

Interview with Jessica Goudeau, August 2020  
Hometown Podcast, Episcopal Migration Ministries

Allison Duvall 0:10  
Why do you support refugees?

Unknown Speaker 0:12  
I support refugees because my family were refugees.

Unknown Speaker 0:15  
I support refugees because we are all God's children and we all deserve a safe place to grow in God's love.

Unknown Speaker 0:21  
I support refugees because God made us all in God's image.

Unknown Speaker 0:25  
I support refugees because I'm a legal guardian of a minor asylum in Carol from Burundi.

Unknown Speaker 0:32  
I support refugees because my Lord was a refugee.

Unknown Speaker 0:36  
Because I welcome and I love my neighbor.

Allison Duvall 0:41  
Hi, and welcome to Hometown, a podcast from Episcopal Migration Ministries, the refugee resettlement and welcome Ministry of the Episcopal Church. I'm Allison Duvall.

Kendall Martin 0:50  
And I'm Kendall Martin. We're excited to have Melissa Coulston, Partners in Welcome consultant and friend of EMM, join us for today's guest interview.

Melissa Coulston 0:58  
Thanks, Kendall, I'm so excited to be here. Today we are talking with Jessica Goudeau, author of *After the Last Border: Two Families and the Story of Refuge in America*. Goudeau has written for the New York Times, The Atlantic, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Teen Vogue, among many other places. And as a former columnist for Catapult, she produced projects for Teen Vogue: *Ask a Syrian girl* and *A Line Birds Cannot See*, a documentary about a young girl who crossed the border into the US on her own. She has a PhD in literature from the University of Texas and served as a Mellon writing fellow and interim Writing Center Director at Southwestern University. Goudeau has spent more than a decade working with refugees in Austin, Texas, and is the co-founder of Hill Tribers, a nonprofit that provided supplemental income for Burmese refugee artisans for seven years.

Allison Duvall 1:50  
This book has definitely been one of the highlights of the last several months for me. One of the things that I loved the most was hearing the stories of individuals who've been resettled to EMM's affiliate in

Austin, Texas, Refugee Services of Texas. And of course, we don't know if Hasna and Mu Naw and their families were resettled by Episcopal Migration Ministries through Refugee Services of Texas or if they were resettled by another national agency, but it still felt so good to be connected more deeply to the stories of individuals that that we welcome. And I just, I just loved the book. It's one of the most important books I've read in this work.

Kendall Martin 2:23

I totally agree. And I highly recommend everyone to make sure you pick up a copy of this fantastic book. And stay tuned for our next Partners in Welcome book discussion kit for *After the Last Border*. It will be a super easy way for you to host a virtual book club with friends or family.

Allison Duvall 2:38

We hope you enjoy today's episode.

Well, Jessica, thank you so much for giving us your time today and joining us for this conversation. We all loved the book. I have a lot of feelings about the book and the narratives and we're just so glad to talk with you. Thanks for being here.

Jessica Goudeau 2:58

I am so excited to be here. I'm a long standing supporter of the work that you do at EMM and I just think it's the kind of stuff that most people don't see, you know, it's not always the public stuff that really makes a difference. It's the the quiet things that you guys do. And I know that you've just done an amazing job. So I'm just thrilled to be here.

Allison Duvall 3:15

Thanks so much. Well, to get the conversation started, we'd love to hear a little bit about your own journey into the work of welcoming refugees and supporting the refugee resettlement program. So can you talk to us about how did you first get started in this work?

Jessica Goudeau 3:27

Yeah, you know, it's, I think most people that have any sort of relationship with refugees often come to it from a relational way. You know, some people find out about the issue and decide to volunteer, but for a lot of people, it's a friend that told me and my story is exactly the same. I was at a community center speaking Spanish--my husband and I lived in South America, I have a PhD that involves issues of representation in Latin America, so like, really not refugee resettlement--and the group of people walked into this fall festival that we had. And I had taught English in Thailand when I was in college. And so I recognize these people as being from Southeast Asia and was thinking, Why are all of these people there in like these beautiful hand woven garments, and it turns out, they were all Karen former refugees who had just resettled there. And so, my very first friend was the woman I wrote about my book, her name is her pseudonym in the book is Mu Naw. And through that relationship, I got to know her neighbors, some of whom most of whom were from Myanmar at the time, but several from Burundi and several from Somalia, and then kind of through that just started teaching English and we helped, several friends of mine and I started helping the women who were weavers who were staying at home, begin to sell their products. And eventually, we got to know Refugee Services of Texas, which at the time was a really small organization. They had like 15 people working there, and it has since exploded, I know they're one of the partners that works with EMM. And so it just kind of it was a sort of backdoor relational journey. I got to know something who got to know someone and through that eventually, I

think with a lot of people that this happens once you get to know refugees, that really changes your life. And for me, it has absolutely up ended my career, my plans, and so many, just like all the best, most wonderful ways.

Allison Duvall 5:15  
Absolutely.

Melissa Coulston 5:16

So it seems like from what you wrote in the book, that sort of the way that you came through this was you first got to know these folks and started to learn about their, their backgrounds and things like that and worked with them on your nonprofit, what inspired you to try to gather their stories and create it and go towards making a book out of it?

Jessica Goudeau 5:37

So I know a lot of you like, I know that a lot of you who've been working in resettlement, see a lot of these groups that start up over time, like there's a sewing project or we're gonna make jewelry and so it was we were part of that that group, there were a bunch of refugees that came over from Myanmar in a seven year period, 10 year period or so and in the very beginning, they were mostly pre-literate, and especially the women were not able to work. And so that was our goal is to create supplemental income for them. And we did. And the last artisan got a job after seven years. So we ended, we retired our nonprofit, the goal was only ever to just help the women who needed it at the time and not to kind of create some long lasting thing. I was actually getting a PhD and had small kids and my co-founder had a part time job. And so it was just one of those things that we started and it was beautiful. And it was lovely. And we closed the chapter on that with some sadness, but also a lot of joy because they were all doing incredibly well and I moved into an academic career. And then in 2015, suddenly, like out of nowhere, the rhetoric shifted so profoundly and and we talked about this a little bit before we began recording. It was the wildest thing, at first. I mean, in all of the years that I've ever worked with refugees, people from every part of the political aisle, they're all these people that always understood that refugees were people that had gone through persecution and needed just a safe place to land. And suddenly the word refugee began to be used as if it were synonymous with terrorists, as if these were people that were gaming the system somehow. And I realized, most people just don't even understand what refugee resettlement is. I hadn't when I first began this process, it was something that I learned over time. I was running a writing center at a local university here, which is just a really lovely place. I had my academic career, and just felt this deep sense of, there are very few people who can do the kind of research that I could do that I learned with my PhD and have the kind of relationships that I do. And so I saw that I could bridge this gap and had the sense that I might need to start writing about it. So I reached out to some refugee friends, and could not keep up with a number of people who wanted to tell their stories thoughtfully. And so my career began out of that, like, Can I help you? Can I serve you? What's the way that I can bring your stories to a larger audience? And started having all these publications and eventually led to this amazing book proposal with my agent who was wonderful. And we shaped it into this book that kind of landed with my dream editor. And this, this whole thing was begun process by process because of my deep sense that people just don't understand what they're talking about when they are anti-refugee.

Allison Duvall 8:20

There's so much about what you just said, and about the book that would just hit me as like, it was so true about just my experience coming into the work of refugee resettlement from Burmese women at

the local affiliate here in Lexington, Kentucky, gathering every week outside to weave together. And I would go outside and participate with them. So even those simple things I was like, Yes, that happens wherever these women, they always are weaving. It's wonderful.

Jessica Goudeau 8:46

I know!

Allison Duvall 8:47

And then that transition that you mentioned, that was just overnight, where people who...it almost felt like the same people who come every week and make donations to support refugees where I live, all of a sudden like they stopped coming. It was shocking.

Jessica Goudeau 9:03

Yeah. And I think, you know, one of the the people that I talked to early on in the very initial interviews for the book talked about the fact that refugee resettlement had not had to defend itself, right, like refugee advocates had not had to defend the state of resettlement in years because it had enjoyed such warm support for really almost four decades. And so because of that, I think there there really wasn't a structure set up for people to have to push and like do this major PR campaign to tell people "This is what it means to be a refugee," because there was already support, it was already built in, it was something that was pretty easy. And I think that's the thing people are so surprised about. And I it was really, that's for me, that was what the most rewarding part was and doing the research in the history of this book is learning that this this is actually the conversation that's been happening, these shifts have been happening over time there has been very deep anti-refugee resettlement feelings, or not resettlement but anti-refugee feelings, but you have to go back to the 1920s, to find this kind of anger and vitriol focused on one group of people. And so just kind of looking at the shifts in public opinion--I thought refugee resettlement was something that the government did that was based on people in crises. And really, it is all about how we, the American public feel about people, and how that then influences policy. And understanding that means that each of us having individual conversations with the people in our life and saying, "Listen, you don't understand what it means to be a refugee" is actually the most important work that we can do. Because as we together, collectively shape public opinion about refugees, that's the way that we can change policy. It's both really simple and incredibly complex. Right?

Kendall Martin 10:46

Absolutely. One of the things that I really loved in the way that you wove the history throughout the book between the stories and how you would talk about like the shifting American identity and so whether or not we are welcoming to refugees is all based on how we see ourselves as Americans at any point in history and I'm curious how you decided how to weave the historical element of the refugee resettlement program through the book in between the stories of the two women?

Jessica Goudeau 11:15

Well, let me say that my editor is incredibly brilliant and did a very good job of being like: you need to stop doing this. My my hardest thing is that I come to this from academia, which in some ways is a real gift. I my dissertation looked at mid 20th century poetry and rhetoric and so I did not have to do a deep dive into the history of this in ways that I think I might have if I were writing a different book. The downside of that is if you spend any time in my endnotes, if you're an endnote person, I love my endnotes and

Kendall Martin 11:43

Your endnotes are amazing!

Jessica Goudeau 11:45

Thank you! Nobody ever talks to me about that. But I have all of these like, like qualifiers, you know, like, Okay, this is this is I'm making this really simple argument, but here are some other things. But at the same time, I wanted this to be the kind of book that if you are not an expert in this, you are not just getting bogged down in all of the history. And so somebody I have a screenwriter friend who kind of helped me look at the structure of the stories. And when I realized that I could really shape the structure of the history almost like that same narrative. This is really a story of the coming of age of our country in terms of refugee resettlement. I mean, it almost feels like one of those... I know Melissa is a librarian and and so you know, that like coming of age stories of like, this hard thing happens and how you respond to it is really going to determine your character, is really a lot of what we see in literature. And I began to see that was really what is happening in history. I was reading a lot of mysteries when I was writing this book, in part because it was so heavy and so painful to me that mysteries where everything is contained, where I'd found them very comforting, like bad things happen and then the bad guy's always caught. But as I was reading a lot of PD James, I like read everything that PD James wrote, I just kind of went through this whole thing, and I really think it influenced me a little bit in that I wanted to have that sense of kind of what's going to happen next. And I wanted to do that with the history too, because I feel that way. I don't know what's going to happen next with refugee resettlement. This really like most people don't feel like it's this kind of breathtaking cliffhanger that we're at, but those of us who are in resettlement, see this is all about to stop, or it's about to thrive. And we don't know what to do with that. And so I think that I wanted to kind of capture that sense of what this this really does matter for people, but also for this entire system, right, this beautiful ecosystem that is being threatened.

Melissa Coulston 13:36

And I think that's those qualities that you're talking about are a big part of why I really really enjoyed reading this book is it was captivating and I kept wanting to read which very much is not the case with nonfiction for me. I kept being like what's gonna happen next? You know, and even though I know a lot of the history already there is still this like, I think you captured a quality of, of living history where you don't necessarily know what's coming next, as you're living it, even when, you know, we're reflecting back on how it was happening at the time. I think even with the historical parts, you did a really good job of capturing that unknown aspect of, you know, these things have been debated over and over again, throughout history. So we're really just rehashing everything again.

Jessica Goudeau 14:26

I just really want to credit my extraordinary editor in that who often I would be like, there's all this stuff and she's like, you may pick two things. These two things feel like the most important. Let's get down to the heart of this. And so having someone you know this, this book has been an extraordinary team effort, and so I get to be the person talking about it, but whether it's Mu Naw and Hasna and Amina, who is the translator, those are all their pseudonyms, who spent so much time with me telling their stories over and over and over and over and over so that I could get the kind of details that I wanted to make it feel novelistic, or my agent and editor who have just been so incredibly responsive and so very good at discerning the structure. And this is, this is not the case for most writers, most writers don't have this kind of incredible communal experience. And so I feel like so much of what I was hoping to do in this book really came about because of the efforts of so many, really, of the incredible team of women that that were involved in this from the very beginning.

Allison Duvall 15:27

A moment ago, you spoke about, like how you were reading mystery novels to kind of like, almost cope with the reality that we were all thrust into. And I wanted to comment on the fact that you said like, it is felt like we are living through history, and how powerful that is. Both reading your book helped me relive the last five years of my life in this work in a way that I was like, Whoa, that was way down in my psyche, and I pushed that down because it was so painful to experience in the moment and it kind of brought it back up. The other thing that I thought was breathtaking, and I I felt myself like sitting on the edge of my seat was knowing. As I was reading Hasna's story, I was praying and praying and praying and hoping against hope that she and her whole family made it before the ban. Like I was just like, please let the timeline work out that her family won't be separated by Trump. But it happened and I was just like, I was like, I know what's going to happen. I know where the story is going. And it was devastating. I'd love to hear about your experience of kind of working with Hasna and Amina the translator, but the difference in the two women's narratives, they're so different so I'd love to hear more about that experience.

Kendall Martin 16:36

Yeah, I mean, we're on Zoom right now and so you guys can't see but even when Alison was talking I got a little teary this still feels so incredibly present for me. And the so I there is an old quote some people attribute it to Mary Carr some other I'm not sure that exactly where the quote derives from. So if anybody knows I'm sorry to say this incorrectly, but when you talk about writing nonfiction memoirs, they talk about writing out of your scars and not your wounds. And I thought about that all the time. I'm--this is not my memoir, in many ways I was receiving and crafting two women's memoirs. And in a way that was really very sacred for me, I understood that my my role in this was to write only what they wanted to write and to keep out some things that they didn't want included. Some of that was relational, they were concerned about portraying family members in a certain way. And we're always very, very careful to respect that. And a lot of that is about identity, because I their family members are still in danger. But you're right. So Hasna comes from Syria. The story begins with her in Daraa and part of why it is structured that way is that, you know, when we Americans think about refugees, we think the journey and they get saved and everybody's great now, and that's really kind of the trope that we have used in refugee resettlement since the 1950s. There's a whole chapter about time, like it's Met Life magazine in 1957. And I was incredibly fascinated to learn how we've even begun I'm setting up these tropes about refugees. But you know, any of us who have relationships with refugees know, they had an entire life before. That journey was a very, very tiny part of them, of their life journey. And then they have an entire life after. Nobody ever refers to me as a tourist, even though I have toured all of these countries, right, like my visa category does not define me even though I love to travel. So I don't understand why we always think about refugees as if they are just encapsulated by this journey, right? And so part of what I wanted to do was show Hasna was a woman who had a home and a family that she loved, she had zero desire to leave. It is not as if Syria is this place that she's scheming to get out of. And I, you know, when we Americans often think about Syria or Yemen or other countries in which there has been this ongoing conflict, we dismiss them as if they are just places full of conflict. They're just Oh, those people do those things. And that's just all awful. And really, there was one line that she used that I haven't, I have never stopped thinking about. That the word Syria tastes like honey on her tongue. And it just like, to me the country of Syria has become precious. And part of that is because I had the chance to be with these two women Hasna and Amina. Those are again those are their pseudonyms. We met every two weeks and we took turns meeting in each other's homes. And they would, to be totally honest with often went to Hasna's house because she loves to cook and she's an

amazing cook. And so I felt like I got the absolute best end out of this if she would make me these like, ornate, incredibly delicious dinners, and I would be like, so I'm just going to interview you now. I mean, oh, so amazing. But as we did that, I would learn from her the things that were the most important. This is incredibly raw to her. This just happened. She can picture her home, she would start and say like, this is where the lemon trees were. This is where the olive trees were. This is what the jasmine smelled like. You can actually in the zoom you can see this jasmine plant behind my desk. I have jasmine in my office right now and the whole office smells like this. And there's just this incredibly beautiful memory that she would walk me through. And as she did that I cannot possibly have done this book without Amina who volunteered her time. Believe me, I tried to pay her this was a whole thing and it is. She is a Syrian American who has been here for a long time and felt like this was one of the things that she could do to help people in her country. And I don't have any other friendship quite like this one. I mean, the three of us became so connected, Hasna no way to tell stories and I would ask questions and Amina was translating in this just incredible rhythm it was it lasted several hours. And the pain of this is so raw, it is still so raw for Hasna and it still feels I feel so connected with all of it. My goal and this truly my goal for this book is for someone to read this and figure out how in the world to help Hasna's family and I don't want to give the whole thing away because I want people to read it but this is very ongoing. This is this is still right in the middle of the story. So what I'm hoping is that we can, can be the people that can help create a happy ending for this family and for so many others.

So I felt...I have highlighted, like so much of the book, it's just so beautiful. A lot of it reads like poetry to me, like you just really captured. It's just so amazing to me the ability to capture what became so visual for me like that you got through interviews, like I think that was so powerful because when I was reading it, it was like watching a movie for me. And I am a very visual person, but it was so easy to visualize, which was really powerful. And I'm curious if Hasna has read this like if you before going to publish shared the stories to see if it matched up with how they saw their stories and their lives and how that process worked.

Jessica Goudeau 21:46

Such a good question, and I'm so glad you asked because I feel like I said this in the afterword but my highest goal in this was for them to feel like I accurately represented their story. So Hasna's children are currently reading it. They did not want to read it beforehand and I actually feel a little bit nervous about it. I know it's fine. I we've talked a lot about it. But so, Amina again was incredibly helpful to me in this process. So she and I set up beta readers after the manuscript, the first draft of the manuscript was finished, but before long before it was due to my editor. And so I did this with three different groups. I had the beta readers for the Karen story for Mu Naw. Mu Naw's English, while incredible, she would be the first one to say is probably not up to understanding the full story. And so I gave it to her and to her children. And I know all of you have had that experience too of like the odd position that teenagers get into where they're both translator and cultural bridge for their families. I have known these kids since they were five and two, they feel like cousins to my kids. And so one of the most precious moments was sitting down with her and with her kids and listening to them talk to each other and saying, I didn't know this about the story. So for me, like, nobody's ever going to hear that. I've actually tried to get them to come on radio or something with me to talk about it and they don't want to, which is fine. I really want to respect this. I would love for them to be included in this conversation. And because that's the choice that they've made, which I absolutely understand and respect. We're not doing that. But for the I had some resettlement people that I knew from RST and from iACT, which is the interfaith group here in Austin. And then Hasna is not able to read English. So she speaks a little bit of English but not much. She has a family that speaks to her. Some of her kids speak more the ones that ended up in a

different location. I don't want to give all the details away, but they were able to read some of it. But really, it was Amina and her friends who did a very deep dive into that and many of them are, they were two other women, one of whom is a Syrian American and one is married to a Syrian American man and they were able to give me some incredible feedback like, this is not the food that we would have eaten. You said this incorrectly. At one point you use this word and I really wish you hadn't. And it was so helpful. So I've said from the very beginning, all the mistakes in here are mine. I've never been to Syria. And so because of that I spent so much time like we spent an entire day talking about how the trash was taken out in Daraa like, was it taken? Was there a curb? Did you take it to the curb? What would it look like if there were trash people that came by and they're just all these like, wild details that eventually Mu Naw and Hasna got so good at telling me like, "Okay, so you're asking about this, I walked into a room, here's what I smelled. Here's what I did with my towel. The towel was pink. Here's what my coffee cup look like." Like these kinds of details. They finally got used to me just asking like the weirdest questions, but also sometimes asking a question like what did the coffee cup feel like? What did it look like? Where did you get that coffee cup? Would lead to these amazing stories. There's so much more about Hasna's story that I can't share or that had to end up being cut because it was long enough that I wish I could and she is worthy of like seven volumes. That is there's just so much richness there.

Melissa Coulston 24:59

So I'm interested to know more about that interview process. Did you decide to go that route yourself? Was it sort of led by them? I think the reason I'm asking is because everything is so so vivid, like Kendall was saying, like, I could picture it just instantly, even though I've never been to either of these places. You did such a good job of describing them. That I, you know, I don't know that it would necessarily occur to many writers to ask those questions. So is that something that comes from your background? Is that something like lead that you took from your your subjects?

Jessica Goudeau 25:33

Yeah, such a good question. I think there are three answers to that. One is because of my relationships, especially with Mu Naw in the beginning, but quickly with Hasna, too, I began to see what mattered to them what they really cared about. I think that there's something about this that feels particularly woman based. I don't want to be mys- I mean, I don't want to be like anti-male, but there is something about being a woman who has encountered other women. Mu Naw and I would bring our babies together and share the fact that we like had these young kids together. And there's something about that that gave us the kind of relationship where I knew, like the kind of clothes that she liked to pick out for her kids. And just the kind of things that like I don't think about, and I'm not sure that most again, there are sure some men who would think about this, but it just felt like a very different way of relating to each other. And so because of that, that was kind of my entry points with both of these women. I'm a mom, you're a mom, I'm a person who loves to cook, you love to cook. And so it gave us kind of that shared point of connection. And from that we begin to ask some of those questions, especially as I was getting to know Hasna. Some of this is because I have a PhD. My favorite book when I was writing my dissertation was *White Women Writing White*, about all the problematic ways that white poets have taken on the stories of other people. And so I am so deeply aware of the problems that come when white people impose a particular story and I will not but could name the the people that have done this to refugee stories and other immigrant stories and just kind of like this is an inspirational heartwarming tale. And that's that's not I mean, maybe it is. But that's not always the the thing that that refugees I think themselves would share, right? My greatest goal would be to put this in conversation with the work of Kao Kalia Yang and Dina Nayeri and Viet Thanh Nguyen and some of these other extraordinary former refugee writers who are doing exactly the work that they should be doing of leading these

conversations. My role was a very, very small role. There's only a tiny niche in which I could enter and that was telling the story of people who otherwise would not want their story, but otherwise will not be able to tell their story. So because of that I had this like, what I felt like is a very, very narrow lane, and I wanted to do that as well as I could. And finally, I think it's because I'm not a journalist and I kind of overshoot. Like I was so worried about making sure that I did this correctly. That and I'm glad I mean, of course I'm glad for it. I think it ended up working out but I think in doing this, I typed up every transcript for every interview for a long time until my hands just absolutely fell apart. And I decided I should stop doing that. And then I started asking journalist friends, like, do you do that? And they were like, no, maybe you should stop. At some point, I think this is because this is not my field. And I was looking to people like Svetlana Alexievich and Wendy Perlman, and others who have done these really beautiful oral histories. And I wanted to take those methods, but do it in a way that resonated for me. I have a PhD in poetry and writing nonfiction, but actually the thing I love the most are novels. And I think it's funny because I don't actually want to, I don't want to study those because I love them too much. And so I think what I ended up doing was writing a book that felt like the kind of book I wanted to read, which is a page turner. That's the kind of stuff that I really enjoy.

Allison Duvall 28:47

It definitely was a page turner, as I'm thinking about so many different things have been wrapped up in the conversation that we we're having right now in the book, the book itself, so I guess a few of the threads, I want to try to weave together I don't know if a clear question will come. But one is, as you noted in this conversation, and in the book, how refugee resettlement has really come in reaction to American public opinion. So that's one thread. There's like the public opinion issue. Another thing from my experience working in the field has been that before the election of 2016, there was a lot of energy in the refugee advocacy space, to improve the program, to speak about the actual, the downsides of the way that the program is structured and the ways that we needed to improve it, but all of a sudden, we were under such assault rhetorically. We couldn't even speak openly or honestly about where the program fails and where the program needs to get better because we were just wearing our armor and we couldn't we could not dare to say a negative thing about this thing that was under attack. So those are the threads I'm holding together like American public opinion, resettlement follows that. There are issues with the program. The program needs to be improved. I'd love to hear from your your perspective, from learning from these women. Where do you think the refugee resettlement program needs to grow, needs to change, needs to improve? Yeah, I just be so interested to hear your thoughts.

Jessica Goudeau 30:15

There were so many good thoughts in that! Okay. So let me let me let me back up and say a couple of things. I'll come to this from a rhetorical point of view. There's a book by Dina Nayeri called *The Ungrateful Refugee*. If you have not read it, you absolutely need to read it.

Allison Duvall 30:29

We interviewed her on this podcast!

Jessica Goudeau 30:31

Oh good! I love Dina so much. Her work is so amazing. Okay. So starting with Dina, and if your listeners have not read it, go get it immediately. That is the kind of book that I think should be at the forefront of these conversations. Right. In 2015, I would have held up a book like Dina's, it wasn't published then but a book like that and said, these are the kind of books that you should read. When the rhetoric changed. And Dina and I have talked about this. We've emailed about this. I interviewed her

last year for Guernica. Can we have another event that we're going to be doing together which I am, like, so incredibly excited about. But when we talked about it, I said I don't. I think that your book is the kind of conversation that we need to have. We need to have more complex language around what it means to be a refugee. We don't need to think in terms of these binaries of newcomer versus native born. And those are her terms that are so beautifully put out. What has happened, however, is in the last five years, we have moved the conversation back so problematically, that what we're ending up having to do is exactly what you said, put our defenses up. We're now starting back at square one, these people need safety, they are deserving of it. What I ended up writing is what I think is kind of a 101 book and some in some ways, I'm hoping that it's a bit more complex than that, but I would not have picked a 101 book because I would not have picked this time in history in which we were having these kind of 101 conversations. Does that make sense? And so because of that I...

Allison Duvall 31:56

We are having arguments about the basic humanity of people like that's what's so perverse about the moment we're in.

Jessica Goudeau 32:01

Yes. And I like one of my soap boxes is that the word humanize is a terrible verb, I hate the word humanize. We should not have to even use it. Um, it is used a lot to describe work that like the this article really humanized this experience or this book is a humanizing book and I, I don't fault people who use it, but I think we should not ever have to use it, right? And so because of that, I think you guys are doing such an incredibly difficult job of having to care for people in a program that is crumbling, while also recognizing that it is, in fact, a flawed program. I ended up writing a pretty glowing like not a review of it like, this is a review of a federal program, but a glowing history of it. And I did that in part because this isn't the time for us to have conversations in which we're like, and it's all falling apart! Because all that would do is just make people turn on it more. Right? I do think that there are things that the refugee resettlement program can probably do better. I have a lot of critiques about camps in general. So I think if we're going to pull this back, I mean, you asked me and I am a little bit hesitant to talk about it, because I'm not a policy person. But I'll just say like my own personal opinion. I wish that we resettled significantly more people, I wish that the support that they got was significantly higher. I wish that you guys had a whole lot more funding to do the amazing work that you're doing because you're teaching English classes and helping people fill out forms and doing all of this incredibly complicated stuff. And I mean, I would be shocked if any of you made a living wage for the work that you do much less the work that will be done if this program ends up revamping. I think that there needs to be significantly better rhetoric or not rhetoric, I think there needs to be a huge public push, like a PR campaign of some sort. And I know that several groups are doing this kind of thing, but I think it needs to be done on a large scale. And I think we need to absolutely rethink the way that camps have been formed since after the Holocaust, so the Holocaust when the Holocaust started, they use the same concentration camps to put refugees in. And UNHCR has done that work since then. And I, this is not really a critique of UNHCR. I think everybody's doing the best that they can in complicated times with, uh, with what they have available to them. But I just think it's really, these are really difficult things. And so I learned from amazing experts that these are some points at which we could possibly change. But again, I'm not a policy person. So I feel some hesitancy of critiquing that. I feel like for me, it's like my critiques are very large scale. They are not on a small scale. I have never met anyone, any caseworker that is not just doing the work of 1000 people. And so I think the the work that you guys do is extraordinary, and I wish that you had better infrastructure and support at a very large scale.

Allison Duvall 34:55

Thanks for that answer. And I think there's there's hesitancy even amongst those of us in the system, the resettlement program system that know the warts. We are hesitant to even name them because of the world that we're in right now. So yeah, I just, I appreciate so much hearing your third party perspective, and the hesitancy because I think we all feel it.

Jessica Goudeau 35:14

There's a scene in the very beginning of the book where Mu Naw is left alone over the weekend. And first of all, that is not something that is normally the case for Refugee Services of Texas and I have a footnote, but I want to make sure that everybody knows that like RST does an amazing job. But also I feel like it is actually the kind of thing that is easy to happen when growth happens at a different scale than infrastructure is setup for. So if the infrastructure is destroyed, which it is currently being destroyed by the Trump administration, and then a group of refugees come in, which could possibly happen. I mean, theoretically, if Biden is elected and the resettlement program jumps up to 125,000, which is what he has said, will the infrastructure be there for us to receive all of these refugees and I think people just don't understand that this is a really complicated dance that resettlement people are involved in like, they really want to help refugees. Refugees really need the help. Resettlement caseworkers end up being blamed all the time because they're at the front lines. And so most refugees that I talked to don't have the best things to say about their caseworkers, but then you talk to the caseworkers and they're like I just, I just needed to take like to sleep for like four hours. I mean, just the work that they are doing is so amazing. And so part of what I was hoping to show is, there is really attention if we are not creating the infrastructure on one side, and bringing over the people who need it on the other end, when that balance is out of whack, which is very, very clearly is right now, even as it regrows, this is going to be really difficult, there's no way that it's going to be done perfectly. And I think I want to make sure that I say that this is not the fault of resettlement agencies. This is something that they are constantly trying to do the best they can with very little budget while you're also fundraising and shifting to trafficking and talking about these other issues. And trying to work out everything that you can in the middle of this very complicated political season.

Allison Duvall 37:05

Thank you for that. Yes.

Melissa Coulston 37:07

So I would love to hear what you have to say about how you approach advocacy because this is sort of an advocating book, right? Like you, you've positioned it in that way where you're not just explaining it, but you're trying to push for a certain result. So how do you understand your role in advocacy? How do you do that? How has that changed for you? What keeps you going in times like these?

Jessica Goudeau 37:31

Oh, that's such a good question. Okay, so I view this book, definitely as nonfiction, but really as a narrative argument. So y'all are asking the best question, so I get to talk about all the stuff from my background. Thank you. I used to teach rhetoric and that for me, while I will talk about this mostly as a nonfiction book, this is a narrative argument. And so I used to teach students how to write a narrative argument versus you know, these other kinds of arguments and I realized that this whole thing is a ong narrative argument. This is definitely not a neutral, non opinion based book just showing some stories. This is something that is clearly advocating for a particular position. And and what surprised me in doing that, as I thought that--so I grew up in a conservative town in Texas, and I live in Austin, Texas, which is

like the least conservative place that you can find in Texas. I really run the gamut personally in terms of the political spectrum and family members and friends and all of that. And I started off thinking that I was writing a book that would probably look a little bit like my life does, and instead, I have become significantly more centrist and writing this book. This book has made me more bipartisan than I thought I would be. I admire George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan's refugee resettlement policies. I may not agree with everything in their presidencies. But at this point, I think we're at the point where we need to start looking at people not just in terms of like, Are they good or are they bad? and these kind of binary terms, but really looking at, there are some things that I disagree with currently about this politician, but boy, I really love this issue and I appreciate their view on that. And I have come to the point where I am looking back and thinking like this entire we are at a point in our history where we are so polarized that we are literally not able to talk about the most basic thing like: can people be safe? Can we offer them safety, we who are quarantined for the most part, I'm sure most people listening to this in safe homes and finding, you know, like, it's it's hard for us, but the hard stuff is often like our kids are bored, you know, like some of us are losing jobs, but it's not like my home was bombed. Right? And so we're having these conversations in which we are not recognizing that the most basic thing that we need to offer to people is safety and a haven. And looking back on that I had such nostalgia and was so surprised to find that that the the time in which people were able to have good conversations with one another. This passed in the Senate in 1980 the Refugee Resettlement Act, the Refugee Act of 1980 passed unanimously in the Senate. And I just almost can't imagine that at this point, and it felt, I felt so nostalgic to return to a time when people had reasonable conversations with each other about shared values. And I think when I come down to it, the argument that I want to make is both about the safety of people. And also, we need to come to a point where we can have good conversations about real things. And I feel like that is what I'm hoping, I don't want this to be the kind of book that is only preaching to the choir. I want this to be the kind of book that I can give. I literally have given it to my neighbors who have very different political opinions than me and they are reading it right now. And it is making me very nervous because this has very personal stakes for me, like, when I walk my dog, are they gonna say hi to me? Are they gonna think I'm terrible? And I think that's the kind of stuff that I it really matters to me on a very personal level. Like if I wrote this book so that my neighbor thinks--you know, refugees really aren't that bad. I may be wrong about that. It will have been a massive success in my eyes, right. And so that's, that's the thing that I'm really hoping that people can do it. When I think about the argument that I want people to make, I want people to be able to hand this to relatives and say, here, read this and meet these women, learn to love them, understand a little bit about the history of where we've been. And then let's talk about this. And I think that's the kind of thing I could not have asked for. Anything more than that, if that's if that is what ends up coming out of this.

Kendall Martin 41:22

I am curious, though, since I know this is sort of a turn away from what you had been doing in your career, sort of like what, where you're seeing yourself if it's writing more nonfiction, or if it's..

Jessica Goudeau 41:36

Yeah, I, I had a conversation the other day with an academic that I had never met at a prestigious school who called me to talk about doing some things that maybe I can talk about at some point. And he asked me, so basically, you've left academia right? And it was such a great question, because if you're not an academic, you don't understand I don't think. I didn't recognize how people didn't get this. I'm married to someone who's decided not an academic and so he is very, like he's always like, what what do you mean? When I left to, I was in a writing center job. So I was not a tenured, I was already not on the tenured faculty market. And at one point played with that, but then, for me, this just felt too compelling

a journey to take. It was a very, very risky career move for me to be like, I think I'm gonna write about this thing. This is the first time the last couple of weeks in which I'm kind of finally seeing the fruits of that and it has been so incredibly wonderful to have conversations with people and see that maybe this paid off for me. It feels a bit like a sacrifice of that career, but also a move into a significantly more rewarding one. So at some point, I hope to teach and I hope that I can do some of those things but I just can't have a traditional academic English professor career anymore. That is not that may not have ever been something that I was able to do it, I may just not I may just not be wired that way. And in part academia has changed so much that there aren't those kinds of jobs anymore. And in part, it just feels like all of us who can do something, should. I have used the analogy a lot that my grandmother used to talk about having a war garden when she was when it was like the war in the 1940s. And like, that was her part. She just did her thing. And she had a they called it I think, a liberty garden. And she would like raise vegetables and like, this is my part. I don't know what this is going to look like next. I'm not quite sure exactly what is going it's going to happen. I am definitely going to be writing more nonfiction. I'm I'm working on some projects now I can't talk about but I'm like, incredibly, incredibly excited about. So this is definitely the path that I'm going towards. It's not at all the path that I thought I would be on. And it feels like the thing that I can do, you know, like, the things have changed so significantly, not just in terms of this pandemic, not just in terms of the reckoning that we're having with our country's views on race that have been so deeply embedded in our DNA for the last 400 years, I mean, all of this is connected, right? And we're recognizing as this pandemic goes, how it's affecting vulnerable people. And we're recognizing what this means I'm hoping that we take this connection in a larger way, and not just in the United States. But recognizing that this happened, this connects with people around the world. And so I think that that's the, when I think about my work, the work that I'm doing now that I want to do, it's dismantling our cultural narratives, the kind of lies that we tell ourselves and replacing them with truer stories. So that's what I'm hoping that this does, like this is the story that we've told ourselves about refugee resettlement is a fiction and I'm hoping to replace it with as close as I can get to the truth, as well as the work of so many other amazing writers who have been doing this and writing about their own feelings and experiences for a long time.

Allison Duvall 44:48

Something you just said that was so powerful was like any of us who can do something should be doing something. And one thing that Kendall and I, our colleagues who work in advocacy, often come up against is people who either don't think that they have anything to offer within this larger, like, what can I do? Or they almost feel like "Well, my members of Congress already agree with my stance on the issue. Like, what can I possibly do?" You know, so I'd love to hear you reflect like, not everyone, certainly not me, like, I'm not going to be able to ever go out write a book.

Right? But what what kind of words of wisdom can you give to our listeners who might be wondering like, well I hear Jessica say like, if we can do something we should like, What? What can people do? How do they start?

Jessica Goudeau 45:36

So, I mean, this people ask me this all the time.

Allison Duvall 45:38

Well and they should buy and read your book.

Jessica Goudeau 45:41

So not being obnoxious about that I of course, I want people to buy and read my book, but not because it benefits me. I would do anything in my power and have done I had some really awkward things that I have done and I'm not going to talk about them publicly. But like some situations this week where I'm like, this is a weird conversation to have with someone but I'm going to do it anyway because I will do anything on behalf of Mu Naw and Hasna. And so all of us who are in relationship with refugees feel this way. And I feel like that compulsion is that paying attention to that compulsion. I don't know what I can do, but I really want to do something is the initial place for everything that has happened in my life in relation to refugees. I did things incredibly poorly, incredibly poorly in the beginning. I we were trying, I was talking with some friends who were there in the early days of our nonprofit about the poor choices that we made, and there are so many things that I did wrong, like making assumptions about people's experiences. At one point, there was this conversation that I had with Mu Naw when she was learning about, she was learning English, her English took off so fast, but as she was learning English, she said, I asked her about her family background, and she said the word boom, and I assumed that her dad had been killed by landmine and then like three years later, she's like, here's a picture of my dad. And I was like, wait, I thought he died. And I had written some blog posts that I was about to post in which I talked about the fact that maybe her dad had died and she was like, What are you talking about? Just the assumptions that I made, I am the first person to say like I did some really poor stuff. I think that if you come into these conversations, really wanting to learn, that's the first start, right? The second thing is, you cannot underestimate the power of personal connection to change the minds of large groups of people. And I think that's the thing that I really keep coming back to. The first history chapter start that I use starts with a phrase "a profound public awakening". And my question was, when I turned the manuscript in last May, how in the world are we going to get to the point where our country is having a profound public awakening? Fast forward, pandemic: this amazing moment like this difficult, complicated, tumultuous, tumultuous, but also rich moment in which we're unearthing who we are as a nation. There are so many conversations happening around us that were not happening a year ago, and it is all part and parcel of the same thing, our country is built on a lie. It is an unjust lie, we need to do our part to change those conversations. And while we're at it, make sure that you understand who oppressed people are by listening to them in their own voices. So for me, my book is a part of that conversation. I really want, Mu Naw's and Hasna's voices to stand through. I know that a lot of people are not like, I love spicy food. I love going to places and learning from people. I know that that is not everybody's jam. And a lot of times people say to me, I could never do that. I'm hoping that this book is an opportunity to really encounter and engage and immerse yourself into the world of people that you might not be able to have that same kind of conversation with in real life. And to learn some things in a way that is, it's not putting our former refugee friends in the awkward position of having to explain why they need safety, but instead is saying listen to these stories, understand and read the history, and then you can begin to learn some of that without having to make them do that hard work of arguing for themselves, which is such an incredibly painful place for them to be. They then have to hold up their children and say please save my children, like what an what an awful position we have put former refugees in in so many ways around the world. And so what I'm hoping that this book does is I'm hoping that's the kind of book that people can read and I definitely hoping that hoping that it is given to awkward uncles at Christmas and that it is the kind of book that is

Allison Duvall 49:27  
I'll give it to my father.

Jessica Goudeau 49:29

Right? ...is being put in the hands of people that are like what are you doing? What do you mean refugees? This is you don't understand. And I'm hoping that it can be the kind of book that can change hearts and minds. Not because I want people to you know, read my my work. This is what when I think Melissa asked me earlier about being an advocate like I could talk about this all day long. My life has been changed by understanding what people have gone through, the privilege that I have, and doing everything in my power to to do what I can and I think what you can do is going to look really different for most people. So even if it's just giving this as a gift, along with so many other works by former refugee writers like that's the kind of stuff and make it make your Christmas list a book, I have a whole list for further reading in the back of my book. And there are so many amazing books that are coming out now. So go through that and buy one for everybody and make sure that you are privileging the work of people who are former refugees themselves, right? So I feel like that's the kind of stuff that it really does help change hearts and minds. My life was changed. I am someone who has been convinced and I'm now in a very different place than I was when I was younger. And so I think I've seen this happen to so many people. So to me, it really feels worth it.

Kendall Martin 50:37

I love that I think stories are like a fundamental part of how we change the narrative and how people understand and I don't think there's a way that someone could read your book or any of the books that we've mentioned and not see yourself and these people's stories like we all have that connection to family or to place or to smells or which makes me think so when we started this podcast three seasons ago, and the whole reason I was named Hometown is because we were thinking and talking a lot about what home means. And what are the commonalities about how people respond to the word "home" regardless of where they come from, or what situation they fit in. So I'd love to ask you what home means to you.

Jessica Goudeau 51:21

Okay, first of all, what you said about that, I love that so much. There's a scene where Hasna like the army's moving in and Hasna's like, you know, what I need to do is fill my freezer. I would she said that I was like, Are you kidding me? I kept pushing back on her, like, you didn't go to safety? She's like, "No, no, I wanted to make everything so that we had all the food that we needed." My mom used to have one of those deep freezers. I literally remember being a child in Tennessee and my mom was like, you know, the power might go out. I'm gonna fill the freezer. It just like putting out like putting this ice around it like so. So many examples are exactly the kind of thing that I would have done. Like there's just this deep connection you have when you you begin to meet people and you think like that is exactly like my mom or my friend or me I would have done the same thing you know like school pickup I was doing a lot of this writing during school pickup times and Hasna was talking about going and picking up her daughter after a bombing and I just pictured the women you know you like start to I don't know if you're in the school pickup line you like know the cars you know, the person that cuts in line all the time is like a little selfish about it. And I mean, back when we our kids weren't our school wasn't on computers. And so like, it's that kind of stuff that I just thought like, she recognized people that she knew because she would see him every day when she walked up to the school like, these are just people. I you know, when I think about home, it's such a great question. For me, I often at night when I go to sleep, think about the fact that my kids are here I kind of like part of what helps me go to sleep is that my kids are here and that they're safe and that my husband is here and I kind of can picture us in this little closed cave and everybody's here and secure and safe. And I, I really I. So to be totally honest, I try often not to do this, but you ask someone to tell you that I had a lot of dreams while I was doing this interview process and there was a, there was a moment that Hasna talks about. There are

some difficult, they're very, very difficult things that happened to her. Not all of them happened to her, but the white phosphorus bombs was particularly horrifying to her. And I feel like I still get goosebumps when we talk about it. I had dreams for a very long time when she would talk about it. And then I would do research because I didn't I was not an expert in white phosphorus bombs. And this is being used on children. And it I don't want to be too graphic but it literally like peels the skin away and is just like of all the horrible ways to die is one of the most horrible and it was happening in Daraa at the time and she just had this fear that her home would not be the thing that protected her and so part of what has made the process of writing this book so poignant for me is that this idea of the safe place like we're in a pandemic and I can have my my babies here and everybody can be safe and we can kind of protect ourselves but that is not something that is available to most refugees and it is the fact that the these wars came to their homes, that this is something that became so deeply personal and then that we would deny them the chance to have, not a better home, just even just like the most reasonably decent one one that is conflict-free, one that is safe. For me, that's the thing that I always picture. I am so glad that the they were just dreams for me that I would wake up with a white phosphorus missile dream like I would wake up and think in the middle of the night these are coming for me and they're not they would never come they will never come to my home in Austin, Texas. And the fact that it is something that happens to people that I love makes me so compelled to just argue: we need to begin at the very most basic level of offering home to people who need it. And after that we can have all of these other conversations about how to do it better. And what that looks like.

Allison Duvall 55:05

This has been one of the most meaningful conversations I've ever been privileged to be part of. Thank you so much for for your time, for the book, for your work, for being with us for a whole hour. It's just been such a pleasure. We're so grateful.

Jessica Goudeau 55:21

You guys, this is one of the best conversations I've had. And in part, I think it's because this is not a conversation about a book. This is these are people, these are people that we know and that we love, and this is work that has changed all of us. And I know a lot of your listeners are in that same position. This is something that is, you know, refugees are people that you connect with and love and become friends with in such a meaningful way. And so I'm so incredibly glad that you invited me to have this conversation. It's meant a lot to me. Thank you.

Kendall Martin 55:54

I don't know about you two, but I left that interview feeling really energized and excited about all the opportunities that we have to lift up these stories of our newest neighbors and all the ways that we can be working to change hearts and minds.

Allison Duvall 56:07

I did too. And I also just, I appreciated that because Jessica's been involved in welcoming refugees for so long, I feel like we were able to have a really deep and at times, painful and powerful discussion about the work and what it has felt like to be to be engaging in the work at all different levels from the local up to the national level. So yeah, it was just one of the most enjoyable and meaningful conversations I've had in a long time

Melissa Coulston 56:35

After the Last Border would make a great book discussion for any group you've got either at a church or with your friends, so make sure to check out the Partners in Welcome book discussion guides on [episcopalmigrationministries.org](http://episcopalmigrationministries.org). After the Last Border will be on there soon. And there are four others available right now that you can take a look at and use with your groups. These guides are comprehensive and make it easy and fun to host virtual book club.

Kendall Martin 57:01

Be sure to follow EMM on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where we are EMMrefugees.

Allison Duvall 57:07

And we'd invite all of you to consider making a gift to support the ministry of welcome of Episcopal Migration Ministries and our local affiliates. No gift is too small and all gifts are put to use to welcome our newest neighbors and to support refugees, asylum seekers, and others who are coming to this country. Visit [episcopalmigrationministries.org/give](http://episcopalmigrationministries.org/give) or text "Hometown" to 91999 to make your gift today,

Kendall Martin 57:32

Our theme song composer is Abraham Mwindi Ikando. Find his music at [abrahammwindi.bandcamp.com](http://abrahammwindi.bandcamp.com).

Allison Duvall 57:38

Until next time, peace be with you had all those you consider home.