



Planting the Seeds of an Inclusive Culture

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Concord, New Hampshire, USA

Brinkley Brown

Source: Lazara Marinkovic

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About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

Location



Introduction

This case study takes an in-depth look at the integration process of refugees living in Concord, New Hampshire. It explores how refugees have transformed the community, but also how the community has transformed the lives of refugees. Concord is New Hampshire's capital and third most populous city at 43,000 people, and one of four refugee resettlement cities in New Hampshire (Data USA, n.d.). This study is based on my own experiences growing up among migrants in Concord, as well as conversations with refugees and locals, city municipality representatives, and service providers. It highlights the economic, social, and political impact of the refugee

presence in the community—particularly the housing market, social services, and education. I was especially interested in exploring the integration process for high school students aged fifteen to eighteen: this age marks an important phase in the development of identity, cognition, socialization, ethics, reasoning, and sense of belonging. As a student in Concord from first to twelfth grade, I observed that high school was a critical phase in the integration of refugees into the Concord community. In this study, I seek a better understanding of how refugee integration shapes the city I call home.

About the Author and How She Wrote the Report

Growing up at Concord High School—the city's only public high school—I was a member of the “Be the Change Club,” whose mission is to promote multicultural awareness and diversity in the community. Here, I initially recognized that there was a difference between having diversity and being inclusive: Concord High and the greater Concord community have diversity, but I questioned if we are truly inclusive or integrated. My role today as a writer for Refugees in Towns and as a native member of the Concord community has allowed me to explore this question.

To build on my own experiences growing up and volunteering in Concord, I had many one-on-one conversations with refugees, community leaders, government representatives, staff of community-based organizations, service providers, and public-school educators from December 2017 through March 2018. My contacts were initially developed through personal connections, which led to additional names for further conversations. In addition, I sat in on a planning meeting for the Welcoming Concord Initiative's Steering Committee, and a Cultural Orientation class put on by Ascentria Care Alliance for newly-settled refugees. I also explored statistical data on the state and city, and a literature review of refugees in Concord and the US.

My findings have the following limitations. First, I was not able to speak with non-English speaking refugees without a translator present, so most of my conversations were with refugees who had either lived in the United States for over a decade or were fluent in English. This means that while I did speak with a group of recently resettled refugees with the help of two translators, I did not speak with a representative sample of the refugee population in Concord. Second, I was not able to speak with a diverse group of key informants. All my conversations were with members of the community who expressed welcoming, accepting, pro-refugee sentiments, and I was unable to speak with community members who are on the other side of the socio-political spectrum. To adapt to this gap, I asked my informants to reflect on their interactions with those who do not share their pro-refugee views.

Interview Chart

Group	Description of Participants	Value	Men	Woman
Community Based Organizations/Community Leaders	Organizations represented: American Friends Service Community, Building Community of New Hampshire, FieldWork Photos, Immigrant Integration Initiative, JLiv Inspirations: Marketing & Event Planning, New American Africans	7	3	4
Government	New Hampshire Council for the Arts, New Hampshire State Senator, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services Refugee Coordinator, Concord Ward Councilor	5	1	4
Service Providers	Ascentria Care Alliance, Concord Human Services, New Hampshire Endowment for Health	7	0	7
Education	Concord High School: Principal, Assistant Principal, Social Worker, Concord School Board President, Former Concord School District Superintendent, 21st Century Coordinator	6	3	3
Refugees	Congolese, Nepali, Ghanaian, Rwandan (in CBOs)	13	7	6
Total		38	14	24

A Note on Definitions

For the purposes of this report, the following definitions—as locally conceived of by communities in Concord—will be used:

New Americans: This term is widely used by residents, service providers, government officials,

immigrants, and refugees to refer to both refugees and other immigrants.

Former Refugee: This term is used by many refugees who view their status not as an identity, but rather as a past stage in their life. Those who refer to themselves as former refugees are well established in the community, typically having lived in Concord for ten or more years.

Background on Refugees in the United States

The United States has a long history of welcoming refugees, and though recently resettlement numbers have declined, the United States remains one of the top resettlement countries

in the world. Over 3 million refugees have been resettled in the US since 1975 (Refugee Council USA, 2017). Resettlement of refugees is conducted through the United States Refugee Admission

Program. The program is comprised of several federal agencies including the State Department, Homeland Security, Department of Justice, and the Department of Health and Human Services (US Department of State). The President of the United States each year determines the number of refugees who may be admitted, along with the designated nationalities and processing priorities (Refugee Council USA, 2017).

The US history with refugee settlement begins with the end of World War II when the United States resettled nearly half a million Europeans through the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. Resettlement of refugees continued through the Cold War period with the US focusing its resettlement initiatives on taking in refugees from Communist states. Following the large resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the 1960s and 1970s, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which incorporated the United Nations definition of a refugee as defined by the 1951 Convention. Through the Refugee Act, the US standardized the resettlement services for refugees by creating the US Refugee Admission Program.

Since the 1980s, refugee resettlement demographics in the US have become more diverse and less defined by Cold War dynamics, with refugees coming mostly from Democratic

Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma, Iraq, Somalia, and Bhutan (Igielnik, 2017). The largest shift in resettlement patterns occurred post September 11, 2001: under the Bush and Obama administrations, refugee resettlement numbers decreased, with the lowest numbers reaching 27,110 in 2002. Numbers under the second term of the Obama administration began to increase, only to shrink again under the Trump administration with a projection of 45,000 refugees to resettle in 2018 (Rose, 2017).

In addition to formally resettled refugees, historically there have been large numbers of irregular migrants to American cities. Efforts to manage irregular migrants has affected their precariousness to varying degrees. For example, since the 1990s, the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program has attempted to provide “provisional” humanitarian relief to displaced persons, meant to protect them from deportation and offer the right to work until the “triggering event” of their displacement has been recovered from (Messick and Bergeron, 2014). By contrast, recent “immigrant bans,” bolstering of Federal immigration enforcement, and efforts to remove TPS protections under the Trump Administration have put strains on both legal migrants from singled-out countries—especially Muslim majority countries—and irregular migrants alike.

Background on Refugees in Concord, New Hampshire

The town of Concord occupies 64.2 square miles and is New Hampshire’s third most populous city (World’s Capital Cities, 2018). In 2015, the population of Concord was 42,537, with 95% US citizens and 90% White, 3% Asian, and 3% Black. Concord’s foreign-born citizens are mostly from Canada, Nepal, and Bhutan (Data USA, n.d.). The three largest employers are the State of New Hampshire, Capital Region Healthcare,

and the Concord School District (New Hampshire Employment Security, 2017). Household median annual income is \$56,093 which is slightly higher than the national average (Data US, n.d.).

The arrival of refugees in New Hampshire is relatively recent. Since the early 1980s some 7,500 refugees have settled in New Hampshire, with 1,513 refugees resettled to Concord between 2009

Refugee Resettlement 2009-2016

	FY09	FY10	FY11	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	TOTALS
Manchester	303	341	314	115	136	130	132	189	1,660
Laconia	70	22	12	3					107
Concord	188	187	178	206	199	189	178	188	1,513
Franklin			1						1
Boscawen									0
Exeter						1			1
Nashua			17	41	90	53	140	140	481
Dover								1	1
Totals	561	550	522	365	425	373	450	518	3,764

(New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Health Equity, 2016).

and 2016 (New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Manchester, New Hampshire is the NH city with the highest number of refugees.

Refugees who have resettled in New Hampshire come from Europe (Serbia and Ukraine), Africa (Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Tanzania), Asia (Vietnam, Bhutan, Burma), and the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria).

Most resettled refugees are assisted by Ascentria Care Alliance, the primary service provider in the state. Ascentria receives incoming refugee cases from Church World Service, one the nine national resettlement agencies contracted by the US government.

Mapping the Refugee Population

Residents of Concord see the city as separated into five main areas: East Concord, Central/Downtown Concord, the Heights, the South End, and West Concord. Housing for New Americans is concentrated along Loudon Road, which is in the Heights, typically chosen because of its low cost.

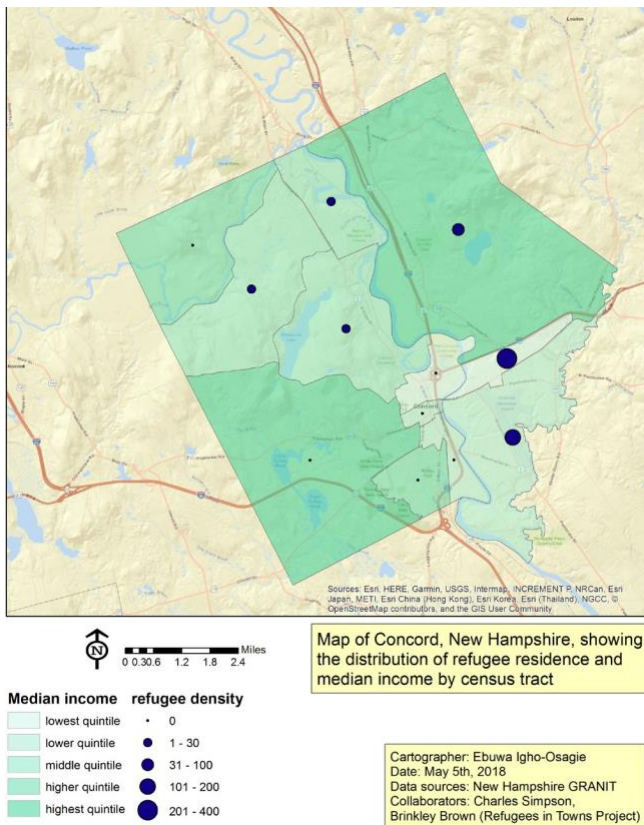
“Housing is such a finite pool,” expressed Cheryl Bourassa, Program Manager at New American Africans, “it is not integrated.” Affordable housing is located primarily along Jennings Drive, Concord Gardens, Royal Gardens, and Eagles Block, where many refugee families live. While most refugees concentrate in this low-income area, several refugees I spoke with have since left these areas and purchased homes elsewhere in the city.

Ascentria’s resettlement team is typically given two weeks’ notice of when “cases are coming down the pipeline,” in which time they are responsible for all aspects of managing the case—coordinating with landlords and furniture vendors, securing and furnishing an apartment, purchasing household supplies, filling the kitchen with a week’s worth of groceries, and organizing medical services.

The Urban Impact

“The idea that Concord is a welcoming community has deep roots” stated Becky Field, professional photographer and longtime Concord resident. This sentiment is one I hear consistently in Concord, and as capital of New Hampshire, I see Concord as a positive model for the state. Below, I explore how and why Concord has taken this inclusive path, and the challenges that housing and federal funding have posed to refugee integration.

Housing Market



“Housing for immigrants and New Americans is concentrated on the Heights and Loudon Road,” said Barbara Seebart, State Refugee Coordinator at the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services (NHDHHS). This setup is “not ideal. It would be nicer if our neighborhoods were more integrated.” Some government

representatives, including State Senator Dan Feltes, echoed Seebart’s statement, noting that Concord has a lack of affordable market-rate and subsidized housing. Jessica Livingston, planner for the annual Concord Multicultural Festival, added that “as much as a welcoming community we are, we are still very segregated. There is a mindset that ‘we are over here, and they are over there,’” referring to New Americans living on the Heights and locals in other areas of the city.

Upon arrival, refugees supported by Ascentria and other organizations are first placed into market rate housing, then placed on a list for subsidized housing. They are only able to move up on the list as long as their credit remains in good standing, in other words that their housing bills and travel loan payments (for their flights to the US) are made on time.

“Money talks” was a central theme in my conversations about Concord’s housing market. Jay Sharma is Ascentria’s Resettlement Coordinator and a former refugee from Bhutan who has lived in Concord for nearly a decade. He told about a recent interaction with a landlord: “Yesterday, I talked to a landlord who belongs to the other side of the political spectrum, he called me four times wanting more renters because his rooms were empty.” Despite anti-immigrant or anti-refugee sentiments and an “us versus them” mindset, empty rooms are empty rooms. Among landlords, money’s power seems stronger than current political polarization, suggesting that refugees fill an economic vacancy in Concord’s housing market.

Social Services

Social service providers fall into two groups: initial resettlement and post-resettlement services.

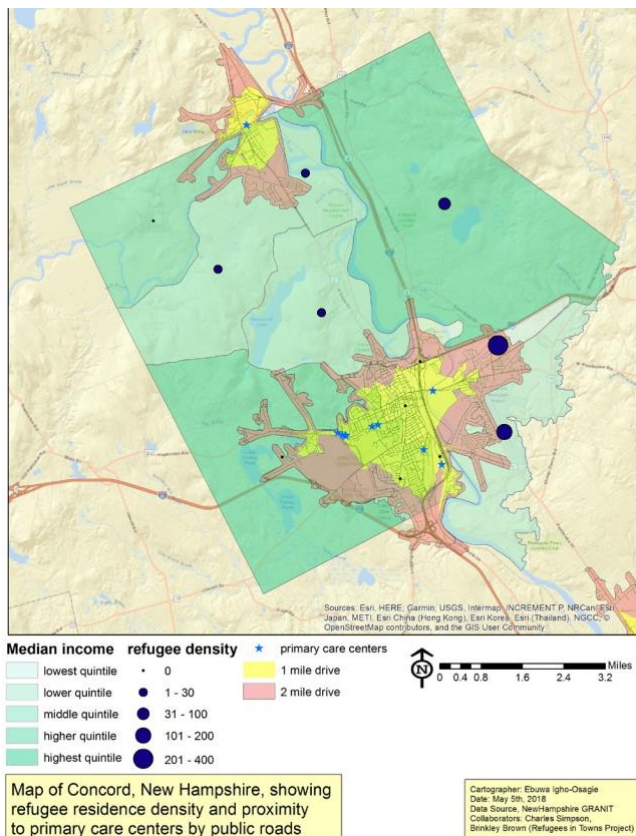
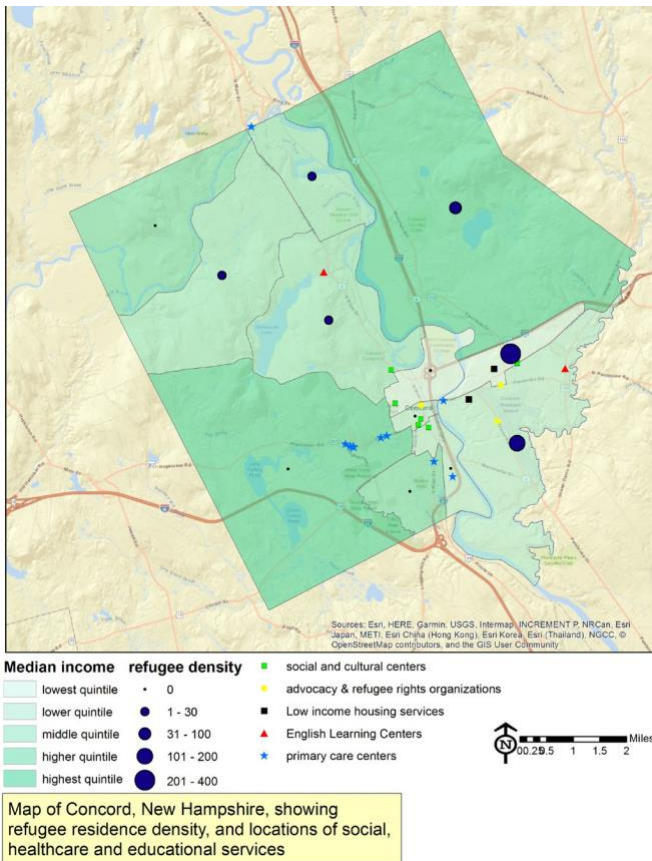
Initial Resettlement

Ascentria Care Alliance, one of the largest community service organizations in New England, has been providing service to New Americans for 20 years, and has resettled 200 refugees per year in New Hampshire since 2010. In Concord Ascentria has resettled 97 refugees per year, and in 2018 the number has decreased to 22. This decrease in arrivals has had a “devastating impact” on the program, resulting in the downsizing of Ascentria’s staff.

When refugees arrive at Manchester Airport, they are met by an Ascentria team member who drives the refugees to their apartments in Concord. There they are provided an orientation that reviews everything from basic safety to appliance operation. The team recognizes how overwhelmed the refugee family must be after hours of air travel, and they try to provide multiple ongoing opportunities for learning. For example, Ascentria’s nine-class Cultural Orientation course provided refugees an introduction to the “American system.”

Sitting in on one of the Cultural Orientation classes—which took place at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church up on the Heights—was a truly eye-opening experience. With the help of two interpreters—one Nepali and another Swahili—Ascentria’s instructor taught seven recently-settled refugees everything from how, why, and when to dial 911 to what a bus sign looks like. Other topics included setting up a medical appointment, reading a prescription bottle, food stamp eligibility, how loans work, applying for citizenship, finding a job, and the importance of education and learning English. In the middle of the lesson, two women from the Church walked in and offered to take the class’s students on a tour of Concord later that week—showing them the bank, Statehouse, public library, Walmart, grocery stores, and elementary schools.

Ascentria helps new arrivals get a social security card, apply for food stamps, programs like



Matching Grant (a cash assistance program for refugees), enroll children in the public-school system and adults into English classes, develop resumes, and find vocational training and work support (Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d.). Sharma said “My hope is that I will be able to support my new clients at the same level that my caseworkers did for me. I struggled with English when I first came to Concord, and they helped me find work. I do that for my clients now.” The rest of the team nodded in agreement, reaffirming both the importance of helping refugees and immigrants transition to their new home and of Concord’s deep welcoming roots.

Post-Resettlement

The federally mandated initial resettlement period is 90 days, after which Ascentria provides financial assistance for up to six months. Being a federally funded organization “silos us in terms of funding and hinders us from looking at a person holistically” expressed the resettlement team. After six months, Ascentria continues to support its clients through other means, including connecting clients with service providers through partnerships it has formed in the community. The service providers highlighted in this section are just a handful of the many that assist refugees in the post-resettlement phase, this is by no means an exhaustive list.

Julianne Gadoury, from the New Hampshire Council for the Arts (NHCA), spoke about the NHCA’s mission to support the arts—from New England traditions like contra dancing and basket weaving, to recent arts like East African dancing and harmonium playing. NHCA’s partnership with New American Africans (NAA), a Concord-based non-profit, sponsored a Rwandan and East African Dance pilot program open to the Concord community. This pilot program ran for one year, teaching 25 teenagers traditional African dance. In the three years since, NAA has applied and received grants from the NHCA to continue this program. Today, dance instruction has moved away from solely teaching traditional forms of

African dance toward more contemporary dance forms, yet still under the direction of an African refugee.

The NHCA has a partnership with Building Communities in New Hampshire (BCNH), another non-profit that sponsors harmonium lessons to the Concord community. This harmonium program was initially sponsored by the NHCA Master Apprenticeship Program which funds artists on the conditions that they dedicate 80 hours per year and provide one-on-one instruction to students for a more in-depth, personal teacher-student relationship. However, this one-on-one structure was not one familiar to the instructors—two Bhutanese refugees—and instead the grant money was used to teach a class of 14 students every Sunday for eight months. Gadoury said that, “For us [the NHCA], we had to make a decision, do we tell them that they were not fulfilling grant requirements or do we restructure the program to be more culturally sensitive to the Bhutanese community?” The NHCA chose the latter, and today the husband and wife instructors, who both have Master’s degrees in Music and Eastern Folk Traditions, have since partnered with the Concord Community Music School teaching lessons.

In thinking about why the NHCA has been such an integral part of Concord’s integration efforts, Gadoury highlighted the importance of making sure all people in Concord feel represented and have access to much-needed resources, whether they be economic, cultural, or political. “We need to move the table forward for everyone a little bit,” she expressed harkening back to the welcoming and inclusive nature of the Concord community.

Social Integration in New Hampshire

Building Community in New Hampshire

Suraj Budathoki and Bishnu Khadka work at Building Community in New Hampshire (BCNH), (formerly the Bhutanese Community of New Hampshire), a community-based non-profit whose goal is to promote integration of New Americans.

According to Budathoki, the organization works with 314 families throughout the state, 114 of whom are in Concord. BCNH was founded in 2010 by a group of Bhutanese who realized that “organizing ourselves is the best way to help us integrate into the community.” Today, BCNH has nine projects, including ESL classes, a New American Youth Engagement Project, and nutrition, employment specialist, health insurance, and mental health programs.

“When we were in the camps,” recalled Khadka, a former Nepali refugee, “we used to walk from our camp to the market and eat very little nutritious food, so when we came here [to America], we just sat in our homes and ate good [non-nutritious] food. Many people got diabetes, bad cholesterol, and high blood pressure,” thus BCNH launched a program that teaches New Americans about basic nutrition. BCNH’s New American Youth Engagement Project is an example of the far-reaching influence that Concord’s strong local leadership has on other refugee resettlement cities in New Hampshire. This project, geared toward Manchester’s New American community, was created to give youth in Manchester similar engaging and empowering opportunities to those provided in Concord. Unlike students in Concord, New American youth in Manchester had “no such dream that they would be somebody” and lacked long-term “goals and plans,” according to Budathoki. For this reason, the New American Youth Project was established. Today, BCNH staff members meet with students each month at their office in Manchester and bring in influential speakers—who have included an Associate Admissions Director from the University of New Hampshire, a well-known doctor from the Bhutanese community, and New Hampshire State Senator Dan Feltes. “We try to show kids what they can be” and “open them up to new fields,” continued Budathoki, because often “they are narrowed by the [refugee] camp mindset.” At the end of the project, BCNH sponsors the students who have attended each of the nine monthly meetings on a trip to Washington, D.C.. In 2017, 16 students went on this trip, and Budathoki looks forward to taking more students to D.C. at the end of 2018.

New American Africans

The New American Africans (NAA) is an immigrant-led non-profit that specifically serves African immigrant and refugee families in Concord (New American Africans). I met with Cheryl Bourassa, NAA’s Program Manager, one afternoon at a café in downtown Concord. Bourassa told me the story of how NAA was started by a pharmacist from Rwanda who moved and integrated into the Concord community, then wanted to help others through the integration process. Initially NAA was focused on helping refugees with daily activities, but today the organization is dedicated to creating systematic change—such as employment opportunities, youth engagement, and education for New Americans.

One of the projects Bourassa is currently working on at NAA is speaking with the Concord School District about custodial positions for New Americans. As it stands, present guidelines require all custodians of the school district to have a high school diploma. Bourassa hopes to change this requirement because among New Americans without high school diplomas there are “people who have tenacity” who could be a solution to “jobs that need filling,” emphasizing the positive role that New Americans can have on Concord’s labor market.



New American Africans Family Fun Night (FieldWork Photos).

Bourassa, along with many other key informants, could not speak enthusiastically enough about Family Fun Night, a community event put on by NAA three times a year, attracting both New Americans and host community members. It is an opportunity for Concord residents to learn more about one another over African drumming and dance lessons, Ben and Jerry's ice cream, and Somalimeatpies.

Ayi D'Almeida, Youth Coordinator at NAA, told me about his involvement and work at the organization. D'Almeida came to Concord from Ghana at the age of 16 and has since graduated from Concord High School and the University of New Hampshire. D'Almeida came to NAA because his passion for helping youth and giving back to his community combined with a recommendation from Anna Marie DiPasquale, an English Language Learner Social Worker at Concord High School. Two of his current projects include an afterschool program with NAA and a community engagement project with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). For the afterschool program—where he works with about 40 New American children—D'Almeida coordinates everything from science lessons to book groups to yoga and dance classes. He also organizes volunteers from St. Paul's School, a private boarding school located in Concord, to work with New American youth at Concord's public middle school. At the AFSC, D'Almeida arranges workshops for young New American adults who want to become more involved in the community. This has included a workshop from the New Hampshire Federal Credit Union on budgeting and credit, public speaking classes, and a community conversation at New Hampshire Technical Institute between local law enforcement officers and a group of New American youth.

NAA, along with the AFSC, Unitarian Universalist Church, Jim Bouley (current Mayor), Maggie Hassan (Governor at the time and current US Senator), and other community leaders are responsible for spearheading Love Your Neighbor, a local campaign famous to Concord residents against racist graffiti that was painted on the side of the house of an African refugee family living



Love Your Neighbor, (Steve Booth Photography).

in the community. "People got together and said we are not going to stand for this, we need to let them [the perpetrators] and the community know that the hearts of people in Concord are not with the individuals who did this horrible thing," said Arnie Alpert, co-Director of New Hampshire's AFSC. I was twelve years old at the time, and I vividly remember the outpouring of support and love catalyzed by the hateful graffiti, thus reemphasizing Concord's deep welcoming roots. I went to a neighborhood rally in downtown Concord with my dad, holding the well-known yellow and black sign and shouting "Concord Loves" with the hundreds of others at the event.

Welcoming Concord Initiative

The Welcoming Concord Initiative (WCI) is part of the larger Immigrant Integration Initiative, one that shares many of the same goals as the RIT project, and was funded by the New Hampshire Endowment for Health four years ago (Endowment for Health, 2018). Kelly Laflamme, Program Director, emphasized that in addition to health care, day-to-day experience is also a key determinant of health, so the Endowment for Health identified the refugee and immigrant populations in New Hampshire and sought to focus on promoting integration in the community, which eventually took form as the Immigrant Integration Initiative. This initiative spans the four primary refugee resettlement sites in New Hampshire—Concord, Laconia, Manchester, and Nashua—and brings together New Americans and hosts in working to create stronger, more economically-sound communities.

The WCI is the term coined for the initiative in Concord. In addition to the Endowment for Health, the New Hampshire Charitable Fund is also responsible for funding the WCI (Welcoming New Hampshire, 2018). Jim Snodgrass, Executive Director of Second Start (the WCI's sponsor) and Lead Organizer of the WCI, invited me to the WCI's Steering Committee meeting. The Steering Committee is made up of over two dozen community leaders from a variety of local organizations including Ascentria Care Alliance, NHCA, BCNH, NAA, AFSC, and many others (to see a full list, see the link in the References list for Endowment for Health, 2018).

Three programs that the WCI is in the process of establishing are a Concord Civics Academy, a Microloan Program, and a Driver's Education Program. The Concord Civics Academy is a free six-week program led by Carlos Baia, Deputy City Manager, Maggie Fogarty, co-Director of the New Hampshire AFSC, and Ayi D'Almeida, Youth Coordinator at NAA. According to Snodgrass, this program allows students to meet with city officials and local government members to learn more and about how to get involved. In the Civics Academy's first year, about half of the students were refugees and half were host community members. Additionally, students met with officers from the Concord Police Department, firefighters from the Concord Fire Department, and various city management employees.

In partnership with the Regional Economic Development Center, the WCI has created the Greater Concord Community Microloan Program, specifically geared toward providing loans to New Americans who would like to start a business, but do not have the credit to receive bank loans. Currently, the WCI is in the process of fundraising and has a handful of loans already issued to different members of the New American community in Concord ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000. This program is in the process of extending its reach statewide, and the WCI hopes to increase the number of lenders and borrowers.

The final program is the Driver's Education Program, created when WCI acknowledged the

challenges that limited public transportation poses to integration. Concord Area Transit (CAR), the city's only public transportation service, operates on weekdays from 6:00am to 6:30pm, and provides three service routes—crosstown, Heights, and Penacook (Concord Area Transit). Entering the workforce and becoming financially independent were identified by refugees as key aspects to integration, yet “we don't have bus services to commute to work,” expressed Sharma, Ascentria's Refugee Coordinator and a former refugee. Members of the WCI recognized the limiting hours of operation and routes of travel, as well as the high cost of local Driver's Ed programs, thus they are seeking to provide a more affordable and accessible option for New American adults. The morning that I spoke with Snodgrass, a former refugee from Namibia was taking his Provisional Certificate Exam, the first step toward becoming a Driver's Ed instructor. “The hope,” expressed Snodgrass, “is for the Driving Program to be staffed and owned by New Americans.” Snodgrass said that Second Start plans to incubate the program to get it off its feet, eventually turning it over to New Americans.

Educational Integration

“Concord has benefitted tremendously from having refugees. Kids' perspectives have changed, classrooms have changed, teachers have changed. Overall it has given a global perspective to kids at Concord High that they did not have previously. New Hampshire and Concord is very self-contained, but in the past ten years there has been a good shakeup that there is a bigger world out there.”

- Steven
*Rothenberg, Assistant Principal,
Concord High School*

The Concord School District—made up of five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school—plays a central role in the integration

process, central not only in providing students with English language instruction, but also in forming relationships, offering a support network and wide range of resources, and above all giving students the confidence to explore their interests in and out of the classroom. In particular, integration at the high school level is key to the long-term integration of the city.

The high school's English Language Learner (ELL) program continues to evolve and adapt to the changing needs of its students. Currently, there are around 165 students enrolled in ELL and students have access to the high school curriculum until the age of 21. In reflecting on the expectation that the school district places on ELL students, Principal Sica stated that it "is a tremendous challenge that we place on students," for not only is it expected that a student learns English and a new culture, but also academic language. For this reason, it is important to reexamine the ELL program regularly and ask if it is best preparing students for life after graduation—which is exactly what the Concord administration has been doing. Within the last year, the ELL program has shifted to a more integrated teaching model in which ELL students are enrolled in more mainstream classes than under the previous program. This shift was catalyzed by the importance of creating a more inclusive structure that prepares students for the interpersonal skills needed to be successful post-graduation.

It is a challenge to measure post-graduation success, yet a large indicator is a student's "internal motivation," which was a common theme I ran into throughout my research. Anna-Marie DiPasquale, ELL Social Worker and Advisor of the Be the Change Club, described internal motivation as a student's belief that his or her actions matter in determining life post-graduation. Quantitative measures of internal motivation include GPA, absences, and detentions; however, DiPasquale notes that the most valuable measurement is one that is qualitative and less tangible: personal initiative. DiPasquale explained personal initiative as "the effort to finish a project, involvement in the community, and interest in helping others" which can be reflected in a student's outlook, work ethic, and perseverance and must not be conflated with college participation.

Concord High's graduating class of 2017 had 32 refugee graduates—all of whom went on to pursue secondary education at institutions including Harvard, Keene State College, New Hampshire Technical Institute, and University of New Hampshire. Yet, in recalling the class of 2017, DiPasquale was clear to make the distinction that college participation rates are not synonymous with internal motivation. For this reason, continued support and guidance beyond the walls of Concord High is crucial.

The Concord School District staff is essential in fostering inclusion at school. Besides being educators, staff members are also leaders and role models to refugees and host students alike. The influence of a teacher is not confined to the classroom, but expands to the greater community as Susan Farrelly, 21C Program Director, stated: "I think that the Concord School District's strength lies in individuals seeing a need and filling it." From the very first day of school when elementary school teachers followed the school bus route to make sure New American students got home safely, to Halloween when a middle school administrator set up a pumpkin carving station because a New American student wanted to know what a jack-o-lantern was—teachers play an important role in creating a reliable and trusting support network within the community.

Also important are interactions and relationships between refugees and host students, particularly at the high school level. One way these connections are made is through the student news channel broadcast live to every classroom. The Be the Change Club, Concord's multicultural club, has a weekly segment called "Culture Talks," in which an American student has a conversation with a New American student about his or her culture.

Another way connections are fostered is through events like International Night and "Travel Around the World Without Leaving the Classroom." International Night is an event attended and anticipated by students, teachers, and community members alike. The night begins with a meal of dishes from every country represented in the student body—from Afghanistan to Burundi, China

to Germany, France to Nepal. In total, there are around 30 different countries that line the halls of Concord High, each with a unique cultural dish, and everyone has the opportunity to travel to each table and learn more about their peers. After dinner, there is an international talent show where students perform everything from ballet to Nepali folk dancing, American pop songs to African hip hop music. The night closes out with everyone gathering on stage, hand-in-hand, singing to “We Are the World.” The second initiative, “Travel Around the World Without Leaving the Classroom,” provides another opportunity for students to learn about diversity within their school community. At the start of the school year, DiPasquale goes to every ninth grade Geography and Culture class with a group of New American students who share their cultures and traditions with the class. It allows New American students to be the experts of their culture and host students to learn more about their peers.

Overall, there were two primary takeaways from my interviews with members of the Concord

School District. The first takeaway was the importance of nurturing a student’s confidence in and out of the classroom. As Steven Rothenberg, an Assistant Principal at Concord High, stated “the greatest mission is to help every person in CHS finds a niche that they feel good about” and “once a child feels like they belong, like they are a part of something—they are open to new situations.” The second takeaway was creating an inclusive environment, a sense of belonging. This process begins at the elementary school level, but becomes particularly important in high school—a formative time when identity, perspectives, and values begin to take shape. Experiences made in high school influence behavior outside of the classroom, as DiPasquale noted in our conversation, “Concord High students are the leaders, anytime there has been a misstep in the community, it has been the students who have led the charge in saying that this is not what we are about, this is not who we are, this is my classmate, and we are a community.”

Experiences of Refugees

The refugees I interviewed ranged from students who had just graduated from the Concord School District, to individuals who have been living in Concord for upwards of ten years, to those who have just joined the Concord community within the last two months. One underlying sentiment from all I spoke with is that Concord is a welcoming city, but there is still a long way to go. In the words of D’Almeida, Youth Coordinator at NAA and former refugee:

Diversity has increased and people from different countries are brought together in Concord; however, people still feel like refugees and immigrants are taking advantage of the system.

Additionally, some who had recently graduated from Concord High School expressed the desire

for more places for students to meet, such as the Be the Change Club. “I think American students have more power,” expressed a Manju Gurung, a former refugee from Nepal who graduated in 2017 and is now in college:

If they could just say hi to New American students—that would make their day. It is a new place for them, a new lifestyle, a new school, a new everything for them. To say ‘hi’ and ask ‘how are you doing?’ is so eye opening for them. It tells them I have new friends here. I can fit in here.

From adults who have been in the community for over a decade, a common response was the importance of “helping and organizing ourselves.” Many saw the value of working within the refugee community to advance the integration process

because “by helping ourselves, we show them [the host population] we are here and a strength of the country,” said Budathoki, a former refugee from Bhutan.

Along with the culture shock of moving to America, getting used to the environment, and navigating the system, one of the greatest challenges that face refugees moving into Concord is the language barrier. “Little English makes it hard to break out of the four walls,” said Budathoki, “it depends on us [refugees] if I want to reach out to another community...it’s up to me to do it.” This comment stuck out to me, as did one from Seebart, State Refugee Coordinator at the NHDHHS, who stated that “the onus is not just on the community for inclusion...a refugee has a lot of work to do. Their job is to learn how to function in their new environment.” It is easy to think of integration as either reliant upon the host community or upon refugees. Yet, successful integration takes a collective effort.

The language barrier is particularly visible in the generation gap between young adults and their parents. Generally, the difficulty of learning a new language increases with age. Access to the Concord School District’s robust English Language Learners (ELL) program means children are at an advantage over their parents. “It is very hard for parents,” said Esther Elonga, a former refugee from the Congo who graduated from Concord High in 2017 and is now in college, “because the parent has to come from being the leader of the family to relying on the child to translate for them.” Elonga thinks it made her parents feel they were “helpless, and that me and my sisters were the only ones who could help them.” I asked how it made her feel to take on such a role at the age of 15, to which she responded:

It is all about the child knowing that this is a struggle for all of us, not just me. It’s not like I am the only one that is struggling, my parents are struggling, my sisters are struggling, every one of us is struggling. It is in this period of struggling that we have to hold each other up.

Finally, the current political context of the country has also influenced the integration experience

of many refugees living in Concord. Sharma expressed that “among refugees, there has been fear,” namely that of deportation. Many refugees and locals are unaware of the nature of the refugee process. Sharma said that refugees often feel that they are “second class citizens” as it is common for locals to look at refugees like “they don’t belong here.” Sharma reflected that “I have experienced this personally at the grocery store. People whisper and look at me.”

How do refugees and hosts define integration?

During my research, I asked my interviewees to define integration. Refugees, in particular, identified the ability to enter the workforce and access the city’s available resources (such as housing, health care, education, and community events) as key to successful integration. Community leaders and service providers recognized integration as a two-way street, stressing the importance of maintaining one’s cultural identity, while learning English and adapting to their new home. Overall, the theme that shone through all responses to this question was the ability to feel welcomed and valued—not just for refugees, but also for lifelong host community members.



Concord High School’s Be The Change Club (FieldWork Photos).

Conclusion

I found that in Concord integration is a continuous and two-way process that requires communication and compassion from both long-time residents and newcomers. Concord has much to offer, and a pervasive culture of welcoming and acceptance of diversity, but money, language, accessibility,

and transportation are real obstacles to integration in Concord. Meanwhile, the national current political climate in the US has drastically reduced resettlement in Concord, and the resettlement agency's capacity to provide critical services.

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About the Author

Brinkley Brown is student at Harvard College, and works with the Boston Refugee Youth Enrichment 1-2-1 Program of the Philips Brooks House Association. Brinkley grew up in Concord, where she volunteered with the “Be the Change” organization helping to integrate refugees and new American students into the local school community and worked at the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice.

Email: brinkleylbrown@gmail.com

Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

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