

# sparrow furniture

offering refugees a chance to thrive

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My eyes sweep the workshop and I take note of the labels donning the surfaces of everyday items—CHAIR, TABLE, SAW—a hint at the work the people here are all doing to learn English as quickly as they're learning woodworking. A woman from the Ivory Coast (West Africa) is working in the furniture showroom behind me and this workshop employs 4 other individuals right now, all from different regions on the globe: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Iran and Pakistan. Their stories, languages, cultures are all different; two of them having fought on opposite sides of a war, yet they work peacefully together in a hip, but modest workshop in Oregon, sanding, painting, staining, designing and refurbishing furniture pieces and custom home décor items for a social business called Sparrow Furniture.

All five of these men and women are refugees from their home countries whose initial supports following resettlement have run out. They traveled to Salem after their stint at a resettlement center in Portland, Oregon where they arrived once their refugee status was approved by the High Commissioner of Refugees and other governmental vetting, which likely took years. To be a refugee, you must prove you fled your country to escape war, persecution, death, torture, rape—in short, refugees are not arriving to the U.S. or Europe in search of economic prosperity or dream chasing, they're arriving as a last-ditch effort at survival (Grandi, 2016 World Humanitarian Summit).

"To have some kind of future to offer my children," one Syrian man shared with me.

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Once their refugee status is vetted and approved, they are sent to resettlement centers like the one in Portland where they're given roughly 3-6 months of minimal support that may include language training, menial housing, work papers and funds to subsist on during their initial settlement. Once those months are up, their support vanishes. They may understand some English at that point, and have a roof over their heads so long as they can get a job and continue to pay their rent, but getting a job in America with minimal English, no work history and rampant prejudice is no easy task. Sparrow Furniture founder, Luke Glaze saw this sudden evaporation of support as a massive deficit in the success of this vulnerable population and began envisioning a solution together with







his wife, Jocelyn, and their church which has a large community presence and existing network.

Sparrow Furniture is a transitional program that mentors refugees in woodworking and furniture restoration while also providing them with consistent English language training, offering them marketability in the workforce once they finish their mentorship program. With the ability to communicate, some marketable skills, and the work ethic and persistence most refugees arrive with anyway, they are much more likely to be able to keep their families off the streets following their time at Sparrow Furniture than if they were left with no resources at all as per general U.S. procedure.

Sparrow's business model is straightforward: supply mentorship in a trade through volunteers, provide language training and comfortable opportunities to practice English; invest in people's humanity, see them flourish. All while keeping overhead costs down by refurbishing donated furniture. As a social business: a cause-driven business with the objective of effecting social change, not making profit (Yunus 2009), they've been met with an encouraging amount of support from their city, community and greater change-makers, even hosting the Head of Refugee Resettlement from Washington D.C. who came with interest in their business/transitional model.

Sparrow's products are beautiful, fusing American-made pieces with design from their employees' home countries which gives life and originality to otherwise discarded pieces.

"Place an African fabric on a restored, vintage American rocking chair and you have an original piece that speaks to our mission," said Glaze.

Their design savviness will only benefit the refugee families they support by making products the public desires whether they're looking to be a part of an equitable movement or not. One can only hope they follow Toms Shoes into social business infamy, providing them with the resources to hire an increased number of refugees in the future.

I glance through the large glass window between the woodworking shop and the showroom to see the woman who let me in speaking in English with her mentor at the front counter, surrounded by the beautiful furniture and décor pieces that have come out of the workshop I'm standing in. To my right a man is putting sealant on a vintage curio cabinet and in front of me, someone else is ripping a fresh piece of timber for a new project under the watchful eye of their woodworking mentor. None of the folks in this space want their faces captured on my camera, or their personal stories told in print. None of them feel safe enough for that, despite the miles now between them and their homelands, but they welcome me with smiles and hope.

I step back out onto the street grateful for folks like the Glazes and the others involved at Sparrow Furniture who have chosen to be on the frontlines of change, seeking to stand with the people who have arrived as their neighbors, tired, oppressed, and in search of stability for themselves and their children. They are as much an integral part of my community as I am, but they may need an extra helping hand in order to function and thrive within it. Sparrow Furniture is offering just that.

