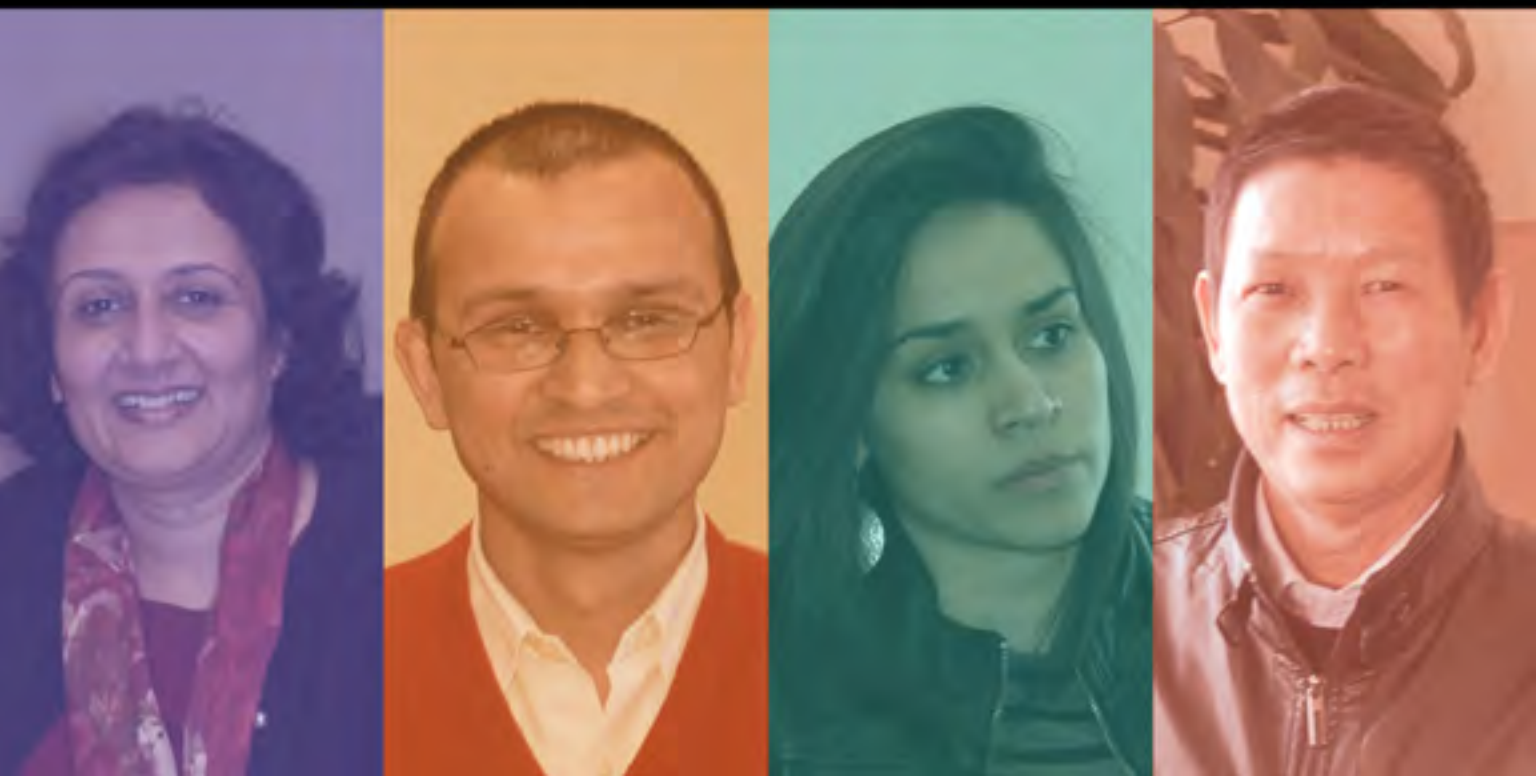
Portraits of Integration

Journeys Toward Belonging

by Estera Piroşcã



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Acknowledgments

Behind every face in this book, there is a story. First, I want to express my sincere gratitude towards the incredible immigrants and refugees who welcomed me with tremendous hospitality and shared with me their stories, their tears, and their memories.

I would like to thank Marty Homan, Franklin County Public Affairs Officer, for his professionalism in taking fantastic pictures of each person, for his editing skills and advice in writing the stories, and for his friendship.

I am especially thankful for Franklin County Commissioner Marilyn Brown, and Michael Daniels, Aide to the Commissioner, for the opportunity and freedom they gave me to bring these stories to life and make this book a reality. Their advice and encouragement propelled me forward.

I am deeply obliged to Guadalupe Velasquez, New American Initiative Coordinator at the Community Relations Commission, City of Columbus; Angela Plummer, Executive Director, Community Refugee and Immigration Services; Seleshi Asfaw, Executive Director, Ethiopian Tewahedo Social Services; and several others who referred me to some of the immigrants and refugees whose stories are written here.

I am thankful for Anthony and Monica Weiler from the Stratos Innovation Group who introduced me to the field of service design and helped me apply it to these stories. I would like to thank Joe Kovell from the Franklin County Data Center for utilizing his talent and skills in designing this book.

I am deeply obliged to the professors and staff at the John Glenn School of Public Affairs at The Ohio State University, who equipped me with valuable education and training.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their love, support, and encouragement, and for believing in me.

Estera Pirosca

Foreword
by Commissioner Marilyn Brown

Having had the pleasure of Estera Piroşcă as an intern in my office for the past two years, I had no doubt that if anyone could accurately and respectfully show the mosaic of races, cultures, and ethnicities that make up the immigrant communities of Franklin County, it would be her.

Estera is an amazing young woman. She combines dedication, attention to detail, and the strong research methodology of the John Glenn School with empathy and understanding. And as an immigrant herself, she can tell these stories in a voice and with a depth that no one else can.

This storytelling is a pure gift to the reader, to the community, and to those who are profiled in these pages. In many cases, these immigrants had never told their story – or at least their full story – and Estera has brought each to life. These residents, these neighbors of yours and mine, welcomed her into their homes and their lives and their hearts, and shared their most intimate and raw stories. That sharing is a most special gift to each of us, and to our entire Franklin County community.

The stories on these pages will have you in tears of sorrow and tears of laughter. You will feel the fear and flight of those running away from their homeland, and the joy and excitement of those running toward theirs. You'll meet men and women, gay and straight, young and old, affluent and poor. Their origins are far apart, their journeys quite different, and yet their spirits and hopes and dreams are in many ways the same. They are the dreams of freedom, of safety, of diversity and acceptance.

This is a remarkable book, a bibliography, and an almanac rolled into one. It is an electronic-microscope image of the complexity and simplicity and diversity and unanimity and segregation and integration that is the Franklin County immigrant experience.

I'm proud to have assembled around me a team such as Estera, my aide, Michael Daniels, and our public affairs officer Marty Homan, who working together and with their colleagues within and without County government, have brought forth this beautiful collection of stories to us all. Thank you, Estera, Marty and Michael. Your work here and in all you do makes real my favorite quote from Anne Frank, "No one need wait a single moment to begin to change the world."

The story of immigrants in America is not a story of "them," it is a story of "us." Immigrants signed their names to our founding documents, built our railroads and cities, fought to defend our values, and fueled new industries. Without these intrepid men and women, our growth from a string of 13 colonies to 50 United States would not have been possible.

- President Barack Obama

Introduction

The foreigner in our midst. The woman wearing a hijab. The man wearing a turban. The young girl wearing a sari. The old man with a thick accent. The young boy with an afro. The black, the white, the red, the yellow. This is the United States of America. A nation where people from around the world come to pursue their dreams. A nation the world looks up to. A nation that is different than any other. A nation with friends and enemies. A nation with struggles. Yet, a special nation. A nation where the foreigner is not a foreigner anymore.

Franklin County is one of the United States communities that has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants in the last 20 years. The second largest county in the state of Ohio, Franklin County is home to 104,358 foreign-born residents, which represents nine percent of its total population. More than half of the immigrant population, 53 percent, came in the last 10 years. Columbus is among the top 10 cities in the country for refugee resettlement. There are 109 different languages spoken by Columbus City Schools' students in grades K-12. In our sports community, we have 32 pro athletes from 14 countries that play for Columbus' Crew and Blue Jackets. There are 644 foreign-owned businesses from 37 countries in Central Ohio that employ more than 39,000 people from our community. There are close to 7,000 international students living in Franklin County.

Immigrants have a story to share and their voices need to be heard in order to better understand and strengthen the social fabric of our community. They bring with them a lot of treasures that, if perceived and understood correctly, can positively shape the culture of the Franklin County community. At the same time, immigrants need to adjust to the local culture, and the process is not always easy. There are many difficulties they encounter during this transition.

From the beautifully-painted canvas of the immigrant and refugee community in Franklin County, I came across 15 intricate, radiant, adventurous, and inspiring people. I listened to their stories and tried to bring them to life on these pages. Throughout this process I was transformed. I was overwhelmed by the suffering that some of the immigrants went through before coming to the United States. I was amazed by the resilience, inner strength, and desire to survive that kept some of these people alive. Values of hard work, faith, honesty, education, family, respect for other human beings, hope for the next generation, and love for life are common themes found throughout the stories.

I invite you to come with me on an unforgettable journey. In the following pages you will meet people from Europe, South America, South East and East Asia, the Middle East, and West and East Africa. You will meet men and women who arrived here as children, as teenagers, and as adults. You will meet Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims. You will meet medical doctors, travel agents, translators, immigration attorneys, school principals, rock stars, teachers, journalists, scientists, and business owners.

So, as you begin turning the pages, come to learn, to cry, and to laugh. Come and be transformed.

Kesete Sebhatleab

A Dream Come True

When Kesete Sebhatleab was born in Senafe, a town in southern Eritrea, in 1968, his country was already in turmoil. The Eritrean War of Independence had started in 1961 and lasted for 30 years, until 1991, and killed many people.

"The biggest source of my happiness was when we got independence from Ethiopia," says Kesete through a translator. Like many young men in his country, recently married and with little children, Kesete had a dream of being able to provide for his family, and to send his children to school. "We were hoping to see good future, at least to live in our country and to make the country grow." Unfortunately, the Eritrean government failed to be loyal to its people.

In 1995, the Eritrean government issued a law by which every able male and female over the age of 18, had to serve in the National Service program for one and a half years, with possibility of extension, and very little pay. Eritreans had to receive military training for six months, and work in construction or agriculture for the remaining time. Kesete was forced to leave his family behind and join one of the two central military training centers for four years. His hope for a better future didn't last long.

Being an agrarian society, Eritreans rely heavily on farming. When Kesete left home to serve the government, his wife was left alone, having to fend for herself and her children. During the rainy season, the only propitious time for farming, his wife would have to ask for help, but not many had time for that. They had to worry about farming their own land. This made Kesete frustrated and mad, "I was just serving government for free; I feel I am obligated to provide basic things, but I was not able to provide that."

With crushed dreams, many Eritreans escaped to neighboring countries. Many started crossing the Sinai Desert, others went to Sudan, Egypt or Libya. Realizing that there was no hope for a job in Eritrea, Kesete decided to cross the border into Ethiopia. In 1998, there had been another two-year Ethiopian-Eritrean war due to a border dispute, which killed about 100,000 people. Even so, the Ethiopian government set up a refugee camp for Eritreans, close to the border. Kesete was very grateful for the kindness Ethiopians showed to them, despite past conflicts. "The government did not discriminate us, rather took us and gave us everything that we need. Even we didn't expect that."

Kesete lived in the refugee camp for six years and six months, without having any contact with his wife and four children. The Eritrean refugees were not allowed to work outside the camp, so they would either work illegally outside or find a job within the camp. During this time, Kesete's wife was imprisoned for eight months because she couldn't tell the Eritrean government where Kesete was. The children were taken in by neighbors to take care of them. It was a very difficult time. "And even when I was getting food for myself, I was also thinking about my family and how they would survive," says Kesete with sadness.

When Kesete crossed the border he had no idea about the United States. All he wanted to do was get a job, be able to send money home, and if things would get better, to return to his country. However, in 2007, the United States government offered a group resettlement for the 18,000 people from the refugee camp where Kesete was living. This news reignited Kesete's hope for a better future. He was one of the first people to come to the United States and was resettled in Columbus.

"And that was one of the happiest moments, I feel as if I was born again. It was really a dream come true," shares Kesete. He was welcomed by staff and volunteers from Community Refugee and Immigration Services (CRIS) and was assisted in his adjustment process. However, it was not easy. Not knowing English was hard for Kesete. The environment was completely new. Language, transportation, traffic, everything was new. At times he wondered if he could actually manage to live in this new place. "But once I start to learn language, I think I am confident on what I am doing, it's a big change from that time."

After his arrival, the biggest desire Kesete had was to bring his family here. He found out that, because of the instability in Eritrea, his wife and children needed to cross the border to a neighboring country before UN could process the paperwork for family reunification. Facing a lot of danger, his family successfully crossed the border to Ethiopia and waited in the refugee camp for one year and six months. For them, that was a time of rejoicing and renewed hope. "They were sure that no matter what or when, we would meet," says Kesete.

The family was reunited after ten years of separation, in January 2012. "Once they see me here that was complete happiness. It was a joyful moment." His children had grown and he couldn't even recognize them. Kesete's dream of providing for his family and giving his children an opportunity to go to school came true. "Thank you to God and the government of the United States."

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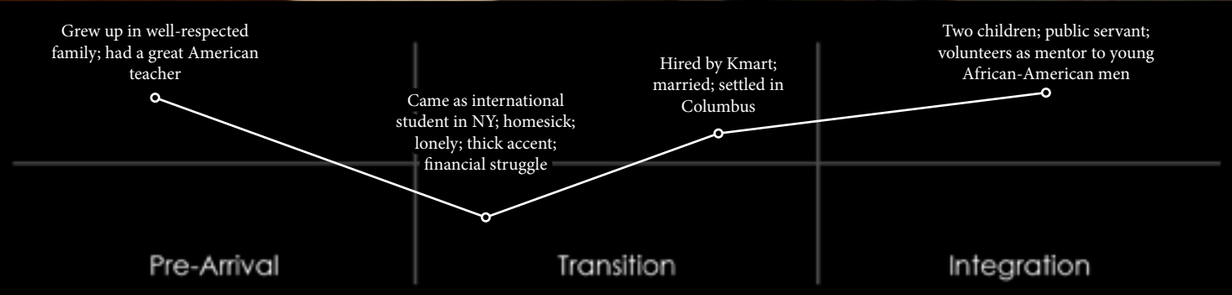

Emeka Okafor

America, A Place I'd Really Like To See

"The American teacher I had was so relaxed, very personable and humble and relates very well with the students. It just gave me an impression, if this is what Americans are like, yes I want to see that," reminisces Emeka Okafor from Nigeria about his secondary school days. His teacher was the reason Emeka built the interest to come to the United States.

Emeka is originally from the southeastern part of Nigeria, a descendant of the Igbo people, one of the most influential ethnic groups in Nigeria. "Igbos have a really strong history in terms of people who are determined to make their own destiny," describes Emeka. His extended family reaches almost 300 people. His great-grandfather was a very wealthy and respected man in the community. His father also was very involved in the community. He was a pharmacist, and he was generous and cared for people. His mother was a business person. "So, I come from a family that is really one of the pillars in society."

From childhood Emeka showed leadership abilities. In the Catholic boarding school he was chosen to be time keeper, then Boy Scout troop leader, then school prefect. "Maybe it's something I got from my father, that drive to excel, to be in leadership positions," explains Emeka. After high school he applied to Syracuse University in New York. There was no Internet back in the 1970s, so Emeka relied on school catalogues and the entire process was done through letters. It took nine months for him to make all the arrangements needed. "I don't remember anyone actually holding my hand and saying 'this is how you do this;' I think I did it myself just trying to get as much information as I can and just keep pushing."

He left for the United States in January 1977. He didn't know what to expect, "I think the whole thing is like you're going to an alien world: you don't know what to expect." He had heard about snow, but he never experienced it. When he came out from JFK airport, "the air hit my face and I just ran back into the airport and I couldn't believe that it could be so cold. I felt lost right away."

The first year at Syracuse University was very difficult for Emeka. He felt lonely, homesick, and was not able to communicate with his family back home. The first time he was able to talk to his family on the phone was three months after he had arrived, and "it was exhilarating to hear their voices." Another challenge was that his accent was very thick, people had trouble understanding him and he had trouble understanding others. However, things took a positive turn when he was invited by another student to a Nigerian party in town. He met there a former classmate from secondary school. "I wouldn't even be able to describe my feeling," says Emeka with a smile.

Eventually, due to economic instability in Nigeria, he lost financial support from his family. He decided to transfer to University of Toledo, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in business administration. Right away he was recruited by Kmart Corporation into their management program. In the meantime, he met his wife and settled in Columbus. He registered for more classes at Capital University, and earned his master of business administration in 1992. A couple of months later he started working for Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Agency in the finance department.

Emeka became an American citizen in 1988. He describes the experience as if he was born all over again. "When I was taking that oath of citizenship, I felt very, very proud. You feel completely different, you are a new person. You are a value-added individual." He was happy that he could vote and participate in society as an American.

The image given by the American teacher in secondary school was true. Although Emeka has experienced discrimination, he never allowed that to bring him down. "America is a free society, it really encourages you to do your best; it brings out the best in you and challenges you." He is currently giving back to the community by being involved with the Franklin County Children Services Simba program where he volunteers to mentor young men.

There are three things Emeka would give as advice to new immigrants. First, they must understand and follow the law of the land. Second, they have to understand how the financial system works in the United States, the credit system and how to use it wisely. Third, in order to integrate, they "have to be involved; get to know the people in your neighborhood, volunteer. That gives you an insight into what America is all about."

To the American community, Emeka would say, "you have to understand that these people come from a whole different environment. Give them the benefit of the doubt, help them assimilate to this environment."

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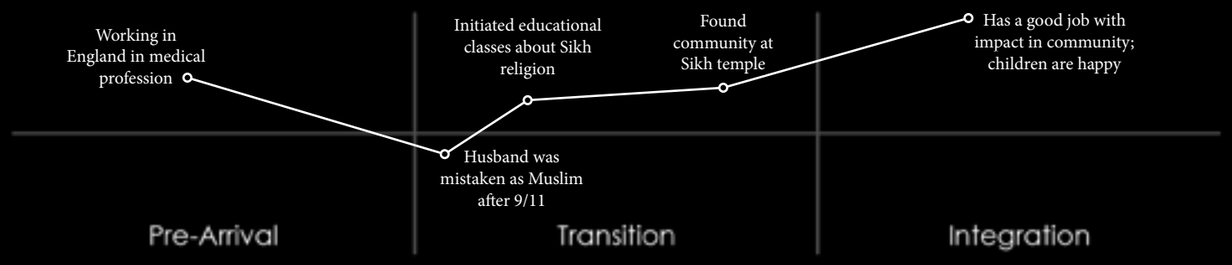

Parminder Bajwa

Truth And Dedication To Your Work

"Let's be truthful, is what our guru says, it's in our religion," remarks Parminder Bajwa as she candidly and openly shares about the Sikh religion that she and her family follow. "And being truthful means you're truthful to everything, you have to be dedicated to your work." This theme has surely permeated through every facet of Parminder's life, in her family, in her career, and in her life as an immigrant.

Parminder comes from the state of Punjab in northeast India, the only state in the country with a majority Sikh population. Her family is very well-educated. Her grandfather was a physician, her dad retired as a principal of a college, and her mother was a teacher. Some of her uncles and aunts were officials in the Indian army. This has had a profound influence on Parminder's worldview. "Because we served the nation, there was a patriotic feeling in the house. It meant we supported all religions. So, I grew up being a Sikh, but I grew up also being appreciative and encouraging to other religions."

Parminder and her family arrived in Buffalo, New York just a couple of weeks before September 11, 2001. "So, it was scary," recalls Parminder, "because a Sikh person in Phoenix had been shot dead, because people mistook him for a Muslim." In the Sikh religion, men have to wear turbans. At the time her husband was doing his pediatric medical residency. Their family back in India was worried for their safety. As part of his work, her husband had to visit schools in Buffalo School District. One day as he walked in the school building, kids started exclaiming, "Oh, here comes Osama!"

Because of their upbringing, Parminder and her husband did not get intimidated by the negative remarks of children in the Buffalo school. Her husband decided they needed to educate the children, the teachers, and the principal about the Sikh religion. So they did. He held lectures, and they showed pictures of religious temples.

They lived in Buffalo for six years. The biggest adjustment they had to make was the weather during winter. Parminder recalls with horror how they had to shovel the snow early in the morning. "But we just did it and we made it as a family sport and everybody did it." The biggest joy was to develop close friendships with the Sikh community there. "The best way to find community is to go to Gurudwara, the Sikh temple. It's not just for worship, but it's a social place. That's where we made friends."

The family moved to Columbus in 2007 because Parminder's husband was offered an excellent opportunity here as a Pediatric Oncologist at Nationwide Children Hospital. They did not want to leave Buffalo because of the relationships they had developed. But once again they went to the Sikh temple and found a new community there. Parminder's first impression of Columbus was very positive. "I loved the city," Parminder exclaimed in one breath and with much enthusiasm. "It was so clean, so green, it was newer than Buffalo." They moved to Dublin, in the Gordon Farms apartment community. She finds it amazing that "in Dublin, wherever you go, even if it's snowing, you can still see the fountains working. That is where our tax money goes, but it looks very pretty."

Parminder works as a Director of Risk Management and Quality Improvement at the Columbus Neighborhood Health Center, Inc. When she started working there in 2008 as a Quality Improvement Coordinator, she was not sure if that was the right place for her. "But somehow, after receiving some patient complaints, I understood that there are people outside who do not have health insurance, they will not be seen by anybody because they do not have any money." This was a wakeup call for Parminder. In India she used to serve the community through healthcare, so, she started investing more in her job, and came to feel the same satisfaction for helping the Columbus community as she used to feel for helping her community in India. Although she doesn't interact with patients directly, by developing a risk management plan and "working behind the scenes" makes her feel fulfilled. "It's a tough role where I am, but it's enjoyable."

Parminder is very proud of her son and daughter. Her daughter is in medical school at The Ohio State University. "In my daughter's eyes, I think she sees me as a role model," says Parminder. "She is very much interested in what I do at my job, and if I have a problem, how I've solved it." Her son is in high school and "he's an extremely confident child, extremely social person, and I would say he's pretty well mannered," she says with a mother's smile.

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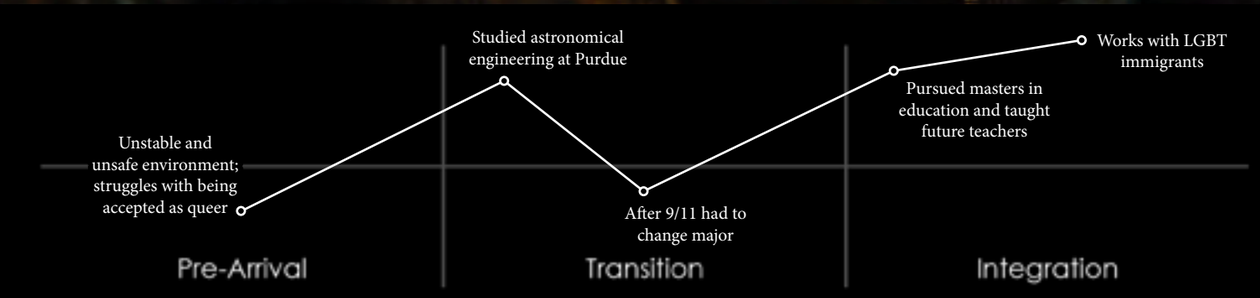

Aliya Rahman

I'm A Brown Immigrant And Queer

"When I was 5 years old people were saying: 'Aliya, Allah's going to get you for the way that you behave.' I think from early on I was saying here's my reality and all these people were saying it wasn't normal," explains Aliya Rahman from Bangladesh. Growing up, Aliya had to wrestle alone with multiple identity issues in a very unstable environment. "There, nobody's going to talk about it, it's illegal."

The genocide that began in Bangladesh, former East Pakistan, in 1971 had disastrous consequences for the already impoverished population. For fear of losing their son, Aliya's grandparents gathered all their financial resources and sent him to the United States. He came to a rural area in northwestern Wisconsin and it was there where he met his wife, a second generation immigrant of Norwegian and German descent. When Aliya was four months old her parents decided to move to Bangladesh. It seemed that things were less chaotic in the country.

From a very young age Aliya displayed behavior that was not acceptable for young girls in a Muslim society. "I was playing soccer, or I was talking back to people, or I was like 'when I grow up I'm going to be an astronaut,' " says Aliya. She had a very inquisitive and astute mind. When her parents were able to get an old computer, she learned how to program. "But people thought that was the weirdest thing."

"Very early the question of what was normal, and what you're supposed to do was just blown out of the water for me," concedes Aliya. There was a lot of dissonance around her identity, not only her sexual orientation, but also "I was in a multiracial, multiclass, multinational, Catholic-Muslim family" where nobody had any experience with cross-cultural communication. As a result, nobody talked about any of the issues that were surfacing within the family. Aliya's uncle, her mother's brother who lived in Seattle, was gay. However, "he never talked to me about it; that would have helped a lot," says Aliya with frustration. To make matters worse, Aliya's father always talked negatively about his brother-in-law, which discouraged her from bringing up the topic.

In order to cope with the lack of communication regarding Aliya's sexual orientation, she resolved to read "a lot of literature with pretty complex queer characters, which fit my identity a lot more." Also, she started focusing on "hyper-logical scientific stuff, which was a good release from having to have emotions." When her father realized that Aliya was queer, he thought perhaps he did something wrong in how he had raised her. "Though a lot of people will say that significant events have nothing to do with your sexuality, that you're just born that way and you don't choose. I don't think anything is that simple," acknowledges Aliya.

After finishing high school, Aliya decided to apply for college in the United States. In Bangladesh "homosexuality is illegal, punishable with prison," so Aliya realized that she was not going to be able to have a family and live a life that she so desired. She was offered a scholarship at Purdue University, to study astronomical engineering with specialization in propulsions. However, after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the focus of the engineering program shifted and "everybody I knew ended up making bombs and I didn't want to do that." So, Aliya changed her major to chemistry education. She then obtained her master's degree in curriculum studies and instruction.

During her studies, Aliya had an opportunity to lecture to future teachers. Her passion was to inspire them to be brave enough to share with their students their sexual orientation. She learned this from her own experience with her cousins from Bangladesh. "Everyone says they don't want to live in a prison. But it's very frightening to walk out of those bars by yourself. If there's someone who's with you, who's saying, 'Yeah, I think I know my way out, why don't we walk together,' it's a lot easier," emphasizes Aliya. She has 14 cousins, "and it ended up being that two of them also are queer of various sorts, and really needed somebody to trail-blaze."

Aliya is now the Lead Organizer for Equality Ohio, and as part of her job she provides training to those interested on "how to make social change, how do race, gender, and sexuality fit together, what do we do with LGBT immigrants, and how does policy fit into that." Aliya dreams of a day when she can take her family and her children to her homeland of Bangladesh. "But in order to do that, lots of things need to happen. That's part of the reason I work in this movement; if I do right in one place, hopefully it impacts somewhere else. I just want my family to meet my family."

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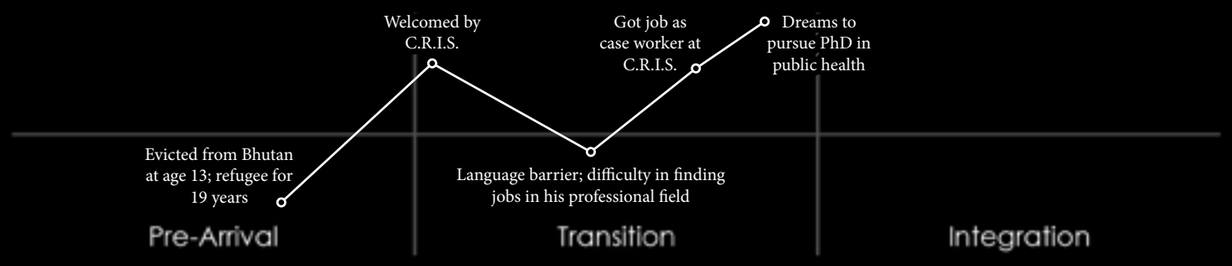

Jhuma Acharya

You Do Not Belong To This Country

Jhuma Acharya and his family were forcefully evicted from the southern part of the Kingdom of Bhutan in 1991, along with hundreds of thousands of other ethnic Nepali people. After more than 20 years of increased legal scrutiny of the Nepali Bhutanese, the implementation of the "One Nation, One People" policy reached a climax in early 1990s when the government of Bhutan started taking horrendous actions against this ethnic group.

The Acharyas received a notice to leave their village, or else they had to suffer the consequences. "Some people were burned alive, houses were burned, and so many families lost their lives together. Some of them were kidnapped, nobody knows where they are," says Jhuma. His older brother, a young man "ignited with issues coming up in the community," decided to take part in the anti-government demonstrations and was put in jail. Fearing for their safety, the family fled leaving behind all their possessions.

At only 13 years old, an intelligent and hard working student in ninth grade, with big dreams to become a medical doctor one day, Jhuma was not prepared for the terrifying rite of passage to manhood that followed. "It was July 17, 1992 when we left Bhutan to come to Nepal. I still remember," acknowledges Jhuma with pain in his voice. The message they left with was "you do not belong to this country." They traveled overnight to Nepal with four other families in a big truck. This trip left a huge impression on Jhuma. "There were lines and lines of trucks to refugee camp. You can just imagine, there were 59 trucks I counted when I came out of the truck, all look the same, same type of people," Jhuma describes.

After the exodus, the sixteen-member Acharya family settled in a modest hut in the refugee camp. A small amount of food was distributed every two weeks depending on the family size. There was no plumbing in the huts so they had a common water collection center, "where you have to line up your water containers." Water only ran for a couple of hours each day. The hut contained "kitchen, bedroom, living room, everything; we sleep on the floor, we never had bed." Little did they know that this would be their home for the next 19 years.

In the midst of darkness, hopelessness, and uncertainty, Jhuma and twelve other teenagers found a new passion to educate the children in the refugee camp. They started walking from hut to hut, recruiting children. "You are most welcome to come under my tree," they would advertise. "When the storm comes, send them back home; if sunny, take them to the shed," Jhuma explains. With no supplies, no furniture, no desks, and only a small board and a ninth grade education, Jhuma taught mathematics, science, and the English and Nepali languages to his first class of 59 students.

Although the Nepali Bhutanese people were allowed to live in refugee camps, they were not granted any rights in Nepal. Again, the message they received was "you do not belong to this country." Against all odds, as years passed, Jhuma, with resilience and perseverance, finished his high school education and bachelor's degree in geology in India, and then earned his master of science in parasitology in Nepal. During this time, he worked as a high school science teacher in a remote part of Nepal. Unfortunately, when the school district committee found out he is refugee, he was fired and sent back to the refugee camp. Again, the message he received was "you do not belong to this country."

"Then this issue of resettling came. We decided to come because future was so dark. At least if not me, my future generation would be proud to say they are citizens of a country, because I never was a citizen for so long part of my life," says Jhuma. His family came in three groups, and was resettled in Providence, R.I. in 2011. A year later, they decided to move to Columbus.

Hardship did not end when they left Nepal. There are many challenges as a refugee in the U.S. There are language barriers, and difficulty in finding jobs. Jhuma was so desperate to provide for his family that he took the first job he found, housekeeping in a hotel. "One day my supervisor found me crying in the elevator," confesses Jhuma. He had been a university lecturer in Nepal, and now he was pushing heavy carts of dirty laundry. But his supervisor encouraged him and urged him not to give up.

Jhuma took his supervisor's advice. He now works as a case worker for Community Refugee and Immigration Services and enjoys helping newly-arrived refugees, just like so many others helped him not too long ago. "I know dreams are difficult to come true, but if my dreams come true, I'll study doctorate in public health at The Ohio State University," says Jhuma with a hopeful smile. He wants to help the community by addressing traditional health-related issues among the Bhutanese people.

"Now I feel very proud I am no more refugee. I already have my permanent residence card. I am already in the track of getting citizenship. It is not easy, but I am ready to face challenges to attain that." Finally, after more than 20 years, Jhuma and his family have found a country where they belong.

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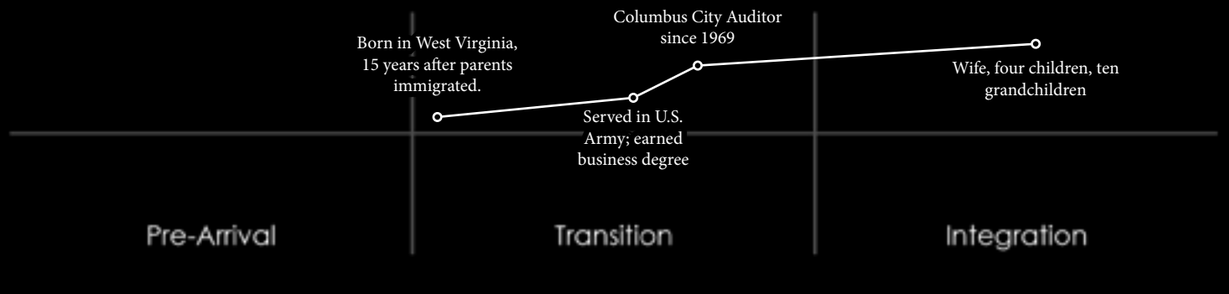

Hugh Dorrian

Hard Work And Faith In God

"In a clear day you can still see the old Holy Family Church steeple over there," Hugh Dorrian, Columbus City Auditor, says nostalgically as he points toward Franklinton from his office at Columbus' City Hall. That's the image that Hugh, a child of Scottish and Irish immigrants, remembers from his elementary school years at Holy Family Grade School.

Hugh's parents immigrated to the United States in 1920. His father was born in County Galway, Scotland and his mother was from Donegal, Ireland. They came on different boats. His mother came through Ellis Island, and his father came through Canada and worked his way into the United States. As he points to the large map of Scotland and Ireland on the west wall of his office, Hugh shares how "back in those days, in the old country of Ireland, it was the tradition that the youngest daughter stayed to care for the parents until the parents died." So, his mother, the youngest of eight children, followed the tradition and embarked on an adventurous journey across the ocean, after her parents passed away.

Hugh's mother had an older sister, aunt Mary, who lived in Pittsburgh. Aunt Mary helped Hugh's mom to find a job as a maid to the Andrew Mellon family. His father also had relatives who preceded him to Pittsburgh, so he also moved there. With a smile on his face, Hugh recalls his parents' love story. "The single Irish boys always knew where to find the single Irish girls," he says. "They would go to the service quarters of the Mellons, the Carnegies, and the various wealthy people in Pittsburgh." That's where they met.

When his father lost his job in Pittsburgh, they moved to West Virginia, where Hugh was born, and then found a more permanent job in Columbus. It was here where they had their eighth child. Hugh and his siblings grew up in 'The Bottoms,' the historic area of Franklinton. He says, "Some people tend to think the term 'The Bottoms' is a derogatory term. But it is not. It has the lowest topography in Central Ohio," which makes is susceptible to floods. He remembers how they were flooded out of their home in January 1959.

The family's arrival to Columbus represented a new beginning. Hugh remembers stories of his dad saying he would come across areas that would say, "immigrants need not apply." Although in those days there was an isolationist feeling in America, that was not their experience in Columbus. They found an accepting community, especially at Holy Family Church. Hugh remembers how, because his parents had thick accents, kids in the neighborhood would come to their house and say "I want to hear your mom talk, Gee, she talks funny." But that never offended them. They felt welcomed and accepted.

His parents were hard working people. "My dad worked every day of the year except Christmas," says Hugh. He recalls with pride how his parents, who never went past the sixth grade of school, lovingly taught their eight children their credo, "you have to prepare yourself to work hard, get your education, and above all keep your faith in God." Hugh is certain that "this formula worked in 1920 when they came to this country. And I think it still works today."

Hugh and his seven siblings never forgot the lessons they learned from his parents. Michael Dorrian, Hugh's older brother, was a Franklin County Commissioner for fifteen years. Four of his five sisters were nurses. His younger brother, John, was a teacher. One sister has two masters' degrees. "Everybody ended up with some kind of a professional degree," says Hugh with pride in his eyes. Hugh served in the United States Army for two years and then earned a degree in business administration from The Ohio State University. He became Treasurer of the City of Columbus in 1966 and three years later was appointed City Auditor, "for better or for worse," he says jokingly. He has served as City Auditor for over four decades.

Hugh and his wife have four children and ten grandchildren. All his children are well educated and actively engaged in their communities. As a child of immigrants who found a new home in Columbus, Hugh has come to love and appreciate this city. "When we look at Columbus, there are over one hundred languages, we have a human collage, we have so many ethnicities, we have different colors, different levels of education. But when we put this all together we call it a community. The most important thing to all of us is to be respectful of each other, to accept each other, to understand each other."

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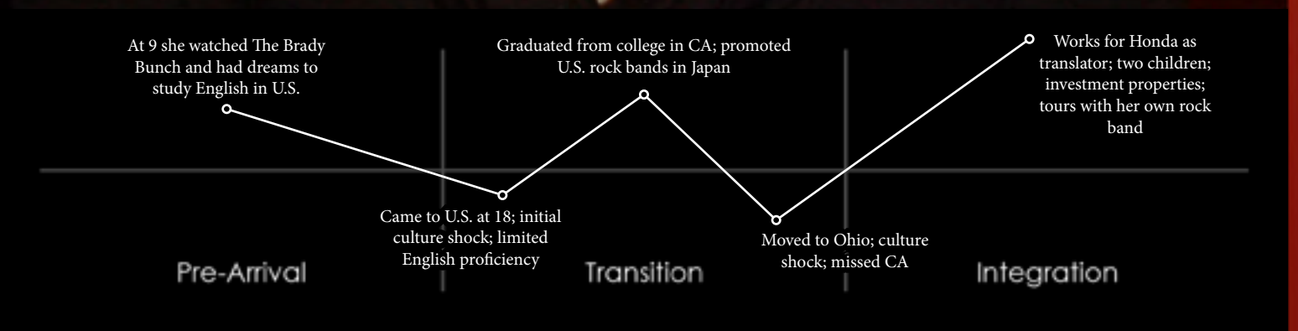

Harumi Thatcher

The Japanese Rock Star

"If I was not touring with rock bands, I was visiting agencies, interviewing models," recalls Harumi Thatcher about her exciting professional life in Los Angeles. Born in 1962, and raised in Tokyo, Japan, Harumi was a "surprise child" for her family. She was born when her father was 45 years old. And to this day she has continued to surprise the world with her many gifts and talents.

Miko, as her friends call her, is an unusually independent Japanese woman. When she was nine, she decided on her own that she wanted to come to the United States to study English. She recalls American TV shows like The Brady Bunch influenced her at that age. She was drawn to the excitement and glamour that to her represented the United States, and, at age 18, her dream came true.

When Miko moved to Los Angeles to attend an English language school, she was completely on her own. She made another Japanese friend, but neither of them had very good English skills. They didn't have a car, so they had to look for an apartment by a bus line. Once they rented an apartment, they didn't have electricity and gas for many months, because they didn't know how to communicate with the electric and gas companies. Also, they didn't have any furniture, so they had to sleep on the floor. Although it was a tough time, Miko exclaims, "I loved every single minute of it. I loved that fact that I was independent, but I still missed my family."

As soon as she graduated from California State University, Long Beach with a bachelor of science in biology and chemistry, she started "using my knowledge, and became a rock band promoter," says Miko laughing. She always liked rock, partly because her brother had played in a rock band in Japan. So, she started going to Sunset Strip at 11 p.m. every night, "when the headliners came out, to see who has a potential of making it." With incredible creativity and entrepreneurship, Miko found starting rock bands, got them a record deal, promoted them on TV, radio, magazines, and scheduled tours for them in Japan. She used to hang out with famous guitar players like Marty Friedman from Megadeth, Jason Becker from David Lee Roth's band, and Alice Cooper. She had a roommate that was a cousin of Bob McAdoo from the Los Angeles Lakers, and sometimes after a game they would play cards at her place. She dated a guy from Black Sabbath. "Everything was happening."

In early 1990, while Jason Becker, her boyfriend at the time, was recording an album in Canada, she decided to look for a job. She got a call from an agency that made her an offer to work for Honda in Ohio. "And I thought, where is Ohio?" admits Miko. Even though Jason Becker didn't come with her, she decided to take the job. Moving from California to Ohio was more of a culture shock for Miko than moving from Japan to California. She came in January, was welcomed by a blizzard, and she didn't have any winter clothes. She says as she recalls with horror, "I came from Hollywood, with a black mini skirt, fishnet tights, boots and a fur coat. That's all I had."

Although she came here for a six-month contract, after 23 years she is still here. She met someone; she got married and had two children, a daughter and a son. She is divorced now, but "we all get along really well, no hurt feelings."

With her adventurous spirit, she made it work and came to like Ohio. She enjoys her day job as a principal translator and interpreter for top executives at Honda. "If you're good at music, you're good at language. It's like listening and playing," she explains. Miko has had her own rock band, OL-JAM, for the past 10 years. They practice in the basement of her "totally Japanese looking" house in Dublin and play for private clubs and parties.

Miko loves the freedom that she has, and her many friends. "I never get lonely," she says. Miko feels she has accomplished her dreams and is happy here. She has a good job, investment properties, and plans to retire in Laguna Beach, California, in a house she owns by the ocean.

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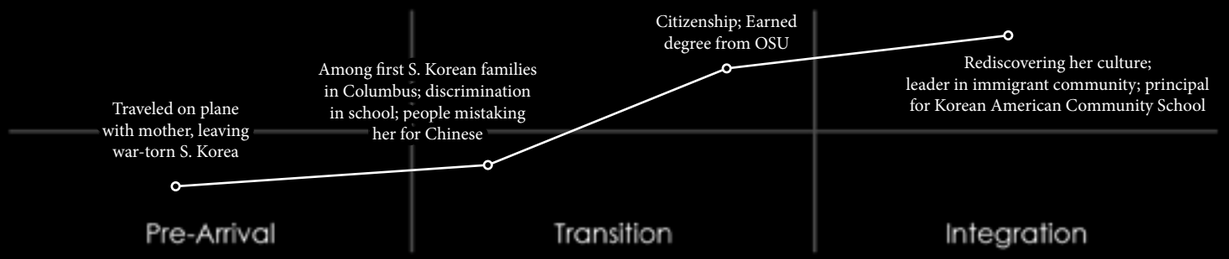

Nancy Pyon

Untold Stories And Unsung Heroes

Sitting in San-Su Korean BBQ restaurant on Bethel Road early in the morning, surrounded by Korean crafts and art, with Korean pop music playing in the background, with the sound of the vacuum cleaner working in the distance, and with a big folder full of artifacts, old *Dispatch* articles, letters, and original passports in front of her, Nancy Mi Chong Pyon shares her parents' immigration journey from a war-torn South Korea to the United States.

Nancy's parents grew up during the difficult transition from the horrendous Japanese occupation of Korea, to the split of North and South Korea after World War II. As a little girl, Nancy's mother witnessed murders and women being taken advantage of during the war. Nancy's father worked for the United States-occupied Korean military forces at Camp Humphreys military base in the Finance and Accounting Department. His sister had married an American soldier and had moved to the United States. Hoping for a better future and encouraged by his sister, Nancy's father decided to come to the United States and start a new life here. In 1974, Nancy and her mother followed. Nancy was one year old at the time. Her mother was scared, having to leave everything behind, and navigate a completely new system. "I admire her for her courage to leave familiar surroundings and to relocate with a child to another country, not knowing anything, how to read, or how to communicate clearly about where she was going."

Nancy's family was among the first Korean families to resettle in Columbus. With only a high school diploma, Nancy's father continued his education and earned his Associate Degree in Computer Science and Business Data Processing Technology from the Columbus Technical Institute. After having several other jobs, he obtained a position as a computer programmer for the State of Ohio. Nancy's mother worked most of her life in the Sheraton Hotel restaurant as a greeter. Nancy remembers how one day her mom came back home and asked her to fill out her tip sheets. Usually her dad was the one that would help her. "And I realized that day that she could not read English." With tears rolling down her face, Nancy expresses her deep gratitude for the sacrifice that her mother made for their family. Through the excellent oral communication skills that she acquired as a greeter, Nancy's mother became a well-respected member in the Korean and larger Columbus community.

Life as an immigrant child was not easy for Nancy. She changed her name from Mi Chong to Nancy when she got her naturalization, because her father had experienced discrimination and he didn't want Nancy and her sister to go through the same things. "Unfortunately I felt sometimes there was discrimination but racism as well," remarks Nancy. She felt a pressure to try to fit in. Because at the time China and martial arts were very popular, "every Asian person was considered Chinese." Although the family practiced Korean traditions at home, Nancy's parents did not encourage their children to learn the Korean language, because they were afraid they would not adjust as well to the American culture.

In 2004 Nancy started a journey of her own, to engage with the immigrant community, and to reconnect and understand her culture as a Korean. She was offered the opportunity to work as an Insurance and Real Estate agent. Through this position, she identified basic needs in the immigrant community that go beyond insurance and real estate, to understanding things like how to obtain a driver's license. She is very passionate about volunteering, about raising awareness of the Korean culture, and about inspiring young professionals. She currently serves as the Principal for the Korean American Community School of Central Ohio, where she bridges the Korean and American cultures. After enumerating countless organizations that she volunteers for, Nancy says, "There are a lot of organizations that I'm very passionate about, that are not Asian related. I think it's important to not segregate yourself in one community, but understand and be willing to get involved with other communities other than just your own."

Nancy would like the American community to understand that immigrants "are making a lot of positive contributions to society and to the local community, whether it's cultural diversity, or creating jobs. There are a lot of positive things, we're trying to make positive contributions, to volunteer, to have an impact." She feels a sentimental attachment to the immigrant community in this city that she loves. "There are a lot of untold stories in the community. There are a lot of unsung heroes that don't want to be known, and who don't tell their stories because they're humble. The immigrant communities know who they are, but the American community doesn't know."

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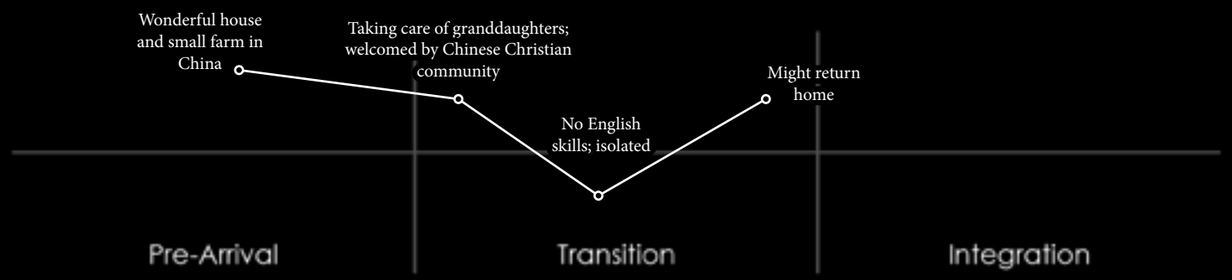

Shihua Long

Every Senior Person Misses His Past

"As a senior person, I tell you, no matter what happens, anything better presenting in front of you, every senior misses his past," acknowledges Shihua Long through a translator. Shihua is 65 years old and he comes from Changsha, the capital of Hunan province in China. Changsha is located in south-central China, and is about 80 miles south-west of Shaoshan, Chairman Mao Zedong's home town.

Shihua comes from a rural area in China, and he used to be a farmer. He and his wife had a good life back home; his family was "doing really good among local people." They enjoyed being hospitable and all their friends and relatives thought their house was "one of the best in the province." They had different crops, and raised pigs, ducks, and chickens. They have three children, two sons and one daughter. "One son went to college, one daughter graduated from high school, and one son came to the United States. That was a big deal at the time, in that area," explains Shihua with great pride.

Today, Shihua lives in New Albany with his wife, oldest son, daughter-in-law and three granddaughters. His son's house is situated in a residential area with beautiful European-style town homes and surrounded by lush woodlands. He and his wife came to the United States for the first time in 2000, and since then they have moved back and forth from China twice.

The reason they came to the United States is because their oldest son asked for their help with raising the granddaughters. His son came in 1997 for a postdoctoral research position in chemical engineering at an Americans university. Shihua and his wife came to help their son, because they knew that would make him happy. "In United States if you have grandchildren, hiring someone to take care of them takes money and we don't know if they can do it well. But their own parents is a guarantee they will take good care of them," says Shihua.

Unfortunately, even after more than 10 years in this country, "to be honest, as a senior, I'm not really adapted here so far," says Shihua with a lower voice. He doesn't speak English at all, he doesn't have a driver's license, and thus finds living in the United States very difficult. Most days, Shihua does gardening outside the house. His wife cooks, cleans the house, and takes the grandchildren to school. He found his community at the Chinese Christian church. There he made friends from different places in China and "communication is very smooth with them." The church provides free English classes and Shihua is taking classes, but it's not easy.

Life in United States is very different than in Mainland China. Although Shihua cannot communicate with non-Chinese speaking people without a translator, he enjoys the political stability in the U.S. "Many people feel peace here," he says. Also, after coming to the United States, Shihua was overwhelmed by the love he received from the Chinese Christian community and he and his family decided to become Christian. He says this brought a lot of peace into his life and he is more honest than before.

His biggest hope is to have a healthy body and not to disappoint his children. Shihua and his wife feel torn between staying in the United States and continuing to be a support for their oldest son, and returning to China where their other two children and their families live. Their other son used to work for China Telecom, a Chinese state-owned telecommunication company. But since he was diagnosed with cancer, he cannot work anymore and needs to receive medical care. Their daughter owns a glove manufacturing plant in China.

Shihua and his wife are waiting to take the citizenship test this year. If they don't pass, he thinks they might return to China. Although they love their son and his family here, they miss their homeland. "We are getting older and all we have left is memory about the past," says Shihua with a nostalgic smile.

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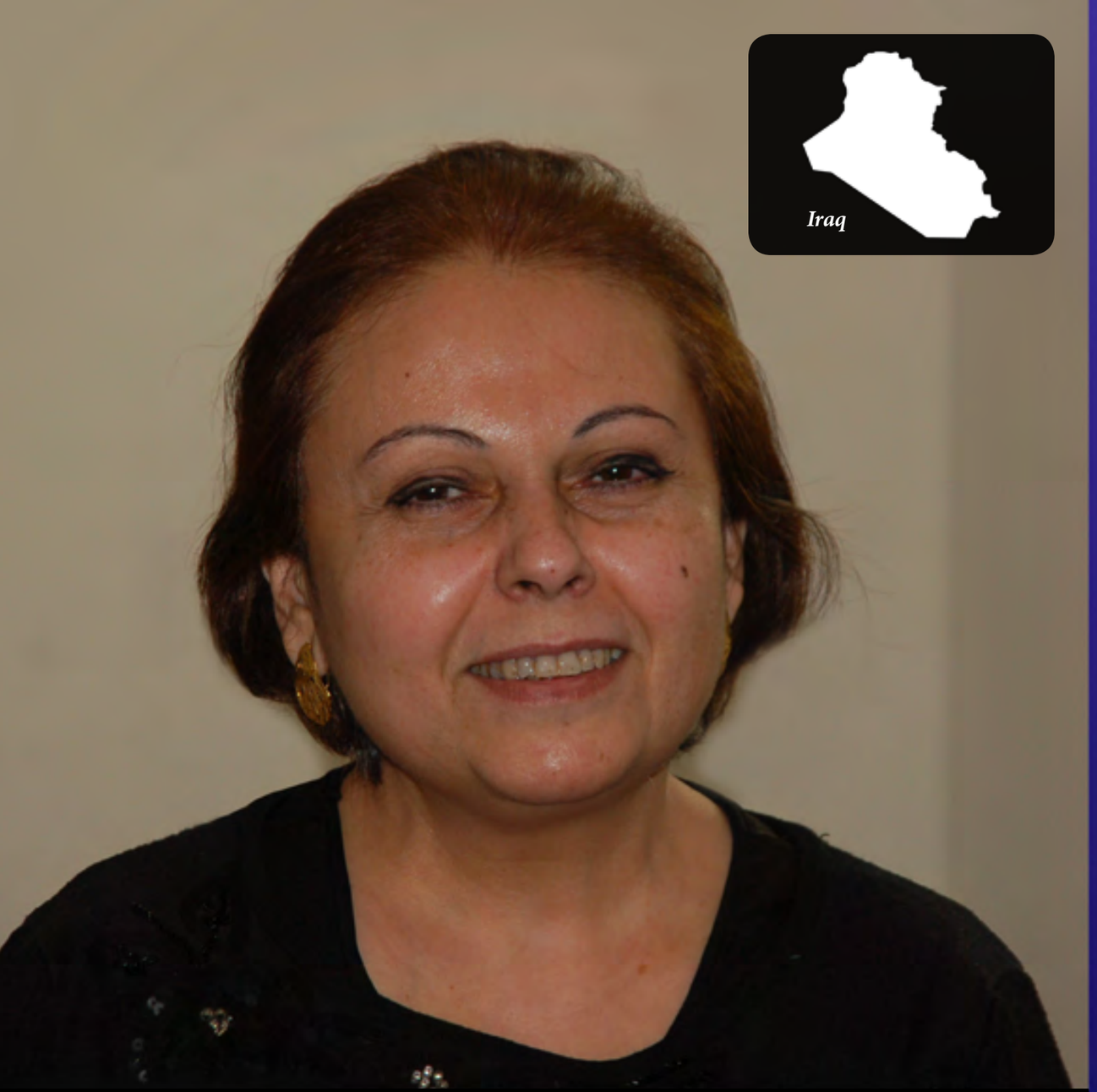
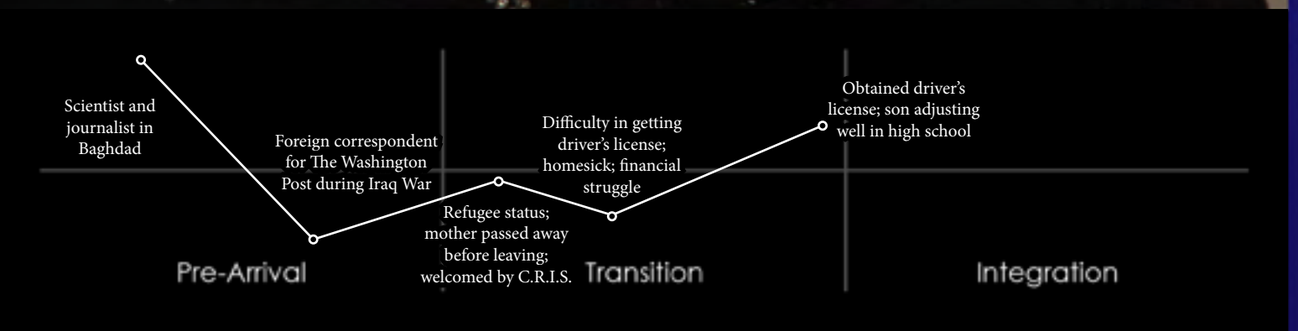




Sahar Nageeb

Peace Of Mind

"I was very anxious, because when you choose to live in a country that you have never been there is an adventure," says 50 year old Sahar Nageeb from Baghdad, Iraq who just arrived with her 16-years-old son, Abdullah, in Columbus as a refugee in November 2012. This sweet lady with an Iraqi accent and a kind smile carries an incredibly thrilling story.

An intellectual woman, with degrees in Chemistry and Foreign Language Translation, at one time a Chemist in the Solar Energy Research Center of the Iraqi Scientific Research Council, at another time an anchor TV presenter for a Computer Science program on Iraqi TV channel, a Baghdad foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* during the Iraq War, a single mother, and a Sunni Muslim. These and many more are identities that Sahar carries in the United States. "Maybe you have a bad idea about Iraqi people, but most of the people who are coming here now from Iraq come from high degree background. And when they come here they are now feel frustrate because they couldn't function as well as they were in their past."

While going through Facebook family pictures on her laptop computer, Sahar brings to life memories from a time when Iraqi people were living in peace, Sunni and Shia Muslims living together like brothers. After World War II, Sahar's uncle served as the head of the Intelligence for the Kingdom of Iraq, and Secretary for the King. During his career he lived for five years in England, as the Military Secretary at the Iraqi Embassy. Sahar explains that "my uncle and my family is an ordinary family, not very high class. But what I want to tell you is that it's open for all, if he is intelligent, clever, and a noble one."

Sahar shares with joy about the famous Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad, where every week at Shahbandar Café she would be surrounded by intellectuals from all fields, and they would read poems, and participate in impromptu performances. Sahar is proud of her heritage. "Iraq is the cradle of civilization you could say, many prophets are buried there, it is known for two great rivers, many civilizations were formed there, even the first land for writing was in Iraq," says Sahar.

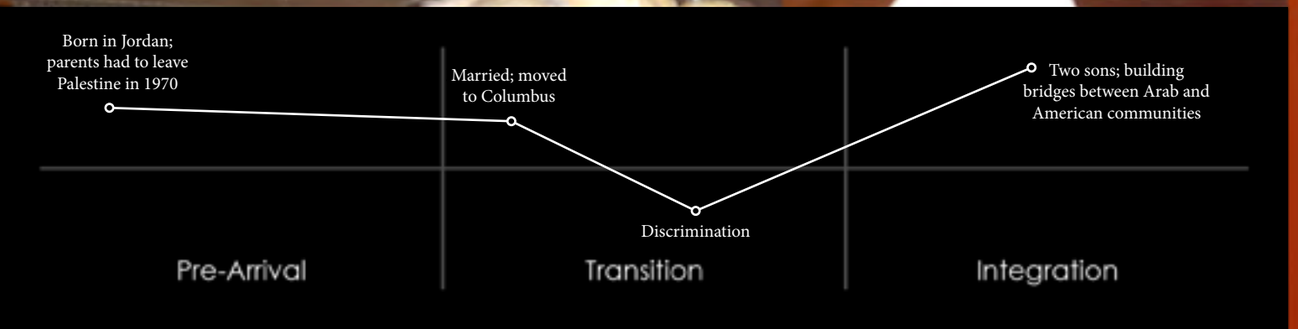
But things took a sudden drastic turn in 2003 with the United States invasion of Iraq. Sunni and Shia religious and political officials turned against each other, and regular people from both sides suffered the consequences. The educational system became corrupted and politically-biased. Baghdad became a war zone with dangers at every corner. The famous Mutanabbi Street was bombed and destroyed. At 37, Sahar had just graduated with her second degree in Foreign Language Translation, so she decided to work with American freelance reporters who needed translators. This led her to work with *The Washington Post* and later *The New York Times*.

Sahar's decision to be a correspondent placed her in a very risky position. There is one particular incident that she will never forget. In 2007 she was covering a story in an area of Baghdad where there were demonstrations. Suddenly, a few men from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior surrounded her, started questioning her, and captured her and two of her colleagues. They were kidnapped, stripped of all their possessions, and thrown into an old abandoned building. Sahar thought that was the end. But, as a brave woman who was prepared for anything, Sahar was hiding a cell phone in her shoe. She was able to make a call at her office and let them know she was in danger. Her colleagues at the office phoned the American forces and a few hours later they came. When questioned by the Americans, the Iraqi men denied anyone's presence in that building. Sahar overheard the conversation, and with all the courage she had left, came outside and yelled, "I am here, I am here, how could you say I am not here?" Thankfully, the American forces took Sahar and her colleagues to a safe place. However, "after this tragedy, a week later, a colleague from *The Washington Post* was killed in that same area," says Sahar with deep sadness in her eyes.

When given the opportunity to apply for immigration to the United States in 2009, Sahar accepted. "I could live with the car bombs, everything, because with the most tension years I could live there," acknowledges Sahar. But she was willing to make the sacrifice of leaving her cherished homeland to offer her son a better future. She waited three years for approval. "Waiting is the miserable thing," emphasized Sahar. She was worried about leaving her mother, her brother and his family in Iraq. She was worried that they would not accept her application. Finally, when the approval came she was happy.

However, right before leaving to the United States, another dark cloud came to Sahar's life when her beloved mother passed away. "Sometimes my mother said that the most clever engineering in the universe is our God. He could put the right things in its place. So when she died I remember her words," explains Sahar with tears in her eyes. Her mother did not want to leave, so Sahar thought that maybe this was God's plan.

Although Sahar faces many difficulties as a newly-arrived refugee in Columbus, she describes her life as having "peace of mind." She appreciates American people. "When I came here and saw them greeting each other even when they don't know you, and helpful and feel very human to each other. That's what I like." Sahar wants her son to graduate from high school with good grades and attend university. She wants him to learn to be good to all people, "to separate our nobility, and to say that other people are good, and not bad people. We have to emerge with other culture, and take the good, and give them our good."



Samia Alzier

One Hundred Percent American And One Hundred Percent Arabic

"My son came running from outside, he was playing with kids in the neighborhood. And he said, mama, am I 50-50 American-Arabic? And I said, look, you are 100 percent American and you are 100 percent Arabic." This is the legacy that Samia Alzier wants to leave for her two sons.

Samia was born in Amman, Jordan, but her family is originally from Bethlehem, Palestine. Her parents moved to Jordan in 1968 and most of her siblings were born there. After the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement in Washington, D.C. in 1995, her family was allowed to return to their home in Bethlehem. Samia is proud to be a Palestinian. But when she thinks of home, she thinks of Jordan.

Growing up in Jordan was a very positive experience for Samia. Jordanians welcomed and treated Palestinians as their own. "We never felt we are just visitors to Jordan, we always felt we are part of the country," remembers Samia nostalgically. Her father and mother earned their degrees after they moved to Jordan. "I remember that three or four years in a row we were all studying for our exams, including my mom and dad. Everybody was studying hard, no television was allowed," laughs Samia.

A few months short of Samia's graduation from college in Jordan, her family was allowed to return to Bethlehem. That was a huge celebration. There were miles of cars parked with guests who welcomed her family back. Samia's grandfather had been a well-respected leader in Palestine. And now his son was returning home, "so for him to come back is bringing the whole legacy back again." Officials like Yasser Arafat and the priests of the Church of Nativity came to welcome her father.

Samia's life changed after her graduation when she met her husband. He was visiting Palestine, but he had settled in the United States some years before. After receiving her green card in a record time of 21 days, Samia found herself horrified in the middle of a historical snow storm in Columbus in November 1995. But she got used to it. To her husband's surprise, Samia decided she wanted to get a job. So, she took some management courses and then worked for the next nine years in business management. Her last job was assistant general manager for credit card processing company.

"I believe I am lucky that I came to Columbus. People were very nice to me," acknowledges Samia. Just like her experience in Jordan, she felt welcomed here. "For me to come here and to be treated exact equal to any other citizen, and accept me no matter, I appreciated that so much." and "that's something I try my best to teach to all the Arabs that come to this country."

Nevertheless, there are challenges that come with being an Arab in the United States. "Still we face stereotypes portrayed in the media for so long, that we are trying our best to correct." Samia has a deep conviction to stand for her opinion, which helps her to cope with and address these challenges. "You research, verify, make sure you're doing the right thing, and then you stand for it, no matter what." So, as the president of the Arab American of Central Ohio and a Board member of the Noor Islamic Cultural Center, Samia builds bridges to and raises awareness of Arabic culture, language, and people.

"Always people fear of what they don't know. So, when they find somebody to explain, then they understand." explains Samia. Throughout her life as an Arabic immigrant in the United States, Samia has trained herself to expect to be treated differently when people first meet her. But she believes that with perseverance, patience, and an open mind Americans will not find her or the rest of the Arab Americans any different than them.

Samia is proud of her work with the Arab Americans of Central Ohio. The organization has representatives from 22 Arabic countries, and represents the three religions, Jewish Arab, Christian Arab, and Muslim Arab. "It makes me happy to see that at a small scale we were able to achieve our dream to get together and unite, at the end we all have the same goals to have a better future for our children and live a better life."

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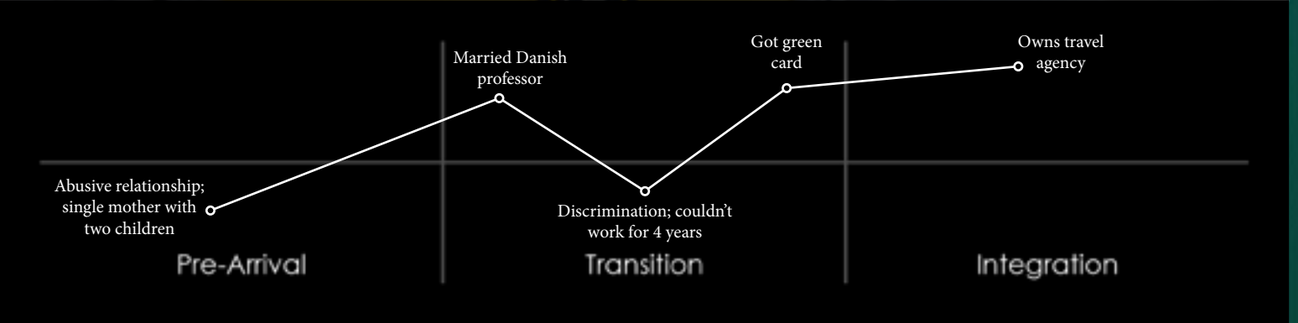

Meibe Cabral Villumsen

Separate A Place In Your Heart To Love America

When Meibe Cabral Villumsen came to the United States from Brazil in 1990, she was confused, recently fired, and had two small children. The dreams she had when she was a teenager had been crushed when her first marriage had turned into a physically and emotionally abusive relationship. When a friend invited her to Miami, Florida for a short business trip, she decided to spend six more months there to learn English. Later, she traveled to Columbus, where her friend's aunt lived. Meibe had no idea that this place would become her new home.

Meibe was born and raised in Rio de Janeiro, in the 1970s. "I was a baby from rock 'n' roll era, you know. Woodstock and crazy people," she says, with a smile and a Brazilian accent. She married young and had two children, Erica and Tercio. At 22, she divorced and had to survive as a single young mother with two children in a "macho country." She had to leave her children with her mother an hour and a half away, and work two jobs, as a Brazilian History teacher during the day and a travel agent during late afternoons.

Her arrival to Columbus represented a new beginning, but also a process of difficult realities. "It was crazy, because I didn't know anybody. I took the phone book and looked at last names to see if there is any Portuguese name, so I could call and see if they were Brazilian." One day she met a family, two teachers, who helped her to get her driver's license and offered their support. She remembers learning how to drive an automatic car by phone. A friend she had made was giving her instructions over the phone as she was trying to figure out how to drive the car.

Meibe extended her tourist visa for six more months, during which time, she met a Danish professor from The Ohio State University who was teaching Astronomy. Four months after, they got married and she brought her two children from Rio de Janeiro. It took four "enormous" years to get her green card. Her husband did not allow her to work during this time, because she did not have a work visa. She couldn't travel back to Brazil, although her father was diagnosed with cancer. "It was a rough, rough, rough path. But it was great, too, because it root me here in a sense." She built relationships with people from a church she found, and that helped her to learn the culture and the language better.

As one of the few Brazilian immigrants in Franklin County at the time, Meibe faced a lot of resistance from the community when she first moved here. Her children attended Upper Arlington High School and Meibe remembers "during a Parent Teacher Organization meeting one of the mothers pushed her girl to sit in another place." Another time, a friend was trying to find her house, and when he asked a neighbor, she exclaimed, "Oh, a black woman with a white husband? Yeah, she lives right there." But Meibe was stubborn, she had principles to guide her through, and she had faith in God. "Stubbornness helps you cope with anything. Every time someone would say to me, 'you cannot do that,' I would do it just to prove them wrong." She affirmed her own self-worth, knowing that God created her beautiful. Proudly she says, "Your eyes is blue and I love your eyes, it's beautiful. But I think mine is beautiful, too. And you're never going to take that away from me."

Meibe was able to find a community in various environments, such as at her church, with Brazilian students from The Ohio State University, with her husband's friends, and through the travel agency that she eventually opened. Throughout the years, she learned to appreciate the United States, and has this advice to new immigrants: "If you come to America, even if you love your country, separate a place in your heart to love America; because that's the only way you're going to be able to understand them." She loves American basketball, music, and is fascinated by parades and marching bands.

To Americans, Meibe advises, "You don't need to change who you are; you just need to accept that there is more than you, not only you." To immigrants she says, "Find something you have in common. God create everybody different. But we always have something that we are equal. Take that common element and make this as your beginning."

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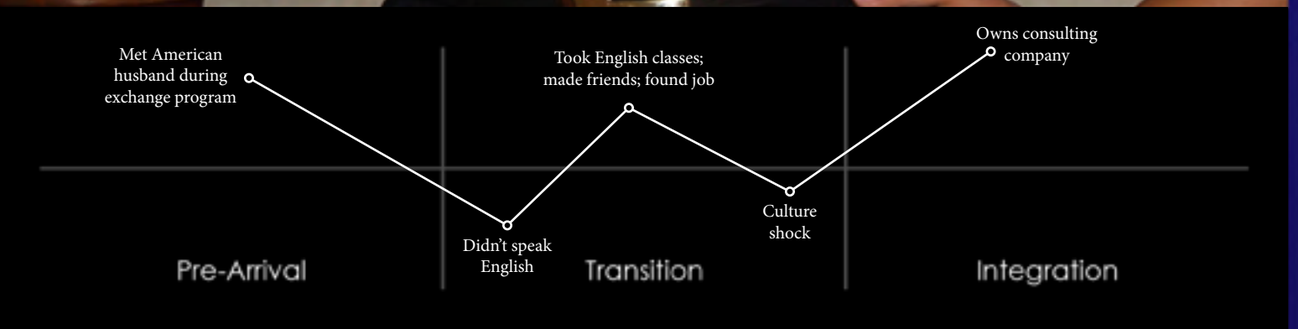

Natasha Pongonis

The Reason I'm Here Is Love

From a lovely two-story, red brick office building located in the Discovery District, the eastern part of Downtown Columbus, an Argentinean immigrant recounts her story. Natasha Pongonis comes from the city of Cordoba in Argentina. "From a very young age I was pushed to be independent, to make my own decisions, and to be responsible for the choices that I make," says Natasha as she remembers her mother's advice. She left her country at 17 to finish high school in Belgium where she learned French. She then returned to the Catholic University of Cordoba to complete her architecture and urban planning degree. She finished her thesis in Venice, Italy where she learned Italian and discovered her passion for marketing and communication.

Natasha met her husband in 1998 during a six-week student exchange program between her university and The Ohio State University. At the time they became friends because she didn't speak English but he spoke fluent French. "In the beginning he was pretty much my voice when I was at OSU, and based on that friendship developed into something more," recalls Natasha with a smile. After graduating from college, in 2000, she moved to Columbus. "The main decision was based on the person who I loved, this was his home and he has strong feelings and knew he wanted to stay here. And I was open to that, come here and build our family."

"I think that the community that I met in Columbus was very supportive," recalls Natasha. Her integration into a new culture, new language, and new community has not been without struggles. When she came in 2000, she had education and experience, but didn't speak English. She took free English classes provided by the City of Columbus. One year later she acquired enough confidence to apply for jobs and was offered a sales position with Virginia Homes. She was impressed that there was "a company here who was open to give me a chance, knowing that my skill wasn't strong."

Dealing with culture shock, and adjusting to the more formal and rigorous American way of life, was a learning experience for Natasha. She realized that priorities are different in this culture, and she has come to embrace that. "We are pushed and we are expected to be the best that we can be in every level. And I like the challenge. It's always being the best and overcome different challenges. And not being set with being content."

An element Natasha has missed from her culture has been the ease of developing meaningful relationships. She feels life here is always planned and scheduled, and she "left aside a little bit of that spark, of being as spontaneous as we Latinas are back home."

Natasha comes from a traditional Latin American family, where everyone lives in the same area, within walking distance. Her mother had eleven brothers and sisters. Although her mother passed, when Natasha goes back to visit, "I feel like being back home because we are so tight," she says. "I think sometimes for family is not about the face to face, it's about more of a strong relation that you have and it has nothing to do with the distance."

"My mother helped me to become who I am today," says Natasha with teary eyes. A strong and well- educated woman, her mother was quite strict, "but at the same time she was very realistic in her expectations." Her mother's influence has had a tremendous effect on Natasha's life. Today she is a very successful professional, the Co-Founder of Social Media Spanish and Social Media Director at DK Web Consulting; she has worked with companies in Europe, North and South America developing a strong sense of understanding companies' needs and assuring brands' relevant online presence.

Natasha also has a passion for investing in the Latino community, particularly developing women. "I strongly believe in educating young women; not many families have the opportunities or knowledge to guide them into making the right decisions." Among many other activities, Natasha has served as Vice President for the Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting, Columbus Chapter (ALPFA), and currently volunteers for Women for Economic and Leadership Development (WELD) and is a Girl Scouts of Ohio's Heartland. "At the end of the day I want to be a role model for my kids. For me it's not about how much money you bring home, it's about how much of the values you pass to your family."

Valuing her Hispanic heritage, Natasha always reminds her two children that they are Latinos. But even more importantly, she says, "my goal is to make them citizens of the world, and not only citizens of the United States of America."

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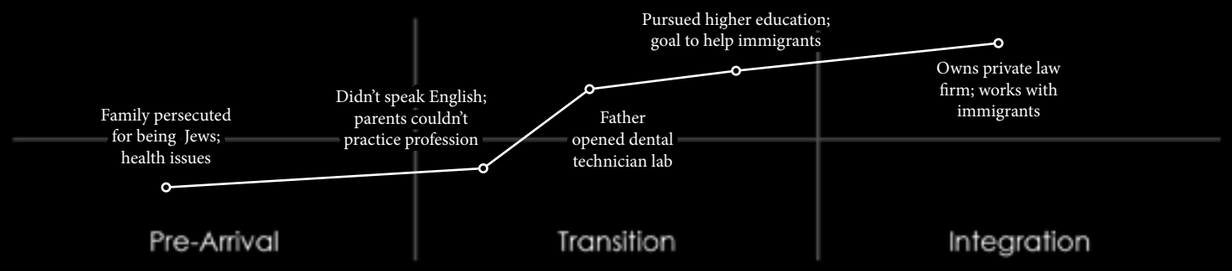

Inna Simakovsky

Living Without Persecution

"In the former Soviet Union they would write Jew on your passport and you were then marked with the scarlet letter for life. Jews were not free to practice their religion openly and the culture and traditions had to go underground and be taught and celebrated in secret. Jews were not given employment, education, or opportunities to advance in the Soviet system because they were Jewish," recounts Inna Simakovsky who immigrated with her parents to the United States in 1976.

Inna's parents wanted a better Jewish life and opportunities for themselves and their family. In 1976, they realized that the gates had opened and they decided to leave without looking back. Inna remembers wearing her big 'shuba,' a fur winter coat, in which her mother had sewn jewelry. "You were saying goodbye forever," says Inna. Soon after they left, government authorities burned down part of the apartment where Inna's grandparents lived, "as punishment for my mother leaving the USSR."

Italy was the transit point, where the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society assisted Inna's family with paperwork for entrance to the United States. During the several months they were in Italy, her parents had to survive, so "they learned enough Italian to sell items on the market." Inna remembers how, the cheapest Italian pizza consisted of dough, cheese, and potatoes. "No sauce," she says, "so when we came to the U.S., American pizza with sauce was foreign as were so many other things such as peanut better."

Once their visas were approved, Inna and her family immigrated to Louisville, Kentucky, where they were adopted by the Jewish community. With teary eyes, Inna thinks about the "very difficult existence" of her family at the time. "No language, no money, no familiarity with the system, and very limited support." This was the reality of recent immigrant families who were searching for a better life. Inna's family decided they were going to survive and strive for the American dream. They found distant relatives in Columbus, and relocated in 1977.

In Russia, Inna's father was a dental technician and her mother was an engineer. But when they first arrived to the United States, her father delivered pizza and painted houses, and her mother cleaned in a hospital. A few years later, "we still to this day have no idea how," Inna's father started his own dental lab. In an animated way, Inna describes her father's "zest for business, for marketing, and schmoozing; people really trusted him because whatever he promised, he delivered and his work ethic was amazing." Her mother worked full-time and "she was the rock at home." Inna remembers how every night they would eat together as a family. "I admire my mom so much for keeping our family unit strong and together and my father for always providing financial support," she says.

Although they were allowed to immigrate because they were Jews, the family had to relearn their Jewish culture and traditions. Inna attended a Jewish day school and was told the importance of marrying Jewish; she rebelled and dated non-Jews, but "when I met my husband, who was Jewish, it was like coming home," says Inna with a big smile. Inna and her husband understand the importance of raising their children with Jewish values and traditions.

Today, Inna is an immigration attorney and her brother works for the Pentagon. "Through very hard work and determination, my parents achieved the American dream," she says with pride. She is grateful to them for their sacrifice and courage to "drop everything and go to a land of unknown."

"I think part of the American dream is becoming a citizen, bringing family members over, and living without persecution." As an immigration attorney, Inna has the opportunity to help people from all over the world with different cultural and religious backgrounds navigate through the complex set of immigration laws and procedures. "Simakovsky Law has allowed me to come full circle as a refugee, a person and a lawyer. I also understand better than most how to assist people and provide effective advocacy and education because I have gone through this system myself."

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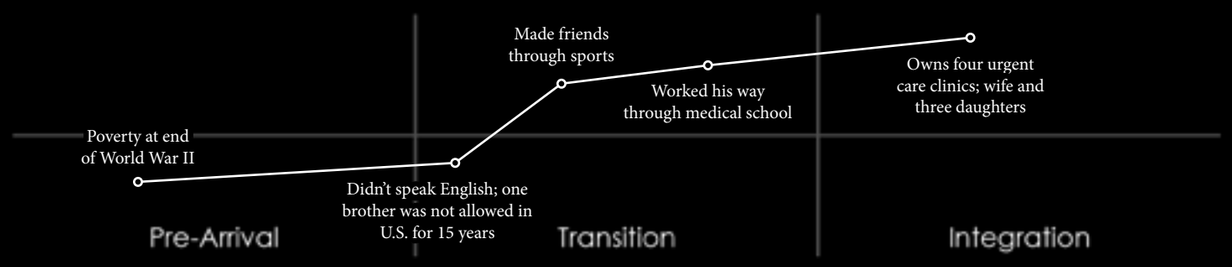

Nino DiIullo

Inspiration And Perspiration

Nino DiIullo, an Italian immigrant, recalled the beginnings of his family's journey in a new country, "You had to start at the bottom. But I think, if the attitude is there, what I call inspiration and perspiration, you can succeed in any society."

Born in Martina Franca, a town in South Italy by the Adriatic Sea, at the conclusion of World War II, Nino remembers playing with unexploded bombs and landmines. Jokingly he says, "I still have all my fingers, my toes. It was fantastic."

At the end of World War II, Nino's family made the brave decision to seek refuge in the United States of America. Nino's mother realized that Italy was not the place to raise a family at that time. Nino states with pride that his mother was "the trail blazer," coming over in 1952 and working for two years to earn enough money for the passage of the others. Two years later Nino and his older brother came. Their voyage across the ocean was on the USS Constitution, in the steerage section, which is the lowest part of the ship. But for Nino and his brother, who had grown up in a village without running water, central heating, or electricity, everything was amazing.

In 1956, the rest of the family came, except one. One of Nino's brothers is developmentally disabled, and he was not able to come into the United States. The immigration laws prohibited his entrance because his disease would have affected his ability to support himself. Nino recalls with sadness how the family was separated for fifteen years. His mother never gave up, though. Against all odds, the last brother did come to the United States, and the family was finally reunited. However, his mother became sick with a recurrence of rheumatic fever, and never saw the fruits of her labor. She passed away before Nino's brother arrived.

The DiIullos established their new home in Youngstown, Ohio. The family unit was at the core of their life. "Everybody working for the family to make the family prosper," Nino says. At the same time, Nino's parents knew they left behind the 'via vecchia', meaning the old ways. Having had only a second grade education, for them it was important that their children would learn English, get an education, and embrace America. "Hey, you're an American," they would say to their kids.

Reflecting on the perceptions his parents had about America, Nino notes, "they perceived America to be the land of opportunity." Their inspiration was that "if you work hard, you can mature, you can grow, you can be anything you wanted to be." But their integration was not without perspiration. Looking back, he feels that "deprivation and desire to succeed are important formative elements in any successful person."

For Nino, his passion growing up as an immigrant kid was sports. He found a community in his football team. And football was his ticket to college. He got a scholarship at Youngstown State University and then worked and took loans for medical school at The Ohio State University.

Nino has been practicing emergency medicine in Central Ohio for the past 35 years. He has moved around a few times, but he feels that Franklin County "has been a well kept secret, with an excellent community to grow and raise a family." He has been actively involved with Franklin County emergency medicine and helped set up the EMS system in the county. Nino owns three urgent care clinics in Central Ohio and one in Florida. He also has a rehabilitation clinic for people that have a difficult time recovering from dependence on drugs and alcohol. He is actively engaged in making people feel comfortable, caring for them, and truly wanting to see them healed from their addiction. Laughing he says, "I work anywhere from forty to fifty hours a week, and I'll probably do that for four or five more years." He is passionate about the diversity of care that he provides, be it urgent care, medical procedures, or rehabilitation care.

Now at the age of 67, Nino is a husband and father of three daughters. He proudly describes the immigrants that come to Franklin County as people who "have the ability to look beyond where they are today." He feels they add richness to society and when they come, "the new society benefits tremendously."

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Conclusion

So, what do you think? Did you learn something new? Did you cry? Did you laugh? Do you feel you were transformed? Do you want to read more? If that is the case, I achieved my goal.

As you read through the stories, there are three main stages that each of the immigrants went through: pre-arrival, transition, and integration. These stages are in chronological order from their childhood, teenage years or young adults, to their arrival in the United States, to their transition, and for some of them, to their integration in the Franklin County community. For each of the stages, there are several patterns common throughout all or most of the stories.

The first stage, the pre-arrival, includes the following themes: looking for new opportunities, learning English, political tension, war, genocide, refugee status, United States refugee intake. These are common events that lead immigrants and refugees to the United States. Some came from healthy and stable environments, and felt excited to come to this country. Others were panic stricken, frightened, confused, petrified, and arrived with crushed dreams. They came here because they had no hope and this was the only way out of a terrible situation.

The second stage, the transition, is the most rich in themes. I will describe the positive ones and then the negative ones. On the positive side, the themes are: United States government refugee intake, identify places of support, learning English, getting an education. The four refugees from this book were welcomed by a resettlement agency and were assisted with initial transition. One person took free English classes offered by the City of Columbus. They felt encouraged and were at ease when they achieved things like learning how to drive and obtaining a driver's license. Most of the immigrants found support through their ethnic community or their place of worship. Those that pursued education felt proud and hopeful.

On the negative side, the themes are: physical adjustment, lack of information upon arrival, language barrier, discrimination, clash of values, shift in cultural norms, and difficulty transitioning professionally. There were six immigrants who spoke of the shock they had with harsh and cold weather. Several mentioned that they were not aware of many free services offered in the county for newly-arrived immigrants and refugees. Most of the immigrants had a language barrier. Because of their thick accent some felt anxious and humiliated. There were some immigrants who encountered racism and discrimination because of their skin color, religion, accent, and level of education, and felt afraid and unsafe. Another theme was clash of values and this was prevalent in cross-cultural marriages, between spouses, between parents and their children who were born here. All the immigrants experienced a shift in cultural norms and lack of connection with the American community. Some felt there was no room for spontaneous community interaction, they saw people as friendly, but had difficulty in making friends, and found that Americans have a lack of sense of responsibility for those around them. Finally, the immigrants who came here as adults had difficulty transitioning professionally. Because they had foreign degrees, they were not able to practice their profession right away.

The last stage, integration, includes the following themes: marriage, starting a business, citizenship, volunteering, bridge building, advocating for immigrant community, tension within family unit, homesickness. The immigrants who got married here were able to fit in easier because of their spouse's network of friends and family. There were five immigrants who started their own businesses here and they feel passionate about their work. Most of them either received their citizenship or are in the process and they feel overjoyed, proud, and excited about becoming an American. Most of them are passionate about giving back to the community by volunteering and being engaged. Some are passionate about advocating for the immigrant community, raising awareness, and building bridges between the immigrant and American community.

On the negative side, most of them have experienced tensions within the family unit, between the parents that were born outside the United States, and the children that were born and raised within the American culture. Finally, most of the immigrants feel homesick at times; they feel nostalgic, torn, and sometimes unsettled. Although they live in the United States, they cannot and don't want to forget their homeland and home culture.

This project has great potential for practitioners, policy makers and the Franklin County community at large. The themes identified here can be utilized to continue the quest for understanding the immigrant population in our county. The stories can be used to identify gaps in service provided, offer ideas for new initiatives, and expand the process of immigrant integration.

Although this book ends here, the stories continue. The process of immigrant integration in the Franklin County community continues. For each immigrant, the story could follow two different paths. One path could lead to a happy ending in which the foreigners and the Franklin County community work together to build unified communities. The other path could lead to a sad ending where the foreigners remain secluded and disengaged, and what will be left will be "untold stories and unsung heroes."

Which path will the stories take? All of us, the Franklin County community, can determine that. Will we take time to find the foreigner in our midst, to listen, to understand, to learn, and together to create a stronger community?

Methodology

This is the first book of its kind in Franklin County. It brings together stories of people from 15 different countries who found a new home here. The data for Franklin County presented in the introduction were collected from the United States Census and The Global Report 2012, published by the Columbus Council on World Affairs.

For the purposes of this book, the definition for immigrant was taken from the Census: “any person born outside the United States, Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas; this includes anyone born abroad to a U.S. citizen parent or parents, naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (immigrants), temporary migrants (such as international students), humanitarian migrants (such as refugees and asylees), and undocumented immigrants; does not include native-born children of immigrants.”

The individuals were selected based on their status as first or second generation immigrants, and diversity in gender, socio-cultural background, age, and place of origin. Access to the immigrant population was obtained through direct contact, as well as referrals from local government and non-profit entities that provide services to the immigrant and refugee population.

The stories include two second generation immigrants. There are two purposes for that. The first is to reveal the life of immigrants seen through their children’s eyes. The second is to show the tremendous contribution that immigrants bring to our community through their children that are born here.

The interviews were audio-recorded and the length was between 45 minutes and two hours and 30 minutes. The recordings were transcribed and then condensed to the stories that you read.

There are two innovative visuals utilized in the book. First, there is an emotional journey chart. For each of the 15 people, you see below the photograph a chart that displays major events from their life and how it affected them emotionally, and their story. With the generous assistance of the Stratos Innovation Group, the emotional journey chart was developed as an innovative visual addition to the stories. The concept was taken from the field of service design, which is a process that helps organizations understand the behavior, needs and motivations of their customers, and portrays these visually. The goal is to search for the right questions to find answers that benefit the customers’ experience and the organization. The chart captures events and emotional levels in three stages in the immigrants’ journey, in chronological order: pre-arrival, transition, and integration.

Second, there is a word cloud included in this section. Word cloud is a powerful visual method of highlighting words that have prominence in the stories. As you can see, the word Family takes the largest space of any one word. The value of the family unit was prevalent in the stories. Other words of greater frequency are: People, United, States, Community, Mother, Came, Columbus, Children, Years, Country, and School. In summary, this word cloud represents, in a visually ingenious way, the many nuances of the immigrants’ lives and journey to the United States.

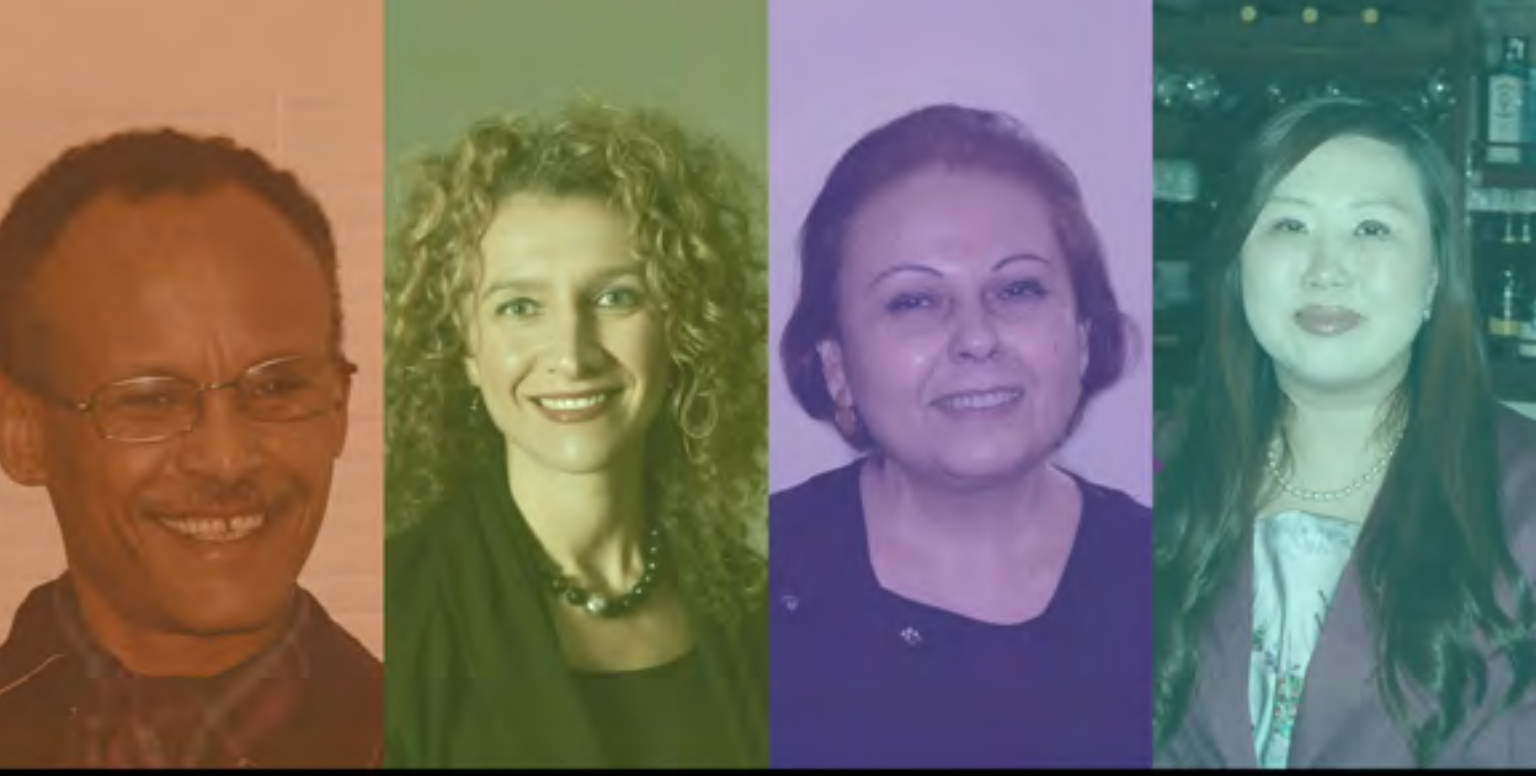
About the Author

Estera Piroșcă comes from the beautiful land of Braila, Romania and was blessed to have the opportunity to pursue higher education in the United States. As an international student, she has experienced some of the needs, challenges, expectations, and opportunities foreigners have in this country.

Estera is passionate about building bridges and fostering successful communication between the American and immigrant communities. She has embraced this project and has been deeply touched, challenged, and transformed by listening to and writing the stories of people who were brave enough, and sometimes forced to, leave their homes and come to a new land.

Estera's desire is that these stories will ignite a passion in the Franklin County community to overcome fear of the unknown and ask, 'Why haven't I met my immigrant neighbors and asked them where they're from, and how and why they came here?' By doing so, they will discover the unbelievable cultural wealth they have in the community, and they'll become better people.

Photo Credit: George K. Chow



Franklin County

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