming from this village, and they just came and say, “You know what? In this village, this and this happened.” And for him, he takes notes, he takes the paper. And I understood, he worked as a human rights activist. And his role was: any news that happened, whatever happened in every corner of the village, they have to report.

And as a servant of God, we are called to preach love, we are called to preach peace, we are called to do reconciliation, we are called to tell people, it's okay, things might happen, we have to reconcile it and kick off and start again life. That's how it was. And I saw him like busy -- by the way, he was even a bank manager, if I can say that, it was a corporation. In French, you say “coopératif,” just a small cooperative that he was managing and doing all of that. So he was a busy guy.

Kendall Martin: Very busy.

Janet Morford: Yeah, I can just imagine how your father's role model really impressed a lot upon you, being able to talk to people and listening to what's happening and seeing what you could figure out to do, to work for peace and for understanding. So that's really powerful.

Salemu Alimasi: Yes.

Janet Morford: As you shared with us before, you and your family, unfortunately, had to flee your homeland and seek safety in neighboring countries -- the first time when you were only six years old, to a refugee camp in Tanzania. And later when you were an adolescent, your entire family was displaced to a camp in Uganda. And each of these experiences was horrific in its own way.

We think about our listeners and those of us who have never had to flee our home, never had to live in a camp for displaced people. What do you think is important for us to know? Like about what it can be like, what it requires in terms of resilience to leave a home and to make a home while you're waiting for a more permanent solution?

Salemu D Alimasi: I would want people to know that it's scary when you have to leave your home and not to prepare. It's not like somebody's going to a vacation. You pack your bag nicely. “No, I don't want these. I don't need this.” I remember telling myself that I have even to write a book called “25 seconds.” Like within 25 seconds, you have to stand up and go. I remember when war started in ‘96. We didn't, that was -- no, we left to go. But just when the war started, we had to move. Maybe we are so exposed, let's go hide in maybe grandpa's house. My brother, our big brother was asleep and the gunfire started like everywhere. And we have, Daddy said, “Wake up, we have to go!” And he [my big brother] didn't have his shorts on. So I remember him running, putting one leg in, holding pants in the run again, stop for a few seconds. You don't wanna be left behind because everybody's running for their life! And then I say like, what do we need people to know?

It's not fair what [in] the world is happening. It's not fair what is happening in the world. It's not fair -- the powerful trying to dominate the weaker and the poor. It's not the powerful. It's not, if I can say, for the rich to become richer and the poor to stay ?warned?. That's what I don't like about the unfair condition of what is happening -- because some of us are victims of what God has given us. We're a victim of what God has given us. You can imagine me -- I was six years old, with somebody who was still two years old or maybe zero years, to go through that crisis, witnessing the massacre, the killing of people. One of the reasons why I took off is like, when I saw other kids on my age screaming for their parents and nobody's responding, I saw like, it's over for me as well. If that's their situation, what about me? So that's, I can say like, I want people just to know that it's not fair, mostly what is happening in Congo. I will raise my voice loud, that it's not fair, and we can all stand and say something, rather than to stay quiet.

Janet Morford: One of the things that you've said is that in conditions like that, that are so life threatening and horrific, migration is not a weakness. Can you say more about that? Migration in response to situations like that is not a weakness.

Salemu D Alimasi: Yes, I will say that very boldly: That migration is not a weakness. I know most of -- maybe I will focus on one side of it. It's the labelling. People are labeling others like, okay, you're a migrant, you are this, you are this, but it's not a weakness! We don't leave our brain home. We don't leave our brain sitting in a coma when I'm in America. When I come to America, I come with my brain, I come with my culture, I come with my home of value, I come with the full package. That's why you see people are doing amazing things. But how you was on me, “You came this way out,” because that was just a label. The migration language, the word name is just a label, but the people in themselves, they're the full package, the full package designed by the Master, God. And that's why I say migration, it's not a weakness -- because we are who we are and we do what we do because of our value.

Even in the refugee camp, I don't know if any one of you have had a chance to be in a refugee camp [that] just started, not the one now, no -- the first refugee camp, which I was in Nyarugusu [Tanzania], we slept *outside*. When I went again to Uganda, I spent two, three months sleeping *in the church*, going to bed around maybe 12 midnight when people stopped praying, you wake up at 4 am. That's a refugee camp. You sleep in the night, you sleep on the floor. It's cold, it's hot. You are waking up, you have -- there's no hope. You don't know what to do. There's no plan, no idea, nothing whatsoever. That's a refugee camp I'm talking about. The refugee camp that our parents always say, I always thank our fathers and our mother for the sacrifice they did. Leaving your home, going in a refugee camp, and accepting for somebody to feed you, your wife and your kids. In manhood, that's an insult.

That's an answer. Our parents accepted that and went there, but they didn't give their hand. They didn't leave their hand down. They keep it up and we stood. In a camp, we have a story. I want to tell you: my family and myself, we left marks. If you go back to the camp where we came from, we left marks. You will see: this is where the Alimasis pass. Because migration is just a label. We, when we move, we have the full package of ourselves.

Janet Morford: And that full package of yourselves in the camp in Uganda included building churches, building choirs, building programs, not for yourselves, but for other people. I mean, recreating a sense of home in terms of people's value by making more that did not exist there.

Salemu D Alimasi: Yes, yes. And teaching people, it's not only leading, what already people have and giving what people never have before. And that's the beauty, the part I love, and I thank God for using me and my family for that. Many people, I remember when I got in the camp, nobody knew how to play guitar. It's not bragging, but when we got there, we sang, we had a crusade, and one Australian pastor gave us his guitar. It was just – wow! And it was just the happiness took over the whole refugee camp! And people say, “OK, you give the guitar, who will play it? You just be sitting in the house.” They were surprised -- the second song we sang, I played the guitar. Even the people who gave this, they didn't expect to see that. And within three months, I counted more than 10 young girls and boys learning how to play the guitar. Now they are good musicians. They can play all instruments. Their teacher, I'm still learning guitar, but they are now doing amazing. Some of them are working in a studio. Some of them have started their own studio. So seeing that, it's just like a salute. Just I say, “Thank God for using us for this.” That's what I say. It's just not a weakness.

Kendall Martin: Thank you. It's so powerful. Thank you for sharing that. We know in 2011, your family learned you'd been granted refugee status and the chance to come to the US, into Houston, Texas. We understand you were 21 years old at the time. So you had to start working to support your extended family. Could you tell us a little bit about how you moved from assembly line work to beginning to work as a caseworker in a refugee resettlement agency, like the one that helps you and your family first resettle in Houston?

Salemu: Yeah, that's a good question. And I don't know, on my side, I always tell myself, I believe in growth. I believe that somebody can grow up. And when you're just in nature, you have to grow. You start as a baby, you become a toddler, you are now a teen, and an adult.

When we first arrived -- by the way, I don't like people to just disregard me for what maybe I can do. When we got here, I told myself, “I'm here in Houston, I'll find my way out, find my way out.” I connected to people as a singer, being a worship leader. The week we arrived, the second week I was in church, I never leave church since then, because that's where I find my peace -- in church. I find my peace in worshiping. And I say, if I am who I am, it's because of God. So I have to continue the race with Him. With that connection, we keep on moving on, keep on moving on.

And we got to America September 20. I got my first job, I was the first one to get a job with my family, November 15. If I remember going back to the agency that welcomed me, it was maybe two or three times. Because I told myself, “I will find my way out and I'll just give them a report.” I don't like to blame people. “Oh, you didn't tell me to fully stop. You didn't do that!” That is not me. If I can do it by myself, why wait for somebody? Why not make easy for the caseworker? That was my part. “Okay, Let him take care of the rest of us. I speak English with my broken English. I'll find one.” And that's what I did.

My friends in church say, “We work at this company called Foxconn. They're hiring.” I went there, applied. Next day, I was called for interview. Boom, next week, I started. Not even the next week, the next day I started and, there is a brother, let me, allow me to share this piece of story. Back in the camp, I told myself, “God, I hear everybody who goes there [to the U.S.], they don't go to church. They don't pray anymore because they are busy with work.” And I told Him, “My faith is too small. Like a small wing of a bird can turn it off. So I want you to help me. I wanted to help my faith to know, reach that level. Because if my faith turned off, I'm dead. I'll be worse than the worst person you've ever seen in the world.” That was my prayer then.

When we got here, I was hired on Wednesday, that was my first day. Reach Friday, they tells me, “Saturday and Sunday it's mandatory, everybody at work.” I was like -- and when I heard that word, my prayer came back. Like somebody starts reciting the prayer I did with exact words. And I said, “Okay, now it's my exam to pass.” I told my landlord, I'm sorry, [my supervisor], “I can come on Saturday because after here we have time. I will go to choir practice, but on Sunday I won't be here. I have to go to church.”

And they say, “I wish it was a request, but it's a mandatory. You have to be here.” And I said, “I'm not asking you, I'm *informing* you.” And she said, “That’s beyond me, that -- the supervisor, go talk to her. Whatever she says, I'm OK.” I went to her and said, “By the way, I'm here to tell you that Sunday, I'm not going to come because I have to be to church.” She say, “When did you start?” I say, “Last Wednesday.” [She said,] “You are not even five days at work. You start asking for—” I said, “I'm not asking, I'm informing you.” She said, “Okay, let's see what will happen.” That was her answer. On the Sunday, I didn't show up. I came on Monday. Everybody was, “Okay, let's see what will happen.” And nothing happened. Nothing happened. Since then, I thought, even my line, even though the CEO say everybody on work, she will say, “Don't worry, sign here.” She will make me sign [to be] fired, the paper. I won't come. And that was not -- I felt so thankful to God for allowing that to happen.

And now back to work. What I was doing here, I was just doing packaging. My station was packaging. People bring the unit and a scan, put it in a box and take it to the warehouse. And I said, “No, no, no, no. Somebody has mistaken me with somebody else. I can't do this. This is too small, maybe for a child, not me.” So inside of me, I knew I can do more than what I was seeing. Inside of me, I knew my capacity. I knew the ability that God put inside [me]. So those were driving me. I remember when -- before we came to the US, we had a teaching in our church with the youth, when I told them like, “When you see it, you can have it. Or in order to have it, you need to see it.” So inside of me, I had the sight. I saw that I can do more than this. And by the way, people who come to America, many of them don't speak English. I speak English. So if I became their caseworker, I think I'll be helping them a lot. That was my already boiling inside.

I stayed there, worked for a few months. I think that's where I got my first car. Yes, I got from a first, from $7.25 an hour. And then boom, I went back [to the resettlement agency] to apply. Nobody told me. I just [said], “Okay, let me go back.” I went to the website, I found they have a position. I submit my application and I got hired. So that's maybe the whatever inside of me that's going to push me out of that assembly line.

Kendall Martin: It's really impressive.

Janet Morford: So when and how did you start seeing yourself as an advocate? I'm hearing already the roots of that. But when you look back and think about -- when did you start seeing yourself as an advocate, as a person who would speak up and who would work with others to bring about a more fair and equitable world?

Salemu D Alimasi: That's a good question. I can again go a little back. I think the feeling came with the love, the passion that God gave me for the youth. It was again in the camp when we got in Uganda, in Nakivale, precisely. When we got to Nakivale, as I said, it was quiet. Nothing was there. And I said, “No, no, no, this cannot be human being. This cannot be somebody who's a ?brand?, somebody who kind of think, I know we all are refugees. I know we all doesn't have nothing, but this cannot be how people live! We should change this way!” And that's triggered my mind.

With church engagement, I was a youth leader. And I start saying like, “By the way, in this little village of ours, we are kind of okay, but there are other villages where people are really refugees. You look at them, these are really refugees.” And the Spirit of God come to me and [I] say, “You know what? I'm going to ask anybody who have clothes that they don't use anymore. We pack them together and we'll take a trip, like maybe say three hours walking, to go somewhere called Kabazana. And we will preach and give those clothes away.”

So I think that was the thing that was now triggering my, my insight of how seeing others, I can speak. And one story of that piece, allow me to share it. It might be a little dark, but not that dark. Don't worry. It's easy.

One part is we are giving, after giving -- they used to give women sanitary material like underwears and everything, but our ladies, in the way I was living, they're kind of modern. They didn't like to use those underwears. And I was, by the way, then I was still, they called me a “community worker.” So I was between the refugees and the officers. If the office needs somebody in the refugee group, they will ask me. If there is somebody here, they will ask me. If it's to have a meeting, I will mobilize the community for the meeting. So that was my role.

And I found myself with a big box of underwears. What to do with them? So that's why I said, “Let’s go.” And when we got there, after we preached, we said, “You know what? Let's give it out, the stuff we came up with.” There is this lady who came to one of our group members and told her, “Please, I need just one underwear. I have one that I use in the morning, and at night I have to wash it and put it on my head -- so nobody stole it.” I cried when I heard that. And I said, [unintelligible]. We had almost more than 1,000 people who came for just a small packet of underwears.

And that's sort of me like, so it means on any position I have, I might be, I don't wanna say better, but I might have something that can help somebody else. And that's where this thing triggered my engagement to speak on behalf of others. And yes, if you go back now to the senior Alimasi, so maybe the roots came from there. That's what I can say.

And now here, after being there, I remember -- if I speak this much English and so many people doesn’t speak English, even in my family, I was helping my parents to go to register my young brothers, at the clinic, the case worker will tell me, “Please stay with your young brothers, interpret for them. I'm going to help somebody else.” And I said, “Okay, if I can do this, I think that we can do better.” And then my eyes start opening, seeing what other people are not seeing. And that's okay. This -- nobody's speaking about this. This -- there is nobody speaking about this. This -- nobody is saying this. So it means I can bring them and expose them.

Kendall Martin: During that time where you were acting as a community worker and liaising between the UN officials and then the folks in the camp, was that sort of where your heart for advocacy was born? Like where you were making the connection between the need to speak up for other people and also your understanding of home and what, I mean, what everyone was in search of, what everyone was hoping for, without any certainty that it would happen for them? Like, it just all sort of collided for you in that moment?

Salemu D Alimasi: Unfortunately, I don't remember the exact moment to say like it was at this moment, but we can put all the episodes like pieces that shape the advocacy desire in me. ‘Cause I remember the moment again, one of the things that sent me to apply -- by the way, the application for me to become a community worker was funny. I just went and I saw: they are hiring for a community worker in our village. I didn't apply. And I went home, I didn't do nothing. And [I saw] one of my friends and said, “Where are you going?” [He said,] “I'm going to the office to put my resume because I'm applying for this position.” I said, “Give me a second.” I went home, write my resume in a few seconds. “Take it for me.” He took his and mine.

He was not called. I was called. I was listed in a shortlist. I was listed in a shortlist to go for the interview. And when it came to my turn, I remember when I went for the interview, they asked me: why you want to be a community worker? I told them. “I can see other villages. There's somebody who speaks for them. Somebody who brings their problem to you. I can see other villages, they have somebody who helps maybe mobilize and call people together for this and that. But in my village, I don't see nobody. And I always see somebody come from somewhere else, to come do that in my village, which -- I think we deserve to have one in our own village to speak for our own issues,” and that was my answer. And that guy was like, “I think that's fair. I think that's fair.” I think that's -- those are one of the pieces because it's just the seeing -- I don't say what nobody sees, but -- it can be that you see the need and know the thing to be the answer, or part of the answer.

Janet Morford: So you have these very powerful and important early experiences with mobilizing people to create things where nothing existed, like a church, a choir, programs for youth, and also this early experience in the village -- the sub-unit of the refugee camp -- of seeing that there was no one that was speaking on behalf of the group and it was needed. As you then moved from the camp in Uganda to resettling in the United States, what's the thread of continuity there? How does the focus of your advocacy develop as you move into a new chapter in the United States, with your whole person that brings all these things with you?

Salemu D Alimasi: It's the same. I remember, I think I can't go away from it because it's the same. I saw again the need. I saw the missing piece. I saw like, something is not right. I remember even talking to my director who I respect a lot, Ali Sudani, with Interfaith Ministries [of Greater Houston, where Alimasi worked as a caseworker]. I went to him and tell him, “Sir, I think we are forgetting a population. There's a population we are forgetting.”

As a caseworker, I don't deal with [people under] 18 or 17. I deal with the parents because I need them to sign [for] my checks, to sign my intakes, to sign my core services. I need them to be enrolled in RCA and Matching Grant, and I need them to be enrolled in employment -- those are what I need. But for the younger ones, I'll put them in school, and I'm done with them. I never see them again. But I said, “Wait! If this person came to America, at 18, in five years, they're already somewhere, they're a citizen and they're able to vote and they're able to donate. If they come at 16, in five years, they're 21. They're already citizens and they're already able to do anything. Oh! I think *these* are the people who will donate to the organization tomorrow. I think *these* are the people who will come back and work for us. I think *these* are the people -- no, there's a population we're leaving behind.” So that's where things start boiling inside of me. And he said, “Yes, we will start from the start.” Really, he started, he initiated so many programs around that, trying to see how we can help the young people. And I was so grateful.

But in the middle of that, I don't remember how the invitation came. I don't really remember. But one day, I got an invitation that there's a training about telling your story over at CWS. I was like, what angel can take me there? Suddenly, I don't know who I was. Somebody said to me, “There is this training going on for 30 days in Austin, and do you think you can do it?” I said, “I can, and I can even bring more people!” I ended up recruiting two more people with me. So we went there for 30 days. It was me, myself, my younger sister, and a friend of mine. We went.

We learned how to tell effectively your story. I found myself like in French, we say, “*Je me suis retrouvé dans mon bain*.” It was like I was swimming in what I love. And the love grew bigger. The love was triggered again. And I got engaged -- from there I could go locally. I didn't miss any opportunity. Even if to speak to elementary kids, I would sign up to go speak to them. And that's the thing, that the love grew up, grew up.

And I remember the last elementary school I went, this young man asked this question, it was so bad. Nobody did it the bad way, but I was like, God, why did you come up with this question? He asked me, “Why do you miss home? Or what [is it that] you don't see here and you miss from your home?” I was like, “You really need an answer from me?” And he said, yes. And the teacher said, yes. “Okay.” And I say, “In my home, let me just tell you, in my home, we care about the people around us. We care about the younger, the elderly, we care about everybody. So any action I want to do, I have to look [at] who will be hurt the most, who will benefit the most? Any clothes I want to put on, I have to check.” The kids were sitting in front of me, [and I said,] “What will happen if I just [show] my leg?” And you could see the uncomfortable, the teachers, they start pulling their skirts [down], because almost everybody had a mini skirt. You see like people start pulling the clothes down. And I say, “Sorry, I had just to tell you. I miss that feeling. That's why I miss that home, where people care about: if I do this, if I say this, it won't work, she's older than me, she has to be respected, he is older than me, he's young, he doesn't deserve to hear this. Like we had that sense of the surroundings.” And that's why I remember this example. They say, one, the community raises somebody. Yes, that's when it came. Ah, this is what they meant.

Janet Morford: Yeah, I can see how that sense of responsibility and rootedness in a community where you're responsible and accountable to everyone is really missing in the United States. And I'm sure that really woke up your listeners.

So now tell us about sort of the next step. So you were invited by Church World Service, CWS, to take part in this workshop about storytelling, and you start to tell your story. How does learning to tell your story and then being eager to tell your story in different venues, different audiences, how does that lead to other kinds of advocacy? Does that make sense?

Salemu D Alimasi: Yes. I will say, you know, maybe speaking now as a little piece or a little bit as an organizer, story connects people. For you to hear me or for you to spend this time listening to what I'm saying, it's because you find a connection somewhere. If we didn't connect, we had no business doing here. And learning that storytelling, they helped me understand the story of self, the story of us, the story of now. And they helped me understand, you have your own story. Yes, it may start with your parents, but believe it, you have your piece between that. And since then, I start working on my own story -- because the person who was the target [of persecution] was not me, it was my father. Because I'm attached to him, I became a target as well. And sometimes I'm the more targeted because they want to reach my father but they cannot reach him. They have to reach me, to reach him. So I became like aware how things can turn ugly, even though I was not the main, the major targeted person. So with that training, I was able to not to shift, but I was able to draft my pieces together, and I learned how to shape them in a situation that's needed to be spoken.

It's not only story, okay, I was born this way. No, how did I make a decision? I can just step there. How did I make this decision? How did I overcome this solution? That's a story that can inspire somebody. Like the question to that young man. It was, man, this question is something else, but it was just only that. And it put me in my story back home because that's how I live. I know in our culture, when somebody's elder, they became like [unintelligible], they became like a general, like the ?marshalls? [respected], like that's how we consider our elderly. With those rank, every year it's another rank, it's another rank, it's another rank. That's how we consider them. And we love to be around them to learn their story.

But with this and every opportunity -- I remember the first time when I was invited to DC was 2019. It was when President Trump announced the travel ban for Muslim countries and some refugees. And it was a World Refugee Day. I went there, it was the 19th, I remember. And I spoke and I say, “We are not a burden to America. We are an asset. When we come to America, we don't come in pieces. We come with the fullness of us.” And it's true, if you can go back in the story, in the history of refugees, we have certain names of refugees who tried to be [terrorists], but they never existed.

“We are not here for that. We are here for life. We are here to make America. We are here to build the economy. We are here to show that we live.” So that's like, that training helped me to know how to have this different style of story, elevator storytelling, all those things which I found very fascinating and very, very helpful too, to any circumstance, because in any circumstance there is a story to tell.

Kendall Martin: Absolutely. How would you explain how the focus of your advocacy work has changed over time?

Salemu D Alimasi: Yes, the focus of my work has changed for sure. And in a very significant way that I can see. Before it was just, okay, we are going like, I don't want to say I didn't have a purpose for myself or I didn't know what I was doing, it's just, “Okay, we're going to meet the Senate. We're going to meet the governor. We're going to meet the mayor. We're going to meet this elected official.” And I was doing it as a community member, I was responding as a community member, responding as somebody who works, who says things.

But the change is happening, like being the person who will mobilize *others* and being the person with them to create policies, create like, this legislation you have to pass, like we have to defend this and you have to oppose, we have to support these, or we have to look for champions. I didn't know that you need a champion, but now it's changing to a level, the priorities are coming differently. The asks are being shaped differently.

Even now, I remember even lately, in May when I was in DC, some people say like, “You know what? We have to bring our community. Why we are suffering? Why nobody talk about this?” I say, “It's true. We should speak about our own community, but it's hard to bring somebody from Nicaragua to talk about Congo. They know it's not Congo. It's me, Congo, who speak about Congo. If you want to speak about Congo, let's ask Congolese people about Congo. This one, what we came to do here, it's what *all of us*, we have a piece of. We are urging the government to support refugee settlement. It's not only our agency, all the agencies. We're urging the government to support the early work authorization for asylum. That is not only Congolese. Everybody's included.” So the ask we have, it's touching everybody. And that's, the focus has changed to know the ask, and I really learn a lot to see how I can be effective in every corner.

Kendall Martin: So since early 2023, you've been doing advocacy, not just in your free time, but through your paid work. You now work for Church World Service as a grassroots community organizer. So could you tell us a little bit about what you do in that role?

Salemu D Alimasi: Thank you. What I do in this role as a grassroots community organizer, I always say we develop leaders. We activate leaders. We train them how to share their story effectively. We equip leaders to speak for themselves. Now it's like I play a double role. When it comes to advocacy, I stand, I advocate. At the same moment, I teach somebody else to do that for themselves. ‘Cause that's the beauty of organizing. We don't want to do that for you. And I always have my own language that I created that say, “The story is better told by oneself.” That's the language I created. I said, “The story is better told by oneself.” I can speak about what happened in Rwanda. I can speak about what happened in Burundi. I can speak about what happened in Tanzania. But I'm not Burundian.

But when it comes to Congo, I will tell you even the name of the village. I will show you even the name of the king. I will show you even the name of the tribe. I will even go down in details to the name or the age of the person and how he was dressed. Because I was there. I saw. I first see that. So that's the beauty of organizing, just telling them that we have power, and mostly when we build collective power.

I don't know if it's where they, but they say, “Alone, you can work *fast*, but together you can work *far*.” So I try to bring that to the perspective of our community. Like this is -- we can, you can go, you can meet even President Biden, but will you make a difference in the community? Yes, no. But when we are a number, you will see that something will change, it will move and that will be tangible. But by the way, I don't stop you moving. You can go alone. I salute and I will support you, but for us to stand up because our community need to be elevated, needs to be removed from the ground, up. And that's what we do. Like we activate the leader. Why – I'm sorry, let me add this piece:

I love when I learned that organizing is: “to turn the resources you have into the power you need, to make the change you want.” When I learned that, I love that definition because -- we have resources, we have people. We don't have money to give for propaganda or the voting, marketing, but we have people [who] can vote. So if we organize, we come together, we can use the resources we have. This is a mass, people, and we can turn and change the narrative that we have to our people. Because so many people doesn't know about refugees. Many doesn't know how we can change things.

Janet Morford: So if I understood, part of what you're saying is that your job is to train community leaders to use their voice to tell their own stories in effective ways: in ways that educate the public, broaden and change people's ideas about who refugees are, that migration is not a weakness, that people come with their whole persons, that they have all these things to contribute, that they're not -- you can't put people in these categories, but they are whole persons -- and change those narratives. And also at the same time as voters, as advocates, to forge relationships with policymakers, so that it's not just about hearing people's stories, but it's about taking the reality of what we've learned and infusing our laws, our policies, our decision-making with recognition and encompassing the reality of what newcomers bring. Is that -- have I understood that?

Salemu D Alimasi: Yes, you got it correctly. You got it correctly. And I will add something else, even to engage the community civically.

Always one of -- what I saw and what pushed me to this advocacy world is [that] so many decisions for refugees were made without refugees. So many decisions for immigrants, [there were] no immigrants at the table. But our role is to bring them to -- I don't want to say by those opportunities, but yes, by any means -- to reach to the level of decision, to engage civically, to be present, to be valuable citizens to our city and our country, as we are already. To be able to bring the change we know, the innovation, everything, to be part of this. The inclusion, mostly to be a part. The inclusion and to bring, trigger those opportunities, bring those to our people. Because many of us are coming from countries that – “You wanna die? Just go in politics. The next day you are dead.” So we have to bring that, we have to remove the fear in our people. We have to bring that in. “No, you can speak for yourself. You can share your story and things will change. You can be part of this commission. You can go and work at the mayor’s office.” “Really?” “Yes, you can.” And all those things just to give them opportunity and learn. I'm telling you, there's a friend of mine. He will vote for the first time in life, 43 years old. That’s for the first time. So all those opportunities to tell them, “We can! This is our power!” And that's community organizing. We try to have every [one of] these little details there. Equip, activate, motivate. It's just to try to see how we can change mostly the narrative. Because if people understand who we are, the change is happening.

Kendall Martin: Yeah, absolutely. So given everything that's happening right now in our government and what we can foresee, changes happening even more so around immigration, I'm curious about what you see as the key issues right now that you're advocating?

Salemu D Alimasi: You know, it's hard to pick one of the issues that we see, like to be, this is exactly, this is really, really, really complicated, it’s very hard to say. In a human, we have so many pieces attached to one and so many pieces that form one. And speaking of what exactly I see, I don't wanna say people doesn't know, but people have *chosen* to not know, or people have chosen to take their own way. I myself, I can speak on this language kind of hard. You maybe sound different from what I do. Even me, nobody can just come to my home and say, “You know what, I will be here and I'll take this room, it will become mine,” and I will leave. No, hey, no, no, no, no. And the same, “Let's do things in a regular way.” Because in immigration language of America, the only thing that is well-traceable, it's refugee resettlement. Even a single dollar, they know what is this dollar, they know what this dollar did. But if you hear the narrative outside, it's like something nobody knows about, it's that.

But secondly, as human beings, we have a responsibility to respond to somebody screaming, “I'm in pain, I need you to help me!” That's our responsibility. And not only that, being a pioneer, being a champion in doing something good, it's already a value that's attached to you. They can't separate you from that. It's like water, you take a fish out of water. America is known as the champion, the leader in human rights. But now listening to whatever is happening, I'm wondering what are we creating in the next generation? We are taking the value away. We are killing that value of welcoming.

Yes, there are a thousand, millions of ways to do it. To avoid it, it's good. But when sometimes I do reserve myself because it sounds and it starts looking political. “I want this, I want this. So let me do it my way, you do it your way. Let me stop this to prove.” It's just now as I said, they reach, try to push [the rich to become] richer and to push the poor to become more poor.

So that's where we say like, to pick one, it's hard because the narrative is turning ugly. And my fear is that the leader [the U.S.] is taking a wrong way. The leader is moving in the wrong path -- because if I speak as a Texan, we are seeing it. We're seeing it now. They will have [Texas state law] SB4 coming up. They catch me without documents and [they’ll give me] 10 years in jail, 10 years in prison. And you remember, those are our mom, those are our brother and sisters. Those are our people.

So what are you creating in me? Somebody's screaming, “I need your help!” And I say, “Sorry, I cannot help you.” I don't know if that's the America we are creating. I don't know – [that’s not what] the state was built on. Even our fathers, that's not what America was built on.

Somebody say, I was reading and see somebody said, “In all Americans, there is a drop of blood of like immigrants in every American. There is a blood that say immigrants, maybe one cell, one thing, but something that's not here.”

So I think we have a value to protect. We have a name to protect and we have been good for it. I always tell people, “Only in America, a refugee like Salemu can meet the Senate and talk to them, only in America.” So I think we have a responsibility to restore what we are good at.

Janet Morford: So you've mentioned that it's really important to ensure that refugees and other forcibly displaced people have a voice, are represented and have ways to participate meaningfully in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Could you help us unpack this a little bit? Like are there, are there organizations or communities or countries that we could learn from, as we think about how to take these principles of democratic governance and how to apply them to the process of welcoming newcomers and enabling them to thrive by participating more fully?

Salemu D Alimasi: Yeah, you know, that's what I said earlier. It's so, it feels bad when the leader is trying to learn from the younger. The leader [the U.S.] has been doing good. Everybody was learning from America. I remember a few years back, my director Ali was sent to a country. They had only 20 refugees. They didn't know what to do with them. Ali had to go to teach them how to treat them, how to make them their own citizens. Like he took the United States’ model of resettlement to that country.

But if we start running, start maybe going to run from them, something is wrong somewhere. And I don't, sometimes I feel bad when they [refugees, newcomers] say, “We need a voice.” I always feel bad to say that language. We have made our own voice without asking nobody. You know how much money we contribute to the state? If you start learning, count[y] by count[y], billions of dollars. If that voice, it's not enough to tell you that these people have a voice, these people just let us open the platform, the door. That's why I'm saying something is happening, it's wrong. Because that contribution, it's everybody's spirit. I told myself within one month, I had to go to work. Since then, I never stopped. So since then, I've been paying my taxes. Since then, maybe I've been paying my military guy. I've been paying a police officer. I've been paying. Since then, that's my voice already! I don't need to fight again to have my voice on this part.

It is just to change the way, to accept that this is our people. And sometimes when I stand and advocate for Afghan, for Sudan, I say, why don't I fight for Congo? I say, Sudan is my neighbor, right? Afghan is my colleague. We spend more time with Afghan people than my family. So I think -- the language of like “for us to have a platform for raising our voices” -- yes, it's a language, but I've been fighting to find a good language to put there. Because we already have a voice, it is just -- it's not accepted. I got it. We need to be accepted. We need inclusion. We need to be included in the decision. We need to be included in what is happening. Because if my money, you accept it, [but] you don't accept my voice or my part or my suggestion? That is unfair. That is not human. And that is not the America of the United States, which was beautiful from then.

Janet Morford: Is there anything else about the need for continued advocacy, or your experience as an advocate, or your observations on the challenges of advocating in the current context that you would like to share with us?

Salemu D Alimasi: Oh yes. The longer humans live, advocacy will be needed. Because there is always somebody who does not have the ability to speak for themselves. There is always somebody who feels powerful to step on their toes. So the advocacy will always be a piece that will exist. And mainly when I said again my passion for youth, I will always speak as an advocate for the youth, as I'm doing

We're having a project that's called a youth arts festival, for the youth, for them to share their story through arts. And all of these need somebody to push. This one, I was pushed by UNHCR, Welcome America and Refugee Congress. But I want this to happen every time. I want to produce more and even reach outside of the United States, to reach the refugee camps, to start preparing when they're still back there. So when the opportunity for them to come here, they're ready, they're not going to be fighting for this and this, they will be reaching good positions and help a lot. So the position is there. It just need push on it, just support. And if we can help that with my little organization, Co-Afro, which –

I came to create another program site, ?Found Center?, we're trying to be the center that helps other people to support. They have idea, they want to start something, but how to start? We want to be the one to push them. Start with this, take this one, or maybe to help them become legal, help them find a platform where they can share their business, everything. Like we want to mobilize funds to help the local organizations and community-based organization and those base entrepreneurs, to lift them higher.

But all of this won't be done if we don't hold each other hand. I myself, I'm still fighting to pay my mortgage. How will I put money there? But I already sacrificed my time, expressed what made my experience, and [I’m] trying to be there for us. If people will stand up and say, you know what, you have your time, we'll put our dollar and you will see how the youth will raise. And all this narrative of gangs, sex, drug will, just like sugar and water, disappear. They don't have that. That's why they are seeing sex is the way to go, the fashion. They don't have that. They see drugs as the way to go.

But if we have all this exposed to them, we have all this program there and they can jump in. We won't tell them, you will see [them saying,] “I don't deserve this, I don't deserve this, this is not me.” “I'm here, I'm seeing myself as an artist, I'm seeing myself as poetry, I'm seeing myself as a dancer, I'm seeing myself as...” And you will see how the map of culture will be more diverse. Because in Co-Afro we say, unity within diversity is the strength and the beauty of our community. And we are home of diversity. The festival will be August 24th, here in Houston, and we have flyers online.

Kendall Martin: Salemu, this has been such a pleasure and I want to keep talking to you. But I want to respect your time. We always conclude our conversations with our guests by asking the same question. And you touched on it briefly early on, when we were talking about your childhood. But given your experiences and your journey through life and your work as an advocate, what does home mean to you?

Salemu D Alimasi: I say it again: home shapes me. Home gives me value. And that's why I don't have no doubt to say that America has shaped me. It has given me value. If I stand boldly, like they say, “the land of the brave.” I love that language: “the home of the brave and the land of the free.” It has given me that boldness, to stand. I'm not afraid, but politely I stand in front of my leader and tell them that's home and that's what America has given me. I did what I have [done] because now it's my home, and boldly I stand to represent America and my origin country. So home gives me value, home shapes me. And that's my home. Yeah.

Janet Morford: We are just so grateful for your bold presence, your vibrant presence, your intelligence, your passion, and your commitment to making the world better for so many others. And it's always a pleasure to talk with you and to learn from you. Thank you so much, Salemu.

Salemu D Alimasi: Thank you for the opportunity and I hope the listener will learn something.