Anti Anxiety Dog Bed 60% Sale
Anxiety Relieving Dog Bed. – MrFluffyFriend™
MrFluffyFriend Open

He fled Congo's war and froze on a Buffalo street

By Emily Wax-Thibodeaux

December 28, 2022 at 4:07 p.m. EST

Abdul Sharifu, left, and his best friend and cousin, Ally Sharifu. (Ally Sharifu)

Plastic Surgeon: "Forget Collagen, Use This Household Item To Fill In Wrinkles"
Sponsored by Beverly Hills MD

Listen 11 min Share Comment 155

Abdul Sharifu survived the war in Congo that left both his parents dead and spent over a decade in an overcrowded refugee camp before he reached the United States seeking safety.

He found a home in Buffalo, a Rust Belt city that in recent years has welcomed refugees, many from war-shattered countries. He met his wife within the growing Congolese community and was excitedly awaiting the birth of his first child when the blizzard approached.

Then he disappeared.

The 26-year-old was found hours later on a sidewalk. He had gotten stuck in the snow after leaving home to buy milk and food for his wife and children who live in his housing complex, his best friend and cousin said. He was declared dead after being taken to a hospital.

"I can't believe he left me," Ally Sharifu, 28, said, his voice breaking with emotion.

Advertisement

Winter storm and blizzard aftermath

- When will the winter storm end? Here's when you can expect travel conditions to improve.
- The catastrophic snowstorm hit Buffalo the hardest and was marked as the region's deadliest blizzard in at least 50 years. Here's why the storm was so deadly.
- Here are the stories of some of the victims of the snow in Buffalo.

1/3

As the death toll in Western New York climbed to 34 on Wednesday, stories of the deceased began to emerge. The dead include at least two refugees who family members believe may not have fully understood the dangers of the storm. Both spoke limited English in a city where activists have been pressuring the local government to translate important warnings and advisories into the diversifying array of languages now heard on Buffalo streets.

Immigrant advocacy groups issued notices in multiple languages on their sites, but note their efforts are limited and most news channels are in English.

"I'm sure many refugees had no idea how dangerous the storm was and what the warnings were," said Amanda Crotty, 51, a volunteer who works with vulnerable communities.

[*Buffalo's no stranger to snow. Why was this storm so deadly?*]

***

Buffalo was once a steel and manufacturing powerhouse, drawing thousands after World War II with the promise of well-paying jobs. Over time it became known as the "City of Good Neighbors," a nod to its history of welcoming arrivals from the South.

Advertisement

Advertisement

But the city lost nearly half of its population as the metals industry shuttered. By the turn of the millennium, Buffalo ranked as one of the most poverty-stricken cities in the nation. It is also considered one of the country's most segregated.

The city took in fewer immigrants than any metropolis of its size in 2000, but in recent years has experienced what locals calls a "refugee revival" by receiving people from some of the most conflict-ridden places in the world.

Vacant properties were rented to arrivals from Myanmar (also known as Burma), Somalia and Iraq. Immigrant-owned restaurants opened. A marketplace where refugees sell goods like Ethiopian baskets and Iraqi artwork became a popular stop for locals to buy home decorations and gifts. Today, more than 10 percent of the city's population is foreign-born.

Ally and Abdul were among the new residents. The cousins left Congo together as young boys, fleeing one of Africa's longest and deadliest wars. After waiting in a Burundi refugee camp for much of their childhood, they obtained visas with a refugee program. In 2017, the pair arrived in America, placed in Buffalo through a lottery system.

TOP STORIES
Deep dives
Longer stories and investigations that go deep
Opinion | Play it again, Sam: Inside Bankman-Fried's last year in the…
Backroom battles between IRS agents, prosecutors in Hunter Biden tax case
He live-streamed his attacks on Indian Muslims. YouTube gave him an…
Try a different topic
Sign in or create a free account to save your preferences

They were given winter coats and boots and laughed at how they looked, Ally said. Where they were from, temperatures rarely dipped below 50 degrees. They'd never seen snow before arriving in a U.S. city that during winter months experiences some of the nation's most frigid weather.

Advertisement

Advertisement

The cousins played soccer together on weekends and married within the close-knit Congolese community. They worked long hours at factory jobs. Abdul took English classes but Swahili was his primary language, his family said. Ally had children first. Abdul's wife is nine months pregnant. They imagined raising their families together.

On Saturday, Abdul went to get milk for some of the children in his complex, Ally said. His wife urged him not to go, saying it was too dangerous. Ally said his cousin was undeterred, convinced it would only take him a few minutes.

When Abdul hadn't returned home by Sunday morning, Ally said he "felt sick." He gathered everyone he knew and searched for over 12 hours in the blinding snow, visiting grocery stores, corner markets, hospitals and even jails.

"After everything, this was my one job: to find him in the snow," Ally said.

Advertisement

***

After hours of searching, Ally said he found Abdul's car late Sunday night behind a Metro station. It looked like it had been moved and hastily parked.

There was no sign of his cousin.

Friends and family began posting Abdul's photo on social media and a site for the missing: "Everyone in Buffalo, please find my uncle," Abdul's niece wrote, sharing a photograph of him smiling widely and dressed in a Hawaiian shirt.

Unbeknown to them, Abdul had already been found. A stranger discovered him freezing on a sidewalk Saturday evening and flagged down a car.

"He's dying, help!" the good Samaritan cried.

Three people brought Abdul inside the vehicle, covering him with their coats, said Savannah Jordan, 24, who said she was one of the people who came to his aid. Abdul was still breathing, but slowly. They urged a resident who Jordan said was filming the ordeal from inside a nearby home to let Abdul in to warm up, but that person refused.

Advertisement

Advertisement

They drove 20 minutes to Buffalo General Medical Center but found the emergency section blocked. Jordan said they tried to reach the main entrance but that people outside wearing scrubs refused to take Abdul in. The workers said to go to the emergency room. They spent another 40 minutes trying to get there, Jordan said, but the vehicle kept getting stuck on icy, snow-filled streets.

Share this article

During that time, Abdul's breathing became very shallow, then stopped, Jordan said.

They eventually succeeded in getting him into a nearby children's hospital, where Jordan said doctors immediately began trying to resuscitate him. On Christmas Day, the hospital contacted Abdul's niece with the news that he had died.

"I'm very upset," Jordan said. "This is supposed to be the City of Neighbors?"

Michael P. Hughes, senior vice president with Kaleida Health, the network that operates Buffalo General, disputed Jordan's account, saying Abdul was taken directly to Children's Hospital and pronounced dead upon arrival.

Advertisement

***

Ally did not want to believe this was how his cousin's story ends.

He looked over photographs of the two arriving to Burundi, then America. They'd flown seated next to each other on the plane and accompanied one another through each milestone of their lives.

After learning of Abdul's death, Ally went to the hospital, hoping his cousin had somehow been confused for someone else.

"I rushed there … to know if it was true," Ally said. "It was."

On Wednesday, as the snow began to melt, officials said they were bracing for the possibility of finding yet more bodies. Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz said the National Guard will visit every home that lost power to do wellness checks, out of concern there are people who may have perished in their homes.

He singled out Abdul's story, describing it as "just terrible."

Advertisement

The dead also include Stanislawa Jozwiak, a 73-year-old refugee from Poland who set out Friday morning to a specialty market across town. Hours later, she called her daughter and said her car had slid off the road and that she was stuck. The older woman wasn't sure where she was and the snow was piling up quickly.

Her daughter, Edie Syta, and her husband tried to reach her mother but could barely make it up their street. She called the police and a snow hotline, desperate for help. On Christmas Day, friends found Jozwiak's car, her body inside.

Syta still doesn't know why her mother was so determined to leave her home. Perhaps Jozwiak, who wasn't fluent in English, didn't understand how severe the blizzard was predicted to be. Maybe she was simply eager to get fresh ingredients like carp and cabbage for the family's traditional Christmas Eve dinner.

Advertisement

"So many families are going to be broken," she said through tears. "And they're never going to look at Christmas the same."

***

Officials have not said how many people they are searching for, but posts on social media indicate a number are still missing. At least half of the 34 bodies recovered thus far were found outside. Several were found in their cars; others, like Abdul, outside on streets and sidewalks.

Lawmakers, community organizers and disaster experts say the storm's deadly toll is a result of the historic nature of the blizzard, bad timing, a dearth of emergency management resources and the immense difficulty of trying to force residents to abandon much-needed jobs, as well as their holiday plans.

Residents have also blamed officials, saying they didn't do enough to prepare. Erie County, which contains Buffalo, announced a travel ban shortly before 9 a.m. Friday, giving motorists only a 41-minute heads up as many of them were driving to work.

Advocates for refugees said the city and county need to do more to make sure public announcements are in languages other than English. Erie County's website offers a Google translation option at the bottom of the homepage, though many of the most readily available documents, including downloadable maps showing where driving bans are in effect, are in English. Local groups have launched education campaigns in languages like Burmese and Somali with tips on how to survive a blizzard.

"In the City of Good Neighbors and throughout Western New York, the snow and winter weather may be the 'same old same old' during this time of year," the nonprofit International Institute of Buffalo noted on its website, "but for many of our New American neighbors this will be their first experience with it."

City and county officials have defended their response, describing the storm as unprecedented. Longtime residents who had lived through previous blizzards are also among the dead, underscoring the storm's severe nature.

"Seasoned Buffalo residents didn't know how dangerous this was," said Jennifer Rizzo-Choi, executive director of the International Institute of Buffalo. "And refugees, even from warm sunny places who do get training on dangerous winter weather when they arrive, were taken aback."

***

On Wednesday, Abdul's wife stayed in bed crying, as relatives visited and encouraged her to at least drink water as she waits to give birth. She stopped eating and drinking entirely after learning of her husband's death, family members said.

Ally, meanwhile, ventured out to retrieve his cousin's car and put a baby seat inside.

Despite his devastating end, Abdul's relatives want his child to know that he was happy in Buffalo. After making it out of Congo's war and through tough years living on rations and under tarp and thatched roofs in refugee camps, he had finally made it.

His wife, Gloria Mawazo, has questioned how she will explain her husband's death one day to their son. There are moments where she is angry at the city for not doing more to ensure residents were prepared. But she also wants him to know that Abdul loved Buffalo and would want their son to as well.

"His child will know that he was so happy the baby would be born here," she said in a text message to a reporter in Swahili.

Abdul was a good saver and worked long hours at a food-processing center. He was proud that he had a car and his goal was to buy a house, his family said. Buffalo was far from war and hunger and the crime and instability of refugee camp. It felt safe.

"People did try to help him in the storm. And those American helpers drove for hours for him to live," Ally said. "And that's what we tell his child."

Share 155 Comments

WINTER WEATHER HAND CURATED
Driving in snow? What to do if your car gets stuck in a winter storm.
December 22, 2022
How to stay warm and safe in a winter power outage
February 19, 2021
Bombogenesis, thundersnow and the polar vortex: Explaining what your favorite winter weather terms mean
January 5, 2023
View 3 more stories

Subscribe to comment and get the full experience.Choose your plan →

View more

Company
About The Post
Newsroom Policies & Standards
Diversity and Inclusion
Careers
Media & Community Relations
WP Creative Group
Accessibility Statement

Get The Post
Become a Subscriber
Gift Subscriptions
Mobile & Apps
Newsletters & Alerts
Washington Post Live
Reprints & Permissions
Post Store

Contact Us
Contact the Newsroom
Contact Customer Care
Contact the Opinions team
Advertise
Licensing & Syndication
Request a Correction
Send a News Tip

Terms of Use
Digital Products Terms of Sale
Print Products Terms of Sale
Terms of Service
Privacy Policy
Cookie Settings
Submissions & Discussion Policy
RSS Terms of Service

Stay informed with a subscription to The Washington Post
24/7 coverage from 1,000+ journalists. Subscriber-exclusive events. Unmatched political and international news.
Subscribe
Cancel anytime.