

Kathryn Wasserman Davis 100 Projects for Peace Proposal

Asylum and Acceptance: Seeking Peace in Charlottesville, Virginia

A photo-narrative peace project documenting and sharing the life stories of refugees resettled over the last decade in Charlottesville, Virginia

Michael Keller
College of the Atlantic
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Project Overview

Interacting with international refugees has been a life-changing experience—an experience that introduced me to the personal horrors of war, famine, and persecution as well as the resiliency of the human spirit and the importance of community support for disrupted families seeking peace. I propose to collect, record, archive, and share refugee stories of asylum and acceptance through documentary photography and digital recordings in Charlottesville, Virginia, the city where I was born and grew up. Since middle school my life has intersected with the lives of refugees whose stories have spilled out as I helped a Congolese teammate write a poem in English, shared Orthodox Christmas with a Bosnian family, learned Serbo-Croatian on the soccer pitch, and drove a Burmese family to the health department for DPT shots. I learned about the concerns of international families, first as a public school student and youth soccer player, and later as an International Rescue Committee volunteer and English as a Second Language (ESL) mentor.

Peace Through Shared Experience

As I listened to refugee stories, I heard painful but brave narratives of leaving native lands to begin life in a new country. Although some have lived in Virginia for almost a decade, refugees are often invisible in the Charlottesville area although they present educational, employment, housing, transportation, and even public health challenges. As we shared a ride, chased a ball, or roasted a freshly slaughtered lamb on an outdoor spit, I have considered how most families in our country, including my own, were new here once and that all of us have significantly more in common than we have apart. Because peace demands understanding, empathy, and respect for what others value, *Asylum and Acceptance* will concentrate on our similarities, not our differences, highlighting the historical shared experience of life in a new land. Since simply arriving in a new place does not automatically restore peace to lives that have been involuntarily and often violently interrupted, the project will also help reveal ways to develop more equitable policies that creatively respond to legitimate refugee needs and concerns.

Now re-settled, refugee families pursue peace in their personal lives as they confront different customs and new cultural, racial, economic, and political tensions. Two public officials elected to represent Virginia in the U.S. Congress—deriding what they do not understand—recently made inflammatory remarks about immigrants and minorities. Former Senator George Allen addressed a Virginia student of Indian ancestry as “macaca,” and Congressman Virgil Goode, of the 5th Congressional District where I live, criticized Congressman Ellison of Minnesota for using the Koran in his swearing-in ceremony even though that particular Koran was previously owned by Thomas Jefferson, Charlottesville’s most famous citizen and the author of not only the Declaration of Independence but also the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Such remarks are especially ironic as Virginia begins observing the 400th anniversary of the immigration of 108 Europeans who crossed the Atlantic and founded Jamestown in 1607. Today’s immigrants, like the Jamestown settlers, are resilient and entrepreneurial despite the hardships and challenges.

Project Details

To demonstrate a continuum of migration over four centuries, I will document 108 refugees living in Charlottesville, VA, the smallest U.S city with a chapter of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The IRC, which in 2008 will mark ten years in Charlottesville and seventy-five years internationally, helps to resettle refugees and has made my city a more diverse and multicultural community. Charlottesville is a city where a grassroots initiative can make a difference in community relations and foster a spirit of

peaceful cooperation and mutual respect, instead of hostility and suspicion. My project is grassroots and local, yet global with the involvement of refugee families from at least three continents. In Summer 2007, I will use skills developed and knowledge gained at college by courses such as *Advanced Documentary Photography*, *Intercultural Education*, currently *Europe: Old Continent, New World* (an advanced seminar on the EU and immigration issues), and an independent study in research methodology, a summer working as an architectural photographer, as well as my previous experience as a mentor at the IRC, as an ESL tutor in a summer ESL immersion program for incoming COA students, and as a regular writing tutor during the academic year. I will document refugees' struggles and successes through personal interviews and photography, and include their stories of leaving their own countries and the important legacies and memories of former lives, as well as the transitions to Virginia and an ongoing acceptance of new careers and pursuits. Recognizing that refugees are a vulnerable population, I will develop safeguards and minimize risks to ensure that participants control their own narratives. All participants will be fully informed about the project and appropriate consents and approvals for public use will be digitally recorded before proceeding with interviews, photography, exhibition, or publication. All participants will receive cds of their interviews and copies of their photographs; ongoing consultations will occur throughout the summer. Documentary photography and digitally recorded interviews will occur in different work, study, and home contexts rather than as individual portraiture. The exhibition will highlight local refugee-owned businesses and entrepreneurs and provide a forum to disseminate information about refugee skills and potentials.

Timeline

Prior to setting up an office in week 1 beginning June 4th, I will review human subjects protocols, complete consultations with an oral historian and documentary photographer on project ethics, establish a project website, and begin gaining consents from participants suggested by IRC. In Week 2, in addition to scheduling interpreters for interviews where English is insufficient, begin interviews and photography that will continue through Week 8. Since refugees sometime have a unique sense of belongings and possessions, I will ask each participant to select a significant object that can be photographed or exhibited as a contemporary archeological artifact. During the photo-narration process, I will ask several participants to co-curate a community-wide exhibition based on the Peace Project photographs and interviews: all curators will be credited. In Weeks 9–13, we will design, install, and open the exhibition, and edit/revise/archive all products. In Week 14, I will prepare the final report and open two exhibits: one at C'ville Coffee, a meeting place owned and operated by a former Vietnamese immigrant, and the other hosted by the Charlottesville Community Design Center in a downtown pedestrian mall. In addition, I will seek out exhibit space at other local venues and at College of the Atlantic. I will invite public and private school administrators, ESL teachers, affordable housing and public health officials advocates, and elected officials to participate in the opening of the exhibit to foster cross-cultural understanding and to disseminate the stories of the 108 refugees and policies that will facilitate their acceptance into the community.

Anticipated Outcomes

Project outcomes include increased awareness of refugee issues and contributions, improved public relations, refugee services, and public policies as well as an enhanced sense of identity, belonging, and ownership for a group that is often forgotten, misunderstood, criticized, or neglected. *Asylum and Acceptance* will have lasting effects through a strengthened community voice articulating refugee issues, struggles, successes, and contributions. These refugee stories will provide models and inspiration for new arrivals struggling to create peaceful lives. Expanded awareness within the broader Charlottesville community should increase sponsorships and donations to the IRC and broaden refugee educational and employment opportunities. All profits from the sale of any photos will be donated to IRC. The project celebrates the entrepreneurship of the many refugee families with new businesses or educational successes. Project materials will be archived at COA and Albemarle Charlottesville Historical Society; anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured where requested. Designed as a seed project, the Peace Project will conclude in September, but I will pursue the topic for a panel discussion at the Virginia Festival of the Book as well as develop a COA senior project that will address refugees, xenophobia, and policies that influence integration.