

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

## Buffalo refugee employment counselors say ‘The Good Lie’ is true to life

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*By Phil Fairbanks*

On one of the last warm evenings of the year, moviegoers in Lancaster turned out by the hundreds for the local premiere of Reese Witherspoon’s “The Good Lie,” the inspiring tale of a young jobs counselor’s relationship with four refugees from war-torn Sudan.

Witherspoon was obviously nowhere to be found. But near the back of the Regal theater on Transit Road sat two of her real-life counterparts, Eve Williams and Kristen Hibit.

Wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the sequin-dotted message, “I am Buffalo’s Reese,” Williams and Hibit sat and watched as their lives unfolded on screen.

They and their boss, Denise Phillips Beehag, are employment counselors at the International Institute of Buffalo, and they indeed are Buffalo’s Reeses.

“We hope the movie inspires you in the same way our clients inspire us each and every day,” Beehag, director of refugee and employment services, told the crowd at last week’s premiere.

While no one movie can adequately depict the tragic journeys of refugees from the Sudan, Iraq or Somalia, the three counselors say “The Good Lie” comes close.

It’s a story of four refugees – three “lost boys” and one “lost girl” – who join tens of thousands of Sudanese in a 400-mile, 10-week trek to a refugee camp in Ethiopia. Thousands die along the way.

Even after arriving at the camp, they must wait 10 years for word of their resettlement in the United States. And when it comes, their extraordinary joy at finally making it out alive will make you smile.

“You see the struggle and the triumph. I liked that,” said Hibit, an employment case manager at the International Institute.

Hibit, Williams and Beehag will tell you that their job is full of struggle and triumph, highs and lows that make it unpredictably difficult and immensely satisfying.

They all talk about their “aha” moment – Witherspoon has one in the movie – when they finally realize why they do what they do for a living. It’s that moment when a specific client – a family or individual – grabs hold of their heart.

For Williams, her “lost boy” was a refugee from Eritrea, near Ethiopia, who already had settled on Buffalo’s West Side but was struggling financially. She discovered he had experience as a welder and found him a job with a manufacturing firm in Alden.

Only later did she learn that her client, in order to make it to work on time each day, woke up at 4 a.m., took three buses and ran the last two miles to the job site.

“You quickly learn how hard they work, how determined they are and how grateful they are for the opportunity,” Williams said.

For Witherspoon’s character, bright and sassy but otherwise indifferent to her clients, there comes a time when she finally understands and appreciates the tremendous sacrifice made by the four people she is trying to help find work.

It is, in many ways, her epiphany.

“I see that all the time in our employers,” Williams said. “I see them really embracing our clients.”

The institute’s partners include 250 local employers who hire refugees, and Williams says the result is often more than a normal employer-employee relationship. She says employers are attracted to the singular dedication and impeccable work ethic that refugees bring to a job, and that often, what they get is much, much more.

Buffalo Without Borders, a fundraiser celebrating the institute’s work with refugees, employers and others, will be held at 6 p.m. Thursday at the Hotel@TheLafayette.

From start to finish, “The Good Lie” is as much about family and the cultural ties that bind the four refugees as anything else.

Beehag says her eyes still well up when she thinks about the family from Bosnia that arrived here just as she was beginning work as a jobs counselor 15 years ago.

The family, a father, mother and 16-year-old daughter, had been separated in Europe but reunited shortly before arriving in Buffalo. Their story of sacrifice, hope and fulfillment, more than any other, still makes her pause.

“I just didn’t get it until ... until then,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion. “I still start to cry when I think about them.”

There is no shortage of heart-wrenching stories among the counselors who work on the front lines of Buffalo’s refugee resettlement effort. And for once, their story is being told to a nation of movie buffs.

Hibit says she loved the feistiness in Witherspoon’s character and the fact that she’s quick to speak her mind and do whatever it takes to help her clients. She also saw the refugee’s journey from the Sudan to Ethiopia as disturbingly genuine, and reminded her all too well of the Iraqi refugees she sees today.

“They’ve been dislocated four or five times,” she said. “A lot of them have lived in Turkey, have lived in Syria and have lived in Lebanon.”

The movie is not without a few lighter moments and Beehag, Hibit and Williams will tell that they were right on target.

In one scene, one of the Sudanese men – they have repeatedly and sincerely questioned Witherspoon about her lack of a husband – enters her apartment. Finding it an absolute mess, he suggests that, maybe, just maybe, that is why she’s still unmarried.

Williams says her clients are always asking about her marital status or why she doesn’t have more kids. The questions are intended to be sincere and friendly, a way of starting a conversation, but they also can be intrusive or offensive to people here, to people unfamiliar with the importance of family in some cultures.

Even now, she laughs when she thinks of the client who saw one of her wedding pictures – Williams was wearing an Ethiopian dress and was heavier at the time – and remarked on how she has changed.

“Oh, teacher, you were so fat and beautiful then,” he said. “What happened?”

In the end, “The Good Lie” gives meaning to its title, and it’s an ending that seemed to surprise the audience, even the three counselors.

Without giving it away, we can tell you this: One of the three men returns to the refugee camp in Ethiopia and makes an extraordinary sacrifice. And while that sacrifice may seem like a far-fetched possibility in today’s refugee resettlement world, it speaks volumes about the never-ending ties that link many of them, even when they’re half a world apart.

“We hope people have a different take on refugees because of this movie,” said Beehag. “It really puts a face on the word ‘refugee.’ ”

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