

# A House Built By Love

Written by SJ Holsteen, October 2019

David was a brave shepherd, a talented musician and poet, and a successful soldier. He was also an asylum seeker. Saul, Israel's king at the time, wanted to kill David out of jealousy and competition. So, David sought safety in foreign kingdoms; he hid in the desert, in forests, in caves. And in the Bible, where David's story is found, we're told that in the midst of this exile, "*Jonathan, Saul's son, went to David ... and strengthened his hand in God.*"

This sentence, from which Jonathan House takes its name, is perplexing. Remember, Saul is the one who wants David dead. Saul is the reason David is running for his life. So, why is Jonathan, the son of David's persecutor, visiting David to encourage him?

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An asylum seeker is a person who, like the Biblical David, is forced to flee their home due to persecution, violence, or human rights violations. By both international and our own national laws, asylum seekers are here legally. But during the years-long legal process, asylum-seeking refugees in the US face many barriers to their survival, and increasingly so. They do not receive government assistance; they are not initially permitted to work; many are held in immigration detention for months or years with limited access to important legal and mental health resources.

International Association for Refugees (IAFR) exists to help people survive and recover from forced displacement. Out of all the barriers that asylum seekers face in the Twin Cities, IAFR believes that access to safe, stable shelter should never be one of them. By God's grace, in partnership with a couple of local churches, we've opened two Jonathan House sites in the past two years, where we're able to provide supportive housing to nine individuals: men, women, and accompanying children. Our program, the only transitional housing in MN designed specifically for and uniquely serving asylum seekers, provides the resources and support these individuals need to eventually secure stable employment and housing in their new community.

At full capacity, operations for these two current sites averages to about \$500/month per resident, and \$58,000 annually. Since we opened Jonathan House, we consistently receive inquiries for housing and still have to say, "We don't have space right now." In 2020, I'm happy to share, we expect to launch a third site in partnership with another local church. This new site will allow us to more than double our capacity, from 9 to 21 residents, and welcome asylum-seeking families. Of course, as we expand to meet this ever-present need, we're also looking to expand our network of committed partners to support our asylum-seeking friends.

Donations to Jonathan House go toward housing, food and transportation assistance. But safe, stable shelter is a key to so much more. Residents come to Jonathan House from living situations that are unstable, unsafe, or exploitative. With stable housing, asylum seekers are finally able to move beyond survival and start to recover from the danger they've escaped. In the words of one resident, they're able to "gather themselves" and dream and plan for the future.

Learn more at [www.IAFR.org/msp](http://www.IAFR.org/msp)

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IAFR also believes that compassionate presence and supportive community are essential to reaffirming personal dignity and worth. Refugees are more than people in need; each one has a valuable contribution to make to our community. It's our hope that within relationship, asylum seekers will experience that God sees, hears, and cares for them. And we know that in relationship with our asylum-seeking friends, we ourselves will be encouraged and transformed.

So, Jonathan went to David at one of the darkest, loneliest moments of his life to "strengthen his hand in God." He reminded David of his true identity, his capabilities, the future promises. King Saul, his father, the voice in power, had declared, "David is the enemy. He will kill you; he will steal your kingdom." And by the quiet rebellion of his companionship, Jonathan was saying, "No, David is not the enemy. He is my brother." We know from Scripture that Jonathan had no problems disagreeing with his father, but I think it's important to note that this was not a rebellion fueled by spite or anger. It was Jonathan's love for David, and ultimately, for God, that compelled him to the cave. Compared to Saul's fear, rage, and hunger for power, we see in Jonathan how God's love converts competition into communion. Both literally and figuratively, Jonathan's presence with David becomes a signpost for a new and different kind of kingdom, a kingdom far more powerful and lasting than any earthly one.

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Our Jonathan House team recently attended the immigration court bond hearing for a newly-accepted resident. We'd written a letter to the court explaining that this gentleman would be able to stay at Jonathan House upon his release from immigration detention, so he can pursue his asylum claim as a free man, in community, with access to resources that will help him heal and rebuild his life. The immigration judge granted bond. At the end, this asylum seeker stood up to exit the courtroom, in his bright orange jumpsuit, his handcuffs, and shackles. His lawyer had us stand up, too, and pointed us out to him, so we could look our new friend in the eyes and greet him, and he could see some of the faces that will welcome him upon his release.

I don't think we could've fit all of our supporters and partners into that tiny courtroom, although I would've loved to flood that space! But you stood up with us in that moment. It's because of you, your financial support, your partnership in this work, that we were able to show up in that small way; together, we affirmed through word and presence, "This man is not a criminal; he is our brother. There's a whole host of people eager to welcome and know him. A house has been prepared for him." You were in that courtroom, standing with us. More importantly, you were standing with him. Thank you.