



Refugees in Lincoln Gather for Book Reading with Nationally Known Author
“What We Remember will be Saved: A Story of Refugees and the Things They Carry”
CSS Dinner with author Stephanie Saldaña

NEWS RELEASE

For more information contact:
Katie Patrick, Executive Director
(402) 327-6223
kpatrick@csshope.org
Kathryn Kruger
(402) 405-3952
kathrynbriggerkruger@gmail.com

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Lincoln, NE – On October 18, 2024, Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska (CSS) welcomed author Stephanie Saldaña to Lincoln for a dinner with around 40 local Syrian, Iraqi, and Yazidi refugees and as part of a tour across the United States for Saldaña’s most recent book, *What We Remember Will Be Saved: A Story of Refugees and the Things They Carry* (2023).

The evening was catered by Nor Gazalah, a Syrian refugee to Lincoln and co-owner of Al Nor Market (850 N 27th Street). The music was provided by Hasan Khalil and Zeyad Saz of Golden Studio (Happy Tunes Band) who played traditional Middle Eastern music and led singing and dancing for the community in attendance. Similarly, artworks from Syrian refugees hung on the walls of CSS as curated by Echo Collective (Empowering Communities through Her Opportunities), a Lincoln nonprofit led by Kelly Ross.

Saldaña, fluent in Arabic, shared stories from her book; showed pictures of some of the refugees she has met from around the world; and led lively discussion amongst refugees in attendance who shared similar stories of wedding attire and textiles, Syrian and Iraqi food recipes, memories of traditional songs and instruments, and memories that they have preserved about their homelands and their journeys to Nebraska.

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Saldaña's book, *What We Remember Will Be Saved*, is a collection of stories refugees have entrusted to her. The book jacket poignantly reads, "Eggplant seeds, a lullaby in a vanishing language, an embroidered dress. When people flee their homes, the things they save speak of beauty and suffering and the indomitable spirit." The book is the winner of the 2024 Religion News Association's "Excellence in Religion Reporting" category; and is the winner of the 2024 Christopher Award in the category for Books for Adults.

"So often the work that Catholic Social Services offers is in the moment of crisis: housing, food, shelter. It was a beautiful change to be able to offer an evening of hospitality and friendship, music and dancing, food and abundance for our refugee neighbors," Katie Patrick, Executive Director of CSS, said in advance of the dinner.

As guests arrived, Saldaña offered a special message which was printed in Arabic on a bookmark for each of the invitees:

"Hospitality is at the heart of who we are as people. We welcome. We connect. And we are changed by those we meet. I know that I will be changed by this meeting with you. In my years of traveling in the Middle East, I have learned the beauty of storytelling. The power of music. The importance of family. And the courage of starting over in new places. I have learned that we carry our stories and our cities with us wherever we go. I'm so excited to speak and learn with you about the power of storytelling. Thank you for the gift of who you are, and the stories you share with us."

Guests of the evening reported that they were grateful for the sense of community, hospitality, and care that CSS helped to provide upon arriving to Lincoln; and they further offered their enthusiasm about the opportunity to share their own stories with other refugees, CSS employees, and with Saldaña who often writes about the refugees she meets from around the world. Khalil, a resident of Lincoln and born in the Mount Sinjar region of Iraq, said of the

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evening: “As a musician whose purpose is to bring people together, this was an inspiring and emotional night for me. I witnessed many different Middle Eastern ethnic groups – diverse in many ways – finding common ground through personal stories, singing, dancing, sharing food, and discovering connections and understanding in each other.”

Each family in attendance received a complimentary signed copy of Saldaña’s book, courtesy of CSS. Today, there are more than 100 million refugees and internally displaced persons around the world. Lincoln is home to more than 30,000 refugees and immigrants from approximately 150 different countries. Nebraska has a long history of resettling refugees: in 2016, for example, at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, Nebraska resettled more refugees per capita than any other state in the U.S.

Saldaña is a journalist and religion scholar from San Antonio, Texas, who has spent most of the last twenty years living in the Middle East. Saldaña studied religion at Harvard Divinity School and is the author of *A Country Between* and *The Bread of Angels*, hailed by Geraldine Brooks as “a remarkable, wise, and lovely book.” Her work has been published in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *America Magazine*, and *Plough*, and she has been featured on National Public Radio. Saldaña and her family split their time between Bethlehem and France.

For more information about volunteering at CSS in the refugee program, please visit CSSHope.org.

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IMAGES AVAILABLE AT csshope.org/gallery