



December 2025

NEWSLETTER



Photo credit: Ron Charles

Rainbow Haven Safe House Opens in Kenya, Providing Refuge for LGBTQI+ Asylum Seekers

A project that began with a small meeting in a church hall one year ago has now become a lifeline for LGBTQI+ refugees in Kenya.

After months of fundraising and coordination, members of Christ Church Cathedral in Victoria have opened the Kenya Rainbow Haven safe house, offering secure accommodation to eight refugees fleeing violence and persecution.

The initiative was made possible through a partnership with Upper Rift Minorities (URM), a Kenyan non-governmental organization that has supported marginalized groups for more than a decade. URM founder Brian Okollan, known for his advocacy and frontline work with asylum seekers, says the impact of even modest support can be transformative. "A bed in a safe home, two meals a day, and help navigating the registration process can change the entire trajectory of someone's life," Okollan said. "The refugee journey is unpredictable, and refugees are both incredibly fragile and profoundly resilient."

URM was responsible for vetting applicants for the safe house. To qualify, residents must have fled their home countries and be registered with the United Nations Human Rights Council as asylum seekers awaiting permanent resettlement. Candidates were selected based on vulnerability, urgency, and the likelihood that stable housing would improve their asylum outcomes.

Residents of the new safe house described harrowing journeys from their home countries to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in northwestern Kenya, where LGBTQI+ individuals face widespread violence and discrimination.

One resident from Rwanda, who asked not to be named for safety reasons, compared life at Kakuma to living through “a dark night.” She reported multiple suicide attempts, repeated sexual assaults, and a two-week jail detention after defending herself from an attacker. Her situation began to change when she met a social worker familiar with URM’s partnership with Rainbow Haven. Skeptical at first, fearing the safe house offer was a trap, she eventually confirmed its legitimacy through another resident. “Now I’m in a stable, safe environment,” she said. “I can finally track my UNHRC registration without fear or chaos.”

Another resident, a university graduate with a master’s degree, said his journey was defined by “fear, danger, and the hope of finally finding safety.” He fled after repeated threats linked to his identity, crossing into Kenya only after resisting coercion from a border officer. Life at Kakuma quickly deteriorated, forcing him into hiding until he learned of Rainbow Haven. “For the first time in years, I feel safe,” he said. “Here, I can breathe, I can rest, and I can hope again.”

According to Anthony Danda, a member of the Christ Church Cathedral committee overseeing the project, the safe house offers more than immediate security. “It improves the success of asylum applications and restores hope and dignity to people who have faced unimaginable hardship,” he said. The program also aims to support residents in pursuing employment or income-generating activities while they await permanent resettlement.

Please consider helping us sustain this work by setting up a recurring monthly donation.

Donate

Rainbow Haven is Growing!

We’re excited to share a major milestone for Rainbow Haven: we’ve expanded to include a new safe house in Kenya, joining our original location in Dakar. As our network grows, so does our commitment to supporting LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers with safe, dignified housing and support.

A Stronger Structure for a Growing Network

To support this expansion, we’ve introduced a new governance model. Rainbow Haven now includes:

- **Rainbow Haven Central** — raising awareness and providing administrative support.
- **Rainbow Haven Locals** — community groups that fund and oversee one safe house each.

Rainbow Haven Central also provides templates, policies, funding guidance, and monitoring to help every Rainbow Haven Local stay aligned and compliant.

Introducing the New Welcome Package

This fall, a dedicated team of members and friends created a comprehensive **Welcome Package** to help new Rainbow Haven Locals get up and running quickly.

The kit includes:

- Clear messaging and print materials
- Email templates and an event kit
- Stewardship tools and compliance quick-refs
- Filing helpers and 40+ ready-to-use digital files
- A companion Social Media Pack with images, captions, a four-week posting plan, and QR codes

Everything is customizable and aligned with our brand and standards of care. We've even included recommended filenames and folder structures to keep things organized.

A Community Effort

A total of **18 volunteers** contributed to writing, editing, and assembling the package. Their work will save new groups countless hours and help safeguard the people we support.

Why It Matters

The Welcome Package reduces rework, ensures safe practices, and helps donors clearly see how their gifts create real impact—providing a safe bed, utilities, and essential basics for LGBTQI+ refugees on the path to long-term safety.

Want to Get Involved?

If you're interested in forming a Rainbow Haven Local or joining an existing one, connect with anyone in Rainbow Haven Central or use the [Contact Us](#) form on our website.

Thank you to everyone who helped bring this resource to life—and to everyone who continues to make Rainbow Haven a beacon of safety and hope.

Food Inflation Eats into Funds for LGBTQ Asylum-Seekers

While setting up the new safe house in Kenya for LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers, Rainbow Haven volunteers were surprised by the high cost of groceries, significantly higher than in Senegal, the location of the first safe house.

While Kenya's overall inflation rate for October was 4.5 per cent, its food inflation rate for the same period spiked at 8 per cent.

The reasons for Kenya's spiraling food costs are more complicated than those inflation spikes that hit globally in 2022.



According to the Geneva-based Shamba Centre for Food and Climate, like much of the world, countries in Africa have faced high food inflation due the high US dollar, and continued supply chain issues caused by Russia's war in Ukraine. But the Shamba Centre suggests most of Africa's countries face an additional inflation trigger

Fundraising Update: Bingo Night Results and March Event Details

Rainbow Haven hosted its inaugural Music Bingo Night in October to benefit the new safe house in Kenya. The event drew participants of all ages from across the Victoria community, who enjoyed drinks, snacks, and a lively playlist curated by host Lucious Leah. Hits from across the decades, featuring artists such as Rihanna, Dolly Parton, the Bee Gees, Chuck Berry, and the Beach Boys, kept the room buzzing.

The energy remained high as players battled for bingo supremacy and some coveted prizes. Two participants won \$50 gift cards to a local grocery store, donated by Robbins Parking, for being the first to complete a row. Two others took home \$100 gift certificates donated by Ithaka Greek Restaurant and Forged Axe Throwing for clearing their entire card.

Rainbow Haven volunteers were on hand throughout the evening to answer questions and share updates about the organization's work. By the end of the night, the event had raised \$2,500, funds that will directly support the operating costs of the new safe house in Kenya.

**Mark Your Calendars:
Concert Fundraiser
March 14th, 2026**

caused by corporate concentration and a lack of competition in the agricultural supply industry.

The Shamba Centre partnered with the Centre for Competition, Regulation and Economic Development to study the issue during a 15-month period between January 2023 and March 2024. They found regulators in African countries had investigated just eight instances of anti-competitive behaviour in the agri-food sector, while missing another potential 27 instances, including several mergers of companies that sell supplies to African farmers.

The Shamba Centre's report on the matter suggests, *"The seemingly poor compliance by companies with competition laws and the weakness of authorities to properly enforce these laws, contributes to extreme concentration of agri-food markets in Africa driving up food insecurity and poverty, and harming small producers, informal businesses and consumers alike."*

In a July 2025 article, the Shamba Centre's executive director Carin Smaller suggests Kenya is a prime example of how agri-food industry concentration is hurting consumers.

"The few companies with dominant positions in the market dictate prices and are increasingly charging excessive markups on the prices of basic goods from fertilizer and feed to flour, poultry

Our next fundraiser will take place at Christ Church Cathedral and will feature a special performance by the renowned Chief and Petty Officers Band on March 14th at 2:00pm. Community members are invited to gather for an afternoon of uplifting music in one of Victoria's most beautiful and historic venues.

The Chief and Petty Officers Band will perform a selection of pieces that showcase their talent and versatility. Their concerts consistently draw enthusiastic audiences, and this event promises to be no exception.

Attendees will also have the opportunity to connect with Rainbow Haven volunteers, who will be available to share information about the ongoing work in Kenya and the impact of the new safe house. All funds raised from the event will support its operating costs.

We hope you'll join us for this special afternoon of music and community as we continue working together to create a safe and hopeful future for those we serve.



Thank you to our donors

and eggs,” Smaller wrote.

The Competition Authority of Kenya conducted a market inquiry last year to try to determine why Kenyan farmers pay 40 per cent more for animal feed than South Africans, Brazilians and Malaysians and why Kenyan consumers pay twice as much for poultry as South Africans pay.

The inquiry report determined that just four companies control most of the animal feed production and distribution in the region that includes Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi and Zambia. The report suggests that had there been more companies in the market resulting in more competition, food prices would have been considerably lower.

It’s not clear what action, if any, the Kenyan government will take. The higher prices are adding to food insecurity for ordinary Kenyans and creating challenges for organizations like Rainbow Haven that have to source food locally to feed people who are among the most vulnerable.

Thanks to all of you, whether you are regular monthly donors or whether you give annually, or from time to time. As you know, we are completely volunteer run. All donor funds go directly to services.

Many of our one-time donors have now become recurrent donors who give smaller amounts every month rather than a single larger amount. This works better for us because it allows us to budget how many safe houses we can open and maintain each year. Monthly recurrent donations give us certainty about how far we can extend our help. In this newsletter you have read that your support has allowed Rainbow Haven to open a new safe house last month in Kenya near the border of Uganda, where a huge number of people are seeking asylum. Some are lesbian women who have been raped and faced other torture. As you know, Rainbow Haven fills the gap at the beginning of the asylum-seeker process to keep them safe and fed for the initial 2+ years it takes to get them to a safer country.

Donate

Please tell your friends, colleagues and family about the work of Rainbow Haven and encourage them to support us like you do. They can [donate](#) directly from our donations page on the Rainbow Haven website. Of course, we will provide a tax receipt for any donations that you or your friends or family make to Rainbow Haven.

Meet the Artists

Light Reigns – Shadows Rule Shines for Rainbow Haven



Anne McCarthy

Creates digital photomontages that blend her own photography with fine-art techniques—a relationship she's explored throughout her career.

Victoria's Gage Gallery Arts Collective recently hosted *Light Reigns – Shadows Rule*, a striking photography-based exhibition featuring new works by Anne McCarthy, Clare Palmer, and Ron Charles. Showing together for the first time, the trio explored themes of LGBTQI+ people living in the shadows as refugees escaping harsh anti-gay laws. The artists generously used the exhibit to raise funds and awareness for Rainbow Haven.



Clare Palmer

Works in street photography and mixed media, using minimal editing to preserve the immediacy and honesty of each captured moment.



Ron Charles

Uses vintage cameras and analogue processes—including film, tinplate, and glass dry plate—to craft atmospheric, one-of-a-kind images merging body, landscape, and nature.

Our Sincerest Thanks

We are deeply grateful to Anne, Clare, and Ron for sharing their creativity and for supporting Rainbow Haven's mission through this powerful show.

MJ's Journey

Background

"MJ" is a warm and expressive young man. At 28 he is intelligent and outgoing and speaks five languages. Born in Serekunda, The Gambia, he grew up mostly in nearby Banjul, the nation's capital and largest city. For a good part of his childhood his "amazing" mother raised him as a single parent.

Due to persecution because he is gay, he left The Gambia for Sénégal in 2016, eventually requesting refugee status from UNHCR (the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). He spent 3 years in Sénégal living in hiding while managing his search for asylum and then waiting for his resettlement process to be completed. He flew to his current home in northern Europe in 2019.

Gay from the Beginning

An excellent student and feminine by nature, he enjoyed the company of girls. They were his only friends during early childhood. He was bullied because of those feminine tendencies and realized as well, by the age of 10 or 12 that he was in fact "gay". He dared not tell anyone about this new realization as even at that young age he had experienced and witnessed plenty of LGBTQ repression.

He completed his education in his home country and worked in different jobs while studying and after finishing school, including teaching at a kindergarten. He also had a passion for arts and design and started working on creative projects that helped him develop useful skills for the future.

Persecution

In 2016, MJ was in his late teens and had started a close relationship with another young man roughly his age. His family and community saw them as "best friends" but in fact they were in a gay relationship. One day while visiting his boyfriend, the young man's stepmother came home and caught them at an intimate moment. This stepmother was a real "villain" according to MJ. She immediately reported what she had discovered not only to her own family but to the neighbours as well. Those neighbours descended on the house calling the young men names. MJ returned to his own home, but word followed him and shortly thereafter he was beaten by members of his family. His boyfriend got thrown out his own house. MJ says that many

people in that community significantly dislike and distrust LGBTQ people and “look at them like they are cursed”.

MJ and his boyfriend realized quickly that for their own safety they not only had to leave their community but to do so quickly.

Flight

They immediately travelled to another town in The Gambia where they stayed about one week. Neither of them knew anything about asylum or much about ways to maintain their safety outside of their community. By phone, one of MJ’s friends, a young woman named “Fatima”, told them about the possibility of asylum via Sénégal. In 2016 there was political turmoil in The Gambia, and a state of emergency had recently been declared. MJ did not have his ID card with him when he fled, just his birth certificate. But the political upheaval made it easier for him to cross the border into Sénégal without full documentation.

A good saver, MJ managed to take a couple of weeks’ worth of money with him when he and his boyfriend crossed the River Gambia into Sénégal. Remotely, Fatima connected them with someone they could safely live with. They were able to stay there for 5–6 months. Although he could not work because he didn’t have the correct documents, he managed to make money creating and selling handmade fashion accessories.

While living in hiding there the young couple met some other gay Gambians in exile. These folks gave MJ and his partner what help they could, but it was meagre since they had the same safety issues and restrictions faced by MJ and his friend. As in The Gambia they all still faced the threat of community persecution in Sénégal since the prevailing negative attitude toward LGBTQ people is similar in both countries.

To Lie or Not to Lie: A Hard Choice in Pursuit of Safety

In early 2017 they learned from their exiled Gambian friends that it was possible to request asylum and resettlement through UNHCR. But in order to do that they had to first register themselves with the Sénégalaise police and that agency has no affiliation with or allegiance to UNHCR. The fact is that it was (and remains) illegal to be gay in Sénégal. They were caught between a rock and a hard place – if they told the truth about how they came to be in Sénégal they risked jail and/or deportation. If they did not register with the police, they could not get the papers required for them to approach UNHCR.

At the police station interview MJ said that he had family issues in The Gambia and that, in fact, his family and the community had accused him of being gay. The police interviewer looked at him and said, “Are you or are you not a Gay – because you look like one.” MJ felt cornered and there was indeed no “good” answer. But, in order to stay safe, he denied being gay.

Another interview, in a different police office followed. MJ says that if you are successful with this second interview you get a stamp on your papers and you can stay in the country, at least temporarily. Luckily, he got the stamp. This allowed him to approach the UNCHR office In Dakar.

The UNHCR Interviews

His first meeting with UNHCR took place in a tiny office. The stern official had him recount his story in great detail – what had happened to him in The Gambia, how he had fled and what he had been doing in Sénégal prior to the interview. In the safety of UNCHR, the truth came out. Several more of these interviews followed throughout the remainder of 2017 and well into 2018. These interviews were spaced months apart as UNHCR staff verified his story and gathered corroborating data.

Life in Waiting

The 18-month interview and vetting process was a difficult and uncertain time for MJ and his now ex-boyfriend. It was not possible for MJ to work legally in Sénégal in spite of his new UN status as a refugee. UNHCR was not able to offer much financial support. Whenever he could assemble the funds and find safe lodging he did so. But sometimes he spent weeks living on the street. Safe housing, when he could find it, was always precarious. At one point he was quietly sharing a rented house with several other gay Gambian exiles when neighbours, suspicious of these strangers, reported them to the police. MJ managed to escape by quickly grabbing his things and fleeing. But four of his housemates were arrested and they spent more than a week in jail. One of the tenants contacted UNHCR about the situation and the agency was able to intervene, securing the release of those imprisoned. Nonetheless the situation was very frightening, and similar hazards were a constant threat. UNHCR even warned MJ not to visit his friends while they were in jail lest he put himself in danger.

For the next year life for MJ consisted of keeping a low profile, making money whenever he could and for safety moving when he had to, which was frequently. With the assistance of fellow-exiles in Sénégal and friends outside of Africa he was able to persevere. Eventually, in November 2018 word came from UNHCR that he had been accepted for resettlement by a western European nation. He immediately signed the papers and in early 2019 he flew to his new home and safety.

Relief and Moving Forward

It felt “amazing” to leave Africa says MJ. After 6 hours in the air, he disembarked from the plane and realized he could now wear whatever he wanted and talk freely to whomever he wished without fear of reprisal. For the first time in his life, he was breaking no law by just being himself.

While the culture of his new country is very different from that of his homeland he has adapted well and is eager to become a citizen. He wants to be a teacher and is upgrading his education to achieve that. He's also still interested in clothing design – the very skill that helped him through his journey from persecution. And he appreciates this opportunity – this recounting of his story – if it helps raise awareness of the many barriers faced by LGBTQ people across the globe as they seek to live their true lives.

Rainbow Haven

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