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**In today's paper**  
**SPORTS:** Miami Dolphins coach Mike McDaniel threatens personnel changes as season slips away, **11A**

# Miami Herald



LISA NALVEEN Courtesy of Refugee Assistance Alliance

Refugee Assistance Alliance staff member Kamar Abouleesh speaks with a volunteer.

## Friendship and volunteering This Miami nonprofit serves refugees in South Florida

BY MILENA MALAVER  
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Kristen Bloom knows what it's like to start over.  
In the 20 years that her husband has served in the Air Force, the couple has moved 10 times.  
Their first assignment took them to Okinawa, Japan. Bloom, now 42, is originally from a small town in Massachusetts and quickly realized how different life in Japan was from what she knew back home.  
Fortunately, she found comfort in the surrounding military community — people who were always willing to lend a hand and answer her many

questions: How did you get your driver's license here? Do you know a doctor who speaks English?  
Fast-forward to late 2016: Bloom and her family had just relocated to Miami from rural Mississippi. Having recently decided to become a full-time stay-at-home mom, she began looking for ways to give back through volunteer work.  
A friend told her about the Syrian Supper Club, a group that brings together recently arrived Syrian refugees to cook meals for fundraising events — helping them financially and socially as they adjust to their new lives.  
Bloom then began volunteering as an English tutor for a Syrian family.

Although she didn't speak Arabic, her background teaching English in Japan and at Mississippi State University gave her the tools she needed to help.  
Having experienced what it's like to live in an unfamiliar place herself, Bloom quickly realized just how much support refugees need — and how little they often receive. Upon arrival, refugees receive only 90 days of federal support.  
Her first English session with the family didn't include a single language lesson. Instead, it turned into three hours of questions, a pile of mail that they couldn't understand

SEE REFUGEES, 8A

## 'Hunting stand' was found same day Trump landed in Palm Beach, FBI says

BY GRETHEL AGUILA AND JAY WEAVER  
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The "suspicious stand" that the Secret Service found in direct eyesight of the Air Force One landing zone at Palm Beach International Airport was an "elevated hunting stand," FBI Director Kash Patel confirmed in a statement Monday morning.  
Patel also confirmed that agents found the stand Friday, before President Donald Trump landed in West Palm Beach for a weekend visit to his Mar-a-Lago residence and club.  
According to Fox News, the stand was set up months ago.  
"The FBI has since taken the investigatory lead — flying in resources to collect all evidence from the scene, and deploying our cell phone analytics capabilities," Patel said in the statement. "We are working with our DOJ partners on service of any legal process required and will provide updates when able."  
The stand was dismantled and is being flown to an FBI lab, FBI Deputy Director Dan Bongino told Fox News on Monday.  
A White House official told the Miami Herald that when Trump boarded Air Force One on Sunday to head back to Washington, he went into the plane using lower steps that lead into its belly due to elevated safety measures.  
In a statement Sunday, Secret Service Chief of Communications Anthony Guglielmi said agents discovered the stand during "security preparations" before Air Force One landed on Friday. "Items of interest" were found in the area, although the Secret Service did not identify or release details about the items.  
The agency is working with the FBI and law enforcement in Palm Beach, he said. The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office didn't respond to the Herald's inquiries. A spokesperson for the airport told the Herald on Monday morning that the airport was informed of the incident but wasn't provided specifics.  
"There was no impact to any movements, and no individuals were present or involved at the location," Guglielmi said in the statement. "While we are not able

SEE STAND, 2A

## Federal-government shutdown threatens to freeze some Florida home sales, Realtors warn

BY ALEX HARRIS  
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Almost three weeks into the government shutdown, Florida Realtors — and home buyers and sellers — are starting to feel the impact.  
Without an open and functioning federal government, homeowners who are required to have flood insurance largely cannot get it, which can delay or freeze home sales. That's because the federal government is the largest provider of flood-insurance policies through



SAM NAVARRO Special for the Miami Herald | Oct. 6, 2025

Without an open federal government, homeowners who are required to have flood insurance largely cannot get it, which can delay or freeze home sales.

SEE SALES, 2A

## 'Untold stories.' Florida's Black history museum will sit on old FMU site

BY RAISA HABERSHAM  
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More than 60 years ago, what was once known as Florida Memorial College sat on more than 310 acres of land in St. Augustine.  
Now, a portion of that property will be used for the site of Florida's Black history museum, housing artifacts, a performing-arts center, an art gallery and an educational space.  
"I think that founding missionaries ... now get to rest knowing that that land is serving a mighty purpose," Florida Memo-



Florida state Sen. Rosalind Osgood: 'It ... gives us an opportunity to preserve and keep our own history.'

rial University President William C. McCormick Jr. told the Miami Herald following a signing ceremony Friday afternoon at the Miami Gardens school



The museum foundation's chairman, Howard Holley: 'What is amazing is the Black history of this state.'

for the ground-lease agreement between St. Johns County and the Florida Memorial Uni-

SEE MUSEUM, 2A



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FROM PAGE 1A

# REFUGEES

and concerns about healthcare — especially because the mother was pregnant.

“They have nobody to reach out to,” Bloom said. “They have no support network. And me, every single time I move, I have this big support network that can support me.”

This realization led Bloom to start Refugee Assistance Alliance, whose mission is to “help the most vulnerable refugees in South Florida with the vital support services needed to survive and thrive in their new communities.”

The nonprofit, which was created in 2017, provides refugees with English-language education, employment opportunities and emotional support.

“I quickly realized that, yes, the families needed to learn English, but more than anything, I really felt like they needed a friend or a neighbor or somebody who could just help them figure life out here,” Bloom said.

## BUILT ON VOLUNTEER WORK

The first volunteers came through Facebook posts asking for help. Today, Refugee Assistance Alliance has a staff of 12, with more than 100 volunteers and about 200 refugee clients. Volunteers are paired with a family and check in at least once a week and stay closely involved in helping families meet their needs, like helping them get to the library or fill out applications for government assistance.

“It really is a community,” said Romona Allen, who is the client-services lead at the organization and started as a volunteer in 2018. “We work with them on a personal level, trying to figure out where they are. We build friendships.”

Allen helps refugees find jobs and navigate cultural and language barriers. Her work also includes connecting children with tutoring and mentorship opportunities to ease their transition into U.S. schools.

One of the group’s first



Refugee Assistance Alliance volunteer Marlene Broad with a refugee family.

Courtesy of Refugee Assistance Alliance



Courtesy of Refugee Assistance Alliance

Rohkan Sahel Niazi, 32, looks at a certificate that he earned. Niazi was a U.S. Army interpreter in Afghanistan.

clients was Rajaa Zewannah, 40, whom Bloom met at the Syrian Supper Club.

Before the Syria’s civil war, Zewannah lived a peaceful life in Homs, Syria, with her husband and two small children in a home that they had built themselves. That peace shattered in 2011 when the civil war reached their city. By the following year, they fled to Damascus — but the violence followed them there, too. Eventually, they decided to walk to the Jordanian border, their youngest child, just 3 years old, walking beside them.

“I was so scared,” Zewannah said, recalling how they feared being shot at

any moment.

Later, she learned their home in Homs had been seized by a militia and everything was stolen.

In Jordan, the family stayed in a UN refugee camp before renting a small apartment in Amman. Work was scarce, but after three years, the UN called with an opportunity to resettle in the United States. After multiple interviews, background checks and medical exams, they arrived in South Florida in June 2016.

Refugees have little say in where they’re placed, and when Zewannah learned they would be moving to Miami, she was excited — her only refer-

“**THEY HAVE NOBODY TO REACH OUT TO. THEY HAVE NO SUPPORT NETWORK.**”

Kristen Bloom

ence point being what she had seen on TV. Reality was harder. Their first apartment in Florida City felt unsafe due to street crime. They moved to North Miami Beach, where they still live, and her husband works steadily in construction.

After Bloom founded the organization, volunteers began visiting Zewannah weekly, helping her earn a certificate in early childhood education. She went on to complete an Associate of Arts degree at Miami Dade College and plans to pursue a bachelor’s degree in social work.

Although English was the most challenging aspect of her transition, Zewannah became fluent enough to volunteer with RAA herself and later joined the organization part-time as a client coordinator.

## HARDSHIP AND HUMANITY

While the refugee-assistance program started as a response to the Syrian refugee crisis, it quickly grew to serve people coming from South and Central America.

Leorelis Tovar, 40, fled Caracas, Venezuela, to Colombia after political and economic turmoil made it impossible to build a future there, and

after five years in Colombia, she realized life had become just as dangerous and uncertain. “This is no longer the place for us,” she remembers thinking when she couldn’t find medicine for her child.

Tovar applied for asylum and arrived in Miami in June 2024. She first stayed with an adoptive family that she knew from Venezuela, but the relationship quickly soured and she had to move out. She spent two weeks living in the Lotus House shelter with her son. “Those two weeks are something I’ll never forget,” she said.

Lotus House offered food, therapy and stability — and soon after, she was connected to RAA. The group helped her rebuild her life, providing rental support, clothing, household items and emotional care. Volunteers even accompanied her to meetings at her son’s school, where Ángel, who is on the autism spectrum, receives music, art and occupational therapy. Tovar’s life was eventually stable enough that she could take on freelance design projects.

“It’s not easy to leave the country you love,” she says. “But if you want to move forward, you have to

## How to help

If you would like to donate to the Refugee Assistance Alliance, visit <https://www.refugeeassistancealliance.org/donate-now>

If you would like to know more about volunteering, visit <https://www.refugeeassistancealliance.org/volunteer-with-us>

look for better opportunities. Here, I’ve found a lot of human warmth.”

Bloom said it is hard for the organization to see negative rhetoric about refugees, because she has found them to be incredibly giving, hard-working people who go through rigorous vetting.

“We want them to feel this is their new home, excited, and feel welcome here. And it’s really sad to see that so many people are feeling fearful right now,” Bloom said.

Rokhan Sahel Niazi, 32, a former U.S. Army interpreter from Jalalabad, Afghanistan, fled with his wife and five young children after the Taliban takeover in 2021. Educated in English literature at Nangarhar University, he had worked alongside members of the U.S. Marines, Air Force and State Department before being evacuated through the chaos at the Kabul airport with help from an American lieutenant and a group of Marines.

After brief stays in Philadelphia and at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico, the family was resettled in Miami — a placement chosen for them. Despite the turmoil, Niazi adapted quickly, using his English to help other Afghan refugees learn the language in their hotel soon after arrival.

He later connected with the RAA, which provided job training, English and computer classes, and financial aid for essentials like transportation and a dryer. His wife now speaks fluent English, and Niazi works in customer service.

“When you say refugee, it means hardship, stress, depression,” he said. “It’s really challenging. We should always help and check on them to see what they need.”

# Study: Shingles vaccine helps protect against heart disease and dementia

BY DENNIS THOMPSON  
*HealthDay News/UPI*

The shingles vaccine does more than just protect middle-aged folks and seniors against maddening rashes, a new study says.

The vaccine also lowers their risk of heart disease, dementia and death, researchers reported in Atlanta on Sunday at IDWeek, the joint annual meeting of America’s top infectious disease professional societies.

According to the new study, adults 50 and older who get the shingles vaccine have a:

- 50% lower risk of dementia caused by blood flow problems
- 27% lower risk of blood clots
- 25% lower risk of heart attack or stroke.
- 21% lower risk of premature death

“Shingles is more than just a rash — it can raise the risk of serious problems for the heart and brain,” said researcher Dr. Ali Dehghani, a doctor of

internal medicine at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in Cleveland.

“Our study findings show that the shingles vaccine may help lower those risks, especially in people already at higher risk for heart attack or stroke,” Dehghani said in a news release.

For the study, researchers analyzed health records from more than 174,000 adults across 107 U.S. health systems, comparing those who got the shingles vaccine with those who hadn’t.

Previous studies have shown that a shingles infection can trigger heart and brain complications, researchers noted.

These new findings suggest that the shingles vaccine might help protect against those complications, as well as preventing shingles itself.

Currently, two doses of shingles vaccine are recommended for adults 50 and older, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states.



DEBBIE HILL UPI

The shingles vaccine lowers the risk of heart disease, stroke, dementia and death for patients over the age of 50, researchers reported in a new study.

About 1 in every 3 people in the U.S. will have shingles, the CDC says.

## CHICKENPOX

Shingles occurs in people who’ve had a prior chickenpox infection, but it’s not necessary to know whether you’ve had such an infection to get the vaccine, the CDC says. More than 99% of Americans born before 1980 had chickenpox, even if they don’t remember it.

The virus that causes chickenpox, varicella zoster, lies dormant in a person’s immune system for decades before reemerging to cause the painful, tin-

gling or itchy rashes known as shingles.

Shingles can break out at any age among prior chickenpox patients, but it typically affects people older than 50 who are under stress and have compro-

mised immune systems.

IDWeek is the joint annual meeting of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America, the HIV Medicine Association, the Pediatric

Infectious Diseases Society and the Society of Infectious Diseases Pharmacists. Findings presented at medical meetings should be considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

## Obituaries

**Virginia de la Llama**  
May 21, 1921 - October 18, 2025



**Miami, Florida** - Virginia “Nena” de la Llama, born May 21, 1921, in Placetas, Cuba, passed away on October 18, 2025, in Miami, Florida, at the age of 104. She was predeceased by her beloved husband, Jose “Pepito” Antonio de la Llama, and is survived by Tony and Jorge de la Llama. She was a wonderful friend to many who considered her family and she will be greatly missed.

## Obituaries

### OBITUARY INDEX

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NAME, AGE	CITY	DEATH	ARRANGEMENTS
de la Llama, Virginia, 104	Miami	Oct 18	Bernardo Garcia Funeral Homes

**Bold listings indicate expanded obituaries**