

Highland Park Family Pays it Forward

The timing couldn't have been better.

When Jill Holden was in Highland Park over the holidays dealing with her late mother Zita Holden's condominium sale and clean-out of the unit, she was perplexed trying to deal with a home full of exquisite midcentury furnishings that meant so much to the ebullient Zita.

"It seemed a shame to simply try to sell this quality furniture to the highest bidder," Jill recalled. "My siblings and I wanted to honor our mother in a way that elevated her memory."

That was when Jill's cousin and North Shore Congregation Israel member Karen Yellen Dillon told her about NSCI's RefugeeOne program and Refugee Resettlement Project. It so happened that NSCI was resettling a Burmese Muslim family with two young sons who had fled their native Myanmar due to violence, ethnic cleansing and mass executions.

The family had been living in a refugee camp for several years but was now being brought over, arriving in Chicago on January 8. And now, the sturdy furniture that had so enriched Zita Holden's home was about to get a new lease on life.

Greeting the refugee family in their new home was a dining room set that included leaves and padding and could seat up to 12, with six matching chairs; a credenza to hold dishes; a leather couch for the living room; a bedroom dresser; and a pair of lamps. All of it was in superb condition.

The furniture gift brought Zita's life full circle following her death at 90 on January 26, 2019.

In fact, Zita's own parents had migrated to the United States on a ship in the 1920s and were long settled once the calls came to take in family survivors as refugees in the late Forties and early Fifties.

"When I was a little girl in the 1950s, my world was filled with refugees," Jill recalled. "My grandparents took everybody in and helped them find a path following the war. In my family, we had Polish and Russian refugees who had made it to Chicago and lived with my mother and her parents. It was only the

few who had survived the Holocaust. Then in the 90's our cousins, who for years were trapped behind the Iron Curtain, made it out of Soviet Russia and needed to start a whole new life. We come from a long line of immigrants and refugees."

In paying it forward, Zita continued the tradition of giving that had been a hallmark of her life.

"My mother would have been so pleased," her daughter believes. "And now, I really wish this lovely Burmese family a happy and healthy life in America. My siblings and I welcome them and hope they get as much enjoyment out of this furniture as we did. I thank RefugeeOne, NSCI and my cousin Karen for letting us share this gift."

- Ray Richmond