

**Asylum & Acceptance; Seeking Peace in Charlottesville, VA**  
**Michael Keller: College of the Atlantic**

**Project Summary: Describe location, timeframe, participants, other funding involved, scope of work, and goals.**

The project, which took place in Charlottesville, Virginia during the months of June, July, and August 2007, involved identifying, interviewing, and photographing community residents who had come to the United States through the sponsorship of the International Rescue Committee. The project was funded exclusively through the Kathryn Wasserman Davis Peace Project. My project goals were not only to foster a spirit of understanding, shared experience, and acceptance among a community group that is often invisible in the larger community but also to recognize ways that re-settled individuals and families pursue peace in their personal lives as they confront different customs and new cultural, racial, economic, and political tensions. The participants were former residents of Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Myanmar, China, Afghanistan, Togo, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. In early June I sent out letters to prospective participants who were identified by the IRC Charlottesville Director, Susan Donovan. Throughout June, I received letters, emails, and calls from people who were interested in being involved in the project, and they formed the core group I documented. Late in the summer, as more people became familiar with the project, I had more referrals, especially within the Somali community. I was pleased by the enthusiasm of the people who responded, but disappointed that there were not more. There were some participants who did not want their names, interviews, or photos used. This made the project harder for me, but they were still tremendously important in contributing to my growing understanding of how these new community members start their lives over. For the participants who agreed, I visited them at their homes, coffee shops, soccer games, and workplaces to interview and photograph them in their everyday lives.

**Project Results: Self-evaluate the project; your assessment should enumerate what goals were and were not accomplished.**

I have been in contact with more than a hundred refugees in Charlottesville; however, I was not able to interview or photograph that many – not because of time constraints but because of hesitance and reluctance within the refugee community to talk “on the record.” However, many were willing to meet with me informally and contribute to my background information and knowledge of refugee issues. As of now, I have photographs of over 40 people and 10 audio interviews. So many IRC participants were concerned about confidentiality that many would not allow me to record or use their interviews publicly. In fact, this was an interesting thing that I learned from the project. Many people expressed discomfort with the refugee label and did not want to be included in a project that looked at this topic. For many *refugee* is a word of the past, not a label that defines who they are today. For a variety of reasons some participants expressed their desire for a certain degree of anonymity. A professional woman, for example, did not want to be perceived by anyone as a refugee, while a Serbian man taking a water break during a soccer match said – half seriously, half jokingly – that he hoped his picture wouldn’t find its way to The Hague. I learned this summer that these community members are quite complex individuals, and that many still carry a survivalist attitude. They are understandably suspicious of a project that might put them under the microscope, expose their identities, or ask them to explain themselves.

The final photographic exhibition installed at Cville Coffee will remain on display for the month of September. In addition, I have arranged to showcase a multimedia exhibit at The Charlottesville Community Design Center in Spring 2008. Originally planned for September 2007, the exhibit date has been rescheduled to take advantage of the celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the IRC, and the 10th anniversary of the IRC chapter in Charlottesville during April. During April, along with my exhibit, there will be a play about refugee experiences, documentaries done by newly resettled high school students, and lithographs of famous painters who were resettled by the IRC. I also will display the photographic narrative at College of the Atlantic's Blum Gallery during the 2007–2008 school year.

**Implications: What are the project's implications for peace? What are the future prospects for the project? What have you learned?**

Demystifying refugees is a very important part of this project. In Charlottesville, many local residents think refugees are backwards or primitive. I hope that my photographs and their stories help put an end to those beliefs and show the commonalities we share. This project spreads awareness of the hardships refugees continue to face as they try to “move up the ladder” from the bottom rung in a new place to find success in their lives. The photo-narrative exhibits show the hopeful yet realistic spirit of the unique group of people I met. Any money ultimately raised from photos will be donated to the Charlottesville IRC chapter with the intention of helping newly resettled residents seek more peaceful lives.

I began by looking for the common ground that refugees share among themselves and with the Charlottesville community. I was interested in the ways that participants sought peace in their new home. The Charlottesville refugee community is diverse, but not at all cohesive. I found some who proudly remembered their pasts, talking about it as a superior life, and those who wanted to forget the past and only think about the future. The participants who were enthusiastic about my project seemed really grateful to have an avenue to speak about their beliefs and experiences. For some it was almost cathartic; others welcomed the attention. Residents who relocated from Myanmar, in particular, were excited about getting attention because they are truly political activists, hoping to increase local and global attention for their struggles for democracy and to free Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest.

Future prospects for the project may include not only a new level of awareness but also increased advocacy for refugee issues, such as finding a new location for the street soccer court—an important place that brings the former Yugoslavians together to play soccer on a roller hockey court that is likely to be demolished to make way for a new vehicular parkway. Other refugee issues that need articulation include the need for more tutoring, not just in English, but also in subjects such as math and science. Many of those that I met left war-torn countries and have now found peaceful places to live. But some of the new lives have come at the cost of inner peace, and many are quick to offer outspoken critiques of the American lifestyle that has robbed them of a peaceful family life. The impediments to living peacefully include working too many hours away from home, not enough family time, the reliance on the automobile, inadequate mass transit, and the difficulty of finding childcare. My hope is that refugee voices can become stronger so that refugees can begin to affect public policy by participating in the civic life of our community as one new citizen suggested at the Monticello Fourth of July naturalization ceremonies I attended with refugee families. My own intention is to continue this project as my COA senior project and to be a more informed advocate for refugees seeking to restore peace to their lives.

