

Obang at Shobi's Table 2023 Thanksgiving Feast



On the road to success, a strong community is essential. And for Obang Agwa, this support has been life-changing. Since 2006, thanks to partners like you, Daily Work (DW) has been a vital resource for Obang and his family, helping them thrive in their new life in the U.S. From securing a good job to assisting his wife and daughter with finding work, to providing advice on tree and pest removal and everything in-between, DW has been there every step of the way, showcasing the power of community.

Obang's journey with Daily Work began in 2006. Originally from South Sudan, he spent years in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya before coming to the U.S. in 2004. Adjusting to his new life proved difficult, especially when trying to find a job.

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As Obang recalls, “When I first came to this country, I couldn’t find a job on my own.” It was through Pastor Jim Erlandson from his church (Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, one of DW’s founding congregations) that he learned about our organization.

Daily Work’s comprehensive approach was key to Obang’s success. Steve Grove, DW’s executive director from 2006–10, helped him create a resume and find a job at Fairview Health Services. “By the time I got to the interview, they barely asked me any questions because Steve had already told them all about me,” Obang says.

“Obang’s good nature and smile light up a room. When you discover the emotional and physical scars he carries behind that smile one cannot help but be amazed, and then truthfully sing his praises to any who will listen,” Steve states.



Co-written by Executive Director Julie Hoff (top) & Lead Clinical Case Manager Meghan Hildebrand (bottom)

Ask any Daily Work case manager and they'll tell you the hardest part of their role isn't the work they do with job seekers. The hardest part is the constant battle against inequities in our systems. "It's never-ending," declares Jamaia, a social work intern from St. Mary's University. "It feels impossible to reach the finish line."

And it *does* feel impossible, because these challenges are embedded in the very systems meant to help – systemic obstacles created by policies and practices that block entire communities from accessing crucial resources, reinforcing power imbalances, and trapping marginalized people in cycles of struggle.

We often think of systemic barriers as huge, sweeping issues, but sometimes it's the smallest things – a single overlooked document, one missed phone call – that can set someone back for months or even years. "The system wasn't built for us," states Iris, another St. Mary's intern. She's speaking to the additional hurdles experienced by People of Color, immigrants, refugees, and those still learning English.

Our welfare systems are rooted in the idea that some are "deserving" and others are not. This divide creates a framework where assistance is viewed as a privilege earned by certain behaviors or circumstances, rather than a fundamental human right.

Here's a heartbreaking example. One of our refugee families stopped receiving county assistance (a little cash and food support) after securing jobs. But due to health issues, both parents recently became unemployed and needed to reapply. Despite previously being in the program, their applications have been denied twice.

Why? The county misplaced a document. A phone call wasn't returned. A mailed letter didn't reach them in time. This family, who already works so hard, now has to submit proof that the mother is related to her own children! It's absurd. With only 30 days to complete the application, any missing paperwork means automatic denial, no matter what the circumstances. Every denial pushes them deeper into

financial crisis, threatening their ability to pay for rent, utilities, basic survival. This rigid enforcement of the rules defies common sense.

This isn't an isolated incident – it's a reflection of a system that punishes instead of supports, rooted in the belief that assistance must be earned. If our public assistance programs trusted people instead of blaming them, they wouldn't be so grueling and punitive. With increased funding caseworkers could manage reasonable caseloads, return calls, and provide more services for English learners.

This is where Daily Work comes in. We're here to advocate, to help families navigate the red tape, paperwork, and complicated systems that stand in their way. We do everything we can to ensure they get the support needed to stabilize and find work. But the truth is change will *not* happen without collective action.

Your voice matters. By voting, contacting your representatives, calling out barriers when you see them, and supporting organizations that fight for justice, you help create a more equitable system. Together, we can build a future where families are lifted up, not knocked down.

Obang's Journey

Continued from page 1

Obang began part-time in Fairview's Supply Chain department and, through hard work and dedication, progressed to full-time. Today, he serves as a Trainer, onboarding new employees and sharing knowledge across cultures.

But Obang's relationship with DW didn't end with his first job. "We meet nearly every year to talk through something," notes Julie Hoff. In 2014, he received a Microgrant to buy a car. When his wife came to the U.S. in 2016, DW helped her find work and take driving lessons. We assisted their daughter in securing a nursing assistant position, and Obang continues to seek advice for furthering his education.

"It's not just about finding one job – it's about building a foundation for a future," explains Julie. We all need a good network, and Daily Work is dedicated to being that lasting ally for folks." Today, Obang is the proud owner of his second home and his first new car, and he recently formed a Welcome Corps group to sponsor his cousin who has lived 15 years in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp.

For Obang and his family, DW is more than a career resource – we're a trusted partner providing the kind of comprehensive, long-term relationship people need to flourish. "When I come to Daily Work, I get help with everything I need," Obang declares. **"I tell everyone, Daily Work changed my life a lot."** He only wishes DW had more resources for addressing immigration issues and getting driver's licenses, saying "When you have a license, you can get a job anywhere!"

Stories like Obang's are proof of the power of community. Together – with your support – we continue to journey with families and invest in their futures, making the Twin Cities a better place for ALL of us.

ANNOUNCING A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH



We are excited that the Old National Bank (ONB) Foundation has awarded Daily Work a \$10,000 grant.

This funding underscores ONB’s commitment to equitable workforce development for immigrants and refugees, investing in innovative programs like those at DW that drive job creation, increase employment entry, and improve retention for underserved and low- to moderate-income communities.

“I understand firsthand what Daily Work is doing,” says Emma Kasiga, an ONB community lending market executive. “As an immigrant myself, I understand the importance of this work.”

Kasiga, also a member of Swahili Lutheran Church in South Minneapolis, recognizes the challenges that many newcomers face, often being forced into low-paying jobs due to language and cultural barriers. She praises DW’s comprehensive approach which combines employment services with ongoing relationships, helping job seekers build the skills needed for long-term success. “There are many similarities between what Daily Work is doing and Old National’s mission,” Kasiga adds. “At Old National I work to improve access to capital for small business owners, especially those from underserved communities, and it’s a challenge.”

Small business ownership is a vital pathway for many people new to the U.S. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, immigrants are 80% more likely to start businesses than native-born Americans, and over half of this country’s billion-dollar startups have immigrant founders.

Kasiga notes that many immigrants turn to small businesses out of necessity, but they often lack access to the generational wealth and financial expertise needed to secure conventional funding, manage debt coverage ratios, and understand the impact of credit scores – all critical for long-term success.

Corrie Maki Knudson (left) with some DW folks



The bank’s Empowerment Small Business Loan Program addresses this by providing capital to minority- and women-owned businesses that may not qualify for traditional loans. Through partnerships with local governments and nonprofits focused on economic development, business owners can gain access to gap loans,

financial education, and technical support that helps them transition into traditional lending.

ONB's alignment with Daily Work's mission is what drew the bank to our organization. "Like us, Daily Work is asking, 'How do you take a human-centered approach and provide people with everything they need to succeed?'" states Corrie Maki Knudson, ONB Foundation board member. For Maki Knudson, this grant is personal, too. "Having worked in fundraising, I know how important general operating grants are. We trust Daily Work to use the funds where they're needed most."

"Partnerships like this are essential to our mission. There are so many synergies..."

"We are thrilled to team up with the Old National Bank Foundation," says Julie Hoff. "Partnerships like this are essential to our mission. There are so many synergies, and I hope this is just the start of our work together."

The ONB Foundation awarded \$3.5 million overall to organizations focused on homeownership, education, healthcare, and workforce development in 2023. "Job placement services are vital in every community and we certainly see the value in providing creative, wraparound support," notes ONB Foundation President Joe Kiser. "We appreciate the opportunity to partner with Daily Work to welcome and support immigrants and refugees in our community." (More at oldnational.com/about-us.)

An invite from our neighbor Shobi's Table

Their talented crew opens the doors to everyone for a flavorful, from-scratch buffet!



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We Will Miss Judy Sharken Simon

Operations and Volunteer Manager Judy Sharken Simon does a little of everything here. With extensive nonprofit experience in strategic planning, management and leadership, for five years she has been our backbone. As Judy prepares to retire at the end of 2024, Julie Hoff reflects, “I could not have predicted the

profound impact Judy would have. She was a critical thought partner to me and our board of directors. She became integral to every aspect of Daily Work.”

It’s bittersweet for volunteers, job seekers and staff. “Judy didn’t just professionalize the organization,” states Volunteer Case Manager Linda Lopez. “She made it a pleasure to walk into the office on Monday mornings. She planned parties and events for volunteers, and invited people out after work.”

“Her knowledge and experience grounded us...”

Judy’s unique ability to balance leadership with support truly set her apart. “She didn’t just strengthen our operations and build new partnerships – she brought a fresh, valuable perspective,” notes Julie. “Her knowledge and experience grounded us, helping Daily Work become more focused and effective in everything we do.”

Looking back on her time here, Judy shares, “My job search criteria were simple: I wanted to work for a leader and an organization that walked their talk. Julie and Daily Work do that. They stretch themselves to stay true to the mission and values, always seeking ways to improve.”

It’s the resilience of job seekers that will leave the deepest impression on Judy. “People come here for a better life, but there are so many obstacles in their way,” she observes. “Their perseverance in the face of those challenges is a powerful reminder of how access to opportunity isn’t the same for everyone.”

“I’ll really miss Judy,” Linda says fondly. “She made us all feel valued and supported. She is a delight to work with.”

For Judy, however, retirement signals a new chapter. “I look forward to seeing more of the world and having the freedom to go places in the middle of the week,” she admits. She’s already diving into new endeavors, helping her daughter prepare for the 2025 American Birkebeiner ski race while setting her sights on skiing part of the course herself. (More at birkie.com.) “We’ve been training since June – roller skiing, biking, hiking and running up to three hours a day, six days a week.” It’s exactly what Judy does best – guiding and motivating others toward success.



Abera: Sunflower Award Winner



You may already know the name Abera Siyoum. His inspiring journey has been featured several times at Daily Work, and for nearly a decade Abera has volunteered in a range of roles: driving and interpreting for job seekers, serving on our board and committees, and speaking at events and in videos. At our 2024 Steps

to Success event, he helped lead an empathy-building activity, highlighting the challenges English language learners face.

Abera first connected with Daily Work in 2012, shortly after arriving in the U.S. from Ethiopia. He started out working temp jobs, then juggled two full-time jobs to get by. After seven years with only one day off each month, he finally achieved his goal: a single, full-time position. He has been with Seagate Technology since 2015, moving his way up from temp, to operator, supervisor and, in May 2024, senior supervisor. “I love it. If people have dreams to grow and change, it’s a good place,” he says.

Today, Abera is pursuing a degree in business administration, and having faced the challenges of job seekers firsthand, he is dedicated to supporting others on their journeys. “For me, it’s personal,” he explains. “Daily Work changed my life, and giving back is my way of helping someone else change theirs.”

“It takes all of us, working together, to build the kind of community we want to live in.”

He also is passionate about building stronger partnerships between Daily Work, Seagate, and other companies to create employment opportunities. “It takes all of us, working together, to build the kind of community we want to live in,” he remarks.

For all these reasons and more, we are proud to name Abera the 2024 Sunflower Award recipient. This award honors those whose loyal service helps build a more caring, equitable, and vibrant community. Abera’s service-oriented approach and remarkable life experience truly embody its spirit.

Receiving the award is especially meaningful to Abera as sunflowers were his childhood favorite, and he continues to grow them in his garden. Their symbolism of loyalty, resilience and hope perfectly reflects his own journey and character. Abera’s contributions through volunteering, advocacy, and mentorship have made a lasting impact on Daily Work and beyond.



Photo from Abera’s garden

Daily Work

105 University Ave W
Saint Paul, MN 55103

651-204-3043
www.Daily-Work.org



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Immigration is not just a link to America's past; it's also a bridge to America's future. *—President George H.W. Bush*



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