

Old Songs New Opportunities: A Museum Program for Young Children and Resettled Refugees

by Kelly Armor



Erie, Pennsylvania, is a Rust Belt city of about 100,000 in the Great Lakes region. Although we have a relatively small resettled refugee community, refugees represent about 11 percent of our population, one of the highest percentages in the nation.

The refugee resettlement process is intense. Most come with great hopes and relief that they can finally set down roots and move forward with their lives, but they also arrive anxious about functioning with limited or no English skills and navigating American culture. Resettlement agencies are under great pressure to find housing for their new clients, teach them English, coordinate medical treatment, enroll children in school, and get adults into jobs within a few months. These social workers, many former refugees themselves, care deeply about traditional culture and their clients, but their federal funding does not support helping refugees in maintaining their folkways. The agencies are judged by their success at getting people into jobs or vocational training programs. The all-consuming nature of acclimating to life in the United States—for example, young children go to one school and older children to another while parents go to different work sites—makes remaining connected as a family, much less continuing language and other traditions, difficult.

Multiple forces threaten refugees' traditional culture. First, whatever caused displacement (civil

Sherain Abdulmjeed works with her students during an internship. All photos and videos courtesy of the Erie Art Museum unless otherwise noted.

war, genocide, ethnic or religious persecution) has done physical as well as psychological damage. Many displaced people find themselves in refugee camps before they are resettled in a more permanent home.

The continuation of folk cultures in these camps is mixed. Some find any celebration of culture too painful, or camp life too trying to enforce traditions consciously. For others, refugee camps actually fortify folkways. The unstructured time and living within close proximity allow some groups to refocus and rebuild music, dance, and craft traditions. In either case, once they come to Erie, refugees find themselves living in a city, not a village, without easy transportation or access to communal space, which makes impromptu community gatherings difficult. Our cold climate makes gardening hard and outdoor rituals almost impossible. Perhaps most devastating, elders who once held a place of status, even in the camps, find themselves isolated and unvalued while their grandchildren more easily acclimate to a new life.

Indigenous Knowledge as Economic Benefit

Because newly resettled refugees must find employment quickly, many end up in low-wage jobs that require few language skills, such as working in factories or cleaning hotel rooms. Yet their indigenous knowledge can be a treasure and a resource for the wider community. In 2004, as the Folk Art and Education Director of the Erie Art Museum, I started Old Songs New Opportunities (OSNO) on a hunch. I learned that our refugees came from rich folk cultures with a living singing tradition, including a large repertoire of traditional children's songs. I figured that some refugee women would rather work with children than in a factory setting. I also suspected that once they learned some basics about American childcare structure, expectations, and regulations and gained practical experience they would be employable. Indeed, OSNO "flips" the negative workforce equation. Whereas refugee women who tried to get childcare jobs were turned away because they were considered too "foreign," OSNO turned that liability into an asset, because they could market themselves as someone who loved to sing and could bring authentic, culturally diverse games and songs to their classrooms—skills that most Erie childcare teachers did not have.



A Teacher's Perspective

Videos throughout this article give the reader a sense of how these songs work in an Early Childhood classroom. The photo above links to a video showcasing a project overview and a teacher's perspective.

The Erie Art Museum has hosted five OSNO trainings in 12 years, working with 63 new American women and two men—primarily resettled refugees, along with a few recent immigrants. Lynn Clint, a certified Early Childhood Educator, and I led the trainings. Ally Thomas, Erie Art Museum Education Coordinator, who has a background in Early Childhood Education, assisted with the fourth and fifth trainings. In four months trainees complete 40 hours in subjects such as rules and regulations, the role of discipline, child development theory, and first aid. We spend a great deal of time comparing how these subjects are treated in different cultures. We also devote time to

trainees sharing their traditional children's songs, explaining their meaning, and collectively creating an English translation that is fun and easy to sing. Every trainee completes a hundred hours of internship in a childcare classroom. Over half the trainees have gained employment working with children, and we have a collection of almost a hundred children's songs from Bhutan, Bosnia, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iraq, Jordan, Nepal, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Russia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Ukraine. OSNO has also expanded to offer professional development for American teachers wanting to present authentic culturally diverse lessons and better support their new American students.

Empowering the “Non-Singer”

Many people in the U.S. consider singing the purview of professionals and those with special talent. Shows like *American Idol* symbolize and popularize this conception. Our material wealth and high production standards bring perfectly polished recordings and videos into our homes, media devices, and automobiles. Often childcare teachers were not raised by singing parents or caregivers; they were raised on CDs and television. In many classrooms there is little singing except along with recordings that also guide children through a variety of movements. There is a double standard for music compared with other disciplines. It is anathema for teachers to proclaim, “I’m terrible at math!” Even if challenged by algebra, they know they can teach basic concepts to preschoolers and putting themselves down may cause children to fear or dislike math. Yet too many teachers disparage their singing, although children's songs are just as accessible as their mathematical counterparts. Too many teachers use recorded music with young children, not allowing the imaginative interplay of manipulating lyrics, tempos, and rhythms that comes when teachers (or children) lead songs themselves.

The Power of Children's Songs

The children's songs collected from Erie's new American community are tiny jewels. One OSNO trainee, Nibal Ab El Karim, realized these songs helped her reach out to her new American neighbors from different countries and said, “These songs are like

Early Education and Music

For thousands of years traditional cultures have used song and dance with children to soothe, teach social skills, build fine and gross motor coordination, and develop language skills. Research has proven that singing with children boosts language development (Gromko 2005). Singing while holding a baby forges an important emotional bond. It provides an intense sensory experience of sound, and the tactile vibrations build important neural connections in the child's brain (Brand 1985, Nakata and Trehub 2003). Yet it is rare to find a childcare teacher who makes use of song and its potential throughout the day. The first challenge is to help new Americans who intuitively use song to calm, guide, and divert children to transfer those skills to more formal childcare settings. The next step is to allow them to coach existing teachers to see their classroom as a microcosm of a traditional village and use song to build community.

Nakata and Trehub (2003) also completed a study that compared babies' responsiveness with their mothers' singing and speech. Babies six months old showed greater interest when mothers sang to them than when they spoke to them, indicated by increased visual focus and reduced movement. We see this at home and in the early education classes as babies “stare and study” when people sing to them. The researchers also noted that the regular pulse of music may also enhance emotional coordination between mother and infant.

passports, they open up doors that were closed to me before.” Learning the songs becomes an act of empathy. They delightfully represent their respective cultures but also are a testament that babies and young children are more like each other than their different cultures. There is a reason these songs have withstood the test of time: their melodies are sticky and tenacious. The “kid DNA” within them makes them disarming to adults as well.

Although the songs sound best in their native language, English versions give them a new life and honor the bilingual lives of new Americans. Creating English versions is akin to repotting a plant, figuring out how it will flourish in a new environment. Translating the songs into English was a collaborative effort between refugee trainees and myself. First a woman would present a song from her childhood to the class. She, along with others who spoke her language, would explain the meaning and how the song was used. Then the song was written out phonetically using the Roman alphabet (often a challenging exercise in phonetics, especially for songs in Arabic). Everyone would then learn the song in its native language. The next class I would present several scenarios of how we might sing it in English that would capture the melody, rhythms, and meaning of the song. The class would discuss their preferences, sometimes come up with new options, and we would come to consensus on an English version.



Ana Behib Il Mama / I Love My Mommy is an Arabic song that helps a mother prepare her daughter for the arrival of a new brother, but when the OSNO trainee realized a new brother wasn't applicable to the children she was interning with she transformed it into cleanup song.

Most English versions are faithful to the original lyrics but sometimes trainees chose to depart from the literal meaning. *Yo Lay La*, a song shared with us by a woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is about a small child begging for peanuts and bananas. In English it becomes a song in which students name their favorite food, which became an incredibly useful song in many classrooms at lunch time. A Dinka lullaby's repeating phrase *In Conyeh Dun* morphed into "Let's get it done," and became a song to keep children on task as they bundle up to go out into the snow. They are all, essentially, work songs. Their job is to soothe or distract a distraught child, focus children to cooperate, teach motor and social skills, vent frustrations, allow physical expression, and bring emotional release. They are ideal for helping children move from one activity to another.

OSNO trainees interning in childcare centers discover that while they feel most comfortable introducing the song in their native language, it is often better to start with the English version. The host teacher is more at ease, and the children immediately grasp the song's meaning. They also find that songs with some kind of participation like movements, gestures, or opportunities for each child to insert a word or phrase are eagerly learned, making the song accessible to a wide variety of learners. Once children master the song, they become curious to hear it in the original language and have little trouble learning to sing it bilingually, eventually preferring it in its native language.

Impacts on American Teachers and Students

A year after our first OSNO training, we realized that our new American trainees could be a real resource to the greater Erie community, so we instituted annual professional development sessions using OSNO graduates as guest presenters. These sessions provided a forum to share songs and have important conversations about culture around childrearing, birthing practices, cuisine, and couture. It was eye-opening for American childcare providers to learn the circumstances of how refugees came to Erie, and they were fascinated with how to make a sling to carry a baby, various childbirth practices, and the myriad ways to cut a mango or bake a plantain. Trainings always included participant reflections on their own culture, something that eluded many until they were able to compare it with the new Americans' culture. Every training covered different OSNO songs and the benefits of considering song in the way of traditional cultures; to use it to ease transitions, to build community, and not to be concerned with their own or their students' vocal quality. These trainings were well received and often filled to capacity. Childcare providers were inspired and moved by refugees' stories and struggles. The providers became sensitized to newcomer cultures and learned about their own cultures as a result. In fact, many teachers stated in evaluations that before the training, they didn't think they had a culture. Learning from the new Americans and the workshop activities made them aware of their own folk culture.

Although providers gained a lot from these trainings, no one was changing how they were using song in their classroom. We realized that a six-hour workshop was not enough to inspire teachers to change their relationship to singing. Empowering non-singers to use the OSNO repertoire required a more sustained, intimate, and personal approach. Thanks to a generous National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services in 2013, we embarked on an ambitious multiyear project that sent ten OSNO graduates as song coaches into over 100 early childhood classrooms at 30 sites across Erie County, reaching 300 teachers and over 22,000 children.



The material wealth of American mainstream society helps discourage people from singing. Many people think of music as something they purchase or stream, not something they create. However, material wealth is not something many childcare centers enjoy. The biggest hurdle is getting American teachers to believe they can sing with their students. Singing is a free resource, and doesn't require money, it requires attitude and skills.

—Kelly Armor

Teachers first attended a two-hour training led by Lynn Clint, Ally Thomas, and refugee song coaches. This training covered how to employ traditional culture as a model for using song to make teachers' jobs easier. We introduced 20 OSNO songs and asked each teacher to commit to learning at least three. Each coach visited her assigned classrooms at least five times over two months to help teachers and children learn and use the songs. This was extremely successful. We observed

firsthand that coaching works in ways that workshops do not. Teachers knew they had to be accountable and learned songs in preparation for the coaches' visits. The song coaches were open and supportive, and host teachers often had them present about their respective cultures to their students. Teachers experimented with using songs for cleaning up, lining up, putting on coats, and waiting for meals. Every class learned at least three songs, many in the native languages. Teachers were given latitude about which of the 20 songs they would learn. Less confident teachers picked the songs they found the easiest to learn. Some chose songs that matched the background of their song coach. Others chose songs that fit their curriculum, such as songs about butterflies, the days of the week, or learning body parts. Others played our demo CD in their classroom, watched children's reaction, and then chose songs the children were most drawn to.



Each trainer was assigned different childcare sites. We visited every classroom at each site at least twice and witnessed how each song coach and teacher made progress. One teacher said to her coach, “I know the songs are great. We had such trouble with cleanup time but using *Simba La La* makes it a celebration. But Nibal [her song coach from Palestine] made it real. Her being from another country, and everything she has lived

through, I so appreciate her visits.” We interviewed site directors and all reported improvements in classroom management, specifically citing an ease of transitions. They said that songs helped make classrooms “calmer.” One director reported her teachers’ classroom management improved, and children were more attentive when teachers used songs. Another director said she knew exactly what each class was doing because she could hear different songs throughout the day from her office. Many teachers had apprehension about learning to sing in another language, so we created slow versions of some songs. One director mentioned how coaches’ visits kept “the teachers on their toes,” and another said, “Hearing songs from the coaches and having guests made the kids and teachers excited and motivated.” All the directors said that singing brought children together and made them happier. The atmosphere and mood in the classroom improved in every case.

We followed up with every class a year later and trained teachers to use video to document how they incorporated an OSNO song into classroom activities to educate families about newcomer cultures in Erie and the importance of singing. Teachers learned basic filming techniques and developed a plan for capturing a mini song documentary in their classrooms. Song coaches, Lynn Clint, Ally Thomas, and I visited classrooms again at least five times. Ninety-one videos were recorded, all uploaded to YouTube and recorded to DVDs for families. Responding to feedback from the first year, we offered cooking workshops led by OSNO graduates with simple recipes to recreate with preschoolers. Every site hosted a parent event with presentations by song coaches, a celebration of the videos and the OSNO songs, and often food prepared by the children.

The videos authentically document influences we saw in the previous year such as increased cultural awareness among students, teachers' use of song to accomplish tasks, and more joyful and music-filled classrooms. The videos also represent how teachers felt most comfortable using the songs: 26 percent demonstrate transitions and 67 percent demonstrate song at circle time. Forty-eight percent of the class videos featured children singing in foreign languages, and 25 percent showed children introducing the context of the song. In the first year, many teachers and supervisors reported little parental awareness of the program. Parent events and videos solved this. Overwhelmingly positive feedback came from families, and parents were very excited to receive the DVDs. Our YouTube channel gives evidence of the popularity of the videos with over 26,000 views and 53 subscribers. Overall we saw inner-city parents were surprised and amazed at the diverse mix of ethnicities in their neighborhoods. The rural locations, not particularly racially diverse, were hungry to learn about the outside world. Some classrooms bonded intensely with the song coaches, and some parents remarked this was their children's first experience meeting people who spoke a language other than English.

Impacts on New Americans

The song coach initiative reached a number of new American parents with a marked effect. One mother was moved to find children singing a tune from her home in Iraq. Previously she had not often spoken to the childcare staff, but the song spurred her to thank the director profusely and share the music videos with her extended family in Iraq and Jordan. She had never thought this song could be used so beautifully with children in America. One childcare director who serves many new American families reported that parents told her when they heard their songs sung at the school it was the first time they felt at home in America.

"When I first came, I did not think a childcare in Erie can use Acholi songs. The training opened my eyes, it encouraged me to use my song and dance with kids to help them learn."

—Victoria Angelo

The greatest impact, naturally, has been for the OSNO trainees. They found that this program strengthened their communication skills, allowed them to bond with American children, and helped them understand American culture more fully. Trainees gave feedback at the end of the program and highlighted the most valuable topics covered during class. These included learning to encourage young children, use positive language in classrooms, delineate between discipline and punishment, and devise strategies for conflict resolution. Many trainees' cultural practices of raising children had included corporal punishment and focused on self-discipline, respect, and patience, but American pedagogy focuses more on developing children's preferences, creative expression, and autonomy. The training gave them a forum to discuss cultural differences in parenting and gave them skills that they put to use in their own homes. This program has demystified the American education system and empowered refugees to work with American teachers as co-workers and as parents.

Trainees discovered that despite cultural differences, song is as valuable a tool here as in their native land. They found songs remain a wonderful way to bond with, cheer, and comfort children. Michou Ntambwe reported that her singing attracted children from across the classroom, who then would always ask for more songs. Gwedet Lado said her songs piqued children's curiosity and led

them to ask more questions about her culture. Bishnu Khadka said, “I am still learning English but I am fluent in *song*. Song helps me lead children, helps me show I love them.” One trainee coach with only beginning English was considered valuable by her host teachers because she had such a large song repertoire and could sing in five languages. One trainee from Bhutan who became a song coach said, “I used to think I'm lost. All of my art is lost now in America because it's all English, English, English. But we've got songs that are really, really good for children and I can use my Nepali language and culture here to help children.”

Thirty-nine of the 65 trainees gained employment as a result of the program. One has started her own home-based childcare. Five have received their CDA, a nationally recognized child care teacher credential. For many, employment was a life-changing event. Instead of being turned away because they spoke with an accent or dressed differently, they were hired because they spoke another language, because they could share about their native culture, because their nurturing skills were valued.

Those who have worked as song coaches or presented at professional development sessions have been given a huge affirmational boost. Some have told me it has been life changing to share their culture and have it so appreciated. During a presentation at the National Association for the Education of Young Children Institute, Marta Sam said, “When I came to America I was like a little baby. I had to learn everything! OSNO helped me to crawl and then toddle. Then I got a job in a daycare and they helped me walk. I get my CDA and now I am running, I am now your teacher, I am really running fast!” She received a standing ovation. Many OSNO graduates have admitted that it is a struggle to retain their songs, dances, food, and language with their growing children. They have told me, ardently, how wonderful OSNO is in validating their culture not just to the wider community, but also to their own children. Seeing mothers perform at a festival or lead a teacher training kindles cultural pride in their children to carry on those traditions.

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URLS

Simba La La: World Music for Children CD features songs collected from refugees in Erie, sung by the native speaker in their language and then in English <https://store.cdbaby.com/cd/oldsongsnewopportunities>
Ana Behib Il Mama / I love my mommy song in Arabic and English <https://youtu.be/SepVITsYR9w>
Teacher's Perspective video produced by Old Songs New Opportunities https://youtu.be/g6wmz9v_3e8
Shapuche / Whispering song in Bosnian and English used as a transition https://youtu.be/dV_tNYAPOKA
Simba La La song used with young toddlers <https://youtu.be/on6UT9G1Igc>
Project website <http://erieartmuseum.org/old-songs-new-opportunities/>

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An Interview with Victoria Angelo, Early Childhood Educator and Refugee

by Kelly Armor

Victoria Angelo was born in Uganda in 1967. Idi Amin's repressive regime forced her to move with her family to Sudan, where she attended secondary school. She graduated in 1985, married, and worked as a sports coach and at a health clinic. The civil war in what is now South Sudan caused her to flee to Egypt in 2000. She has lived in Erie since 2003 and became a U.S. citizen in 2014. She has eight children. She participated in the first OSNO training in 2004 and was immediately hired at St. Martin's Early Childhood Center, where she still works. She has received multiple grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts to pass on her Acholi song, dance, and drumming traditions to her children and other Acholis living in Erie. She has given lectures and demonstrations on African dance and culture throughout the region and performed at many festivals in Erie, and for Acholi gatherings in Erie, Pittsburgh, and Washington, DC. She is studying to become a nurse.



How has Old Songs New Opportunities helped you?

I knew how to dance, I knew how to sing, I knew how to take care of children, but I didn't know where to start. I believe that Acholi music and dance is very beautiful and important. It communicates strong African values and it teaches our African history. It also brings physical fitness, which is very important in the United States because you have to look to find ways to exercise. But when I first came I did not think a childcare in Erie can use Acholi songs. The training opened my eyes, it encouraged me to use my song and dance with kids to help them learn. At first I was scared and thought I'm going to say or do something wrong but instead it helped me not feel ashamed to be African. At first American kids ask me, "Why are you so black? Why do you talk funny?" But I don't worry, I just think that they want to know about me. It isn't bad that I'm different! Then when I started dancing and singing, they look at me like, "Wow she's not even shy!" One supervisor, Miss Leslie, came to train us about child development. When she finished she said, "Now it is my turn to be the student and your turn to teach me to dance." So we did!

What are some cultural differences you find with childcares?

Where I was raised, we don't have daycares. Sometimes relatives watch the children but mostly we take the child with us on our back. In the village we come together as one; we sit together, eat together, sing and dance together. Children respect all adults. Also, in the village everyone has responsibility to look after all the children. We have the right to talk to them and tell them if they are doing something wrong. In some ways this is like childcare. You must always be able to see all the children in the room. You must have your eyes on them all the time.

We love children the same way all over the world. Infants can't talk but they express themselves by crying. It is the same everywhere; we check to see why they are crying. Are they hungry? Is the diaper wet? Here in an American childcare we not only feed them and play with them, we make sure they have their tummy time and that they get fine motor time. We then write what we fed them and when they were changed and later on we give the paper to the parents and tell them how the day was. In the American childcare we are conscious of why we do everything. In Africa I never think, "Why do we dance? Why is this song important?" We just do it. Coming to America

makes me think those questions. We dance because it makes us physically fit, and it helps us keep our culture, and it makes our community strong. The songs helped us keep our history, our knowledge of traditional medicine. Books would just get wet and rotten in the jungle.

What advice would you offer newly resettled refugees?

There are a lot of different jobs they can do for living, but I would advise those with families to work with children. It helps us be involved with our own children. It helps keep your family strong. In America it is hard because older kids are out most of the time. They go to school in the morning and then go to work and then when they come home it's late. So when I talk to my kids in Arabic or Acholi they talk back in English. Working in the childcare also helps our South Sudanese community and lets us take care of each other just like back home. Other African parents are happy I and other African ladies are at St. Martin's. They see it is like a village where the relatives take care of the kids and our culture will be respected. It also helps other new Americans. We speak Arabic, and although it is a little different from the Arabic in the Middle East, still we communicate and we can help each other more.

Any other thoughts on working in a childcare?

At the childcare I am a floater. I move from room to room and work with all ages. Some children at the daycare were so bad these past two weeks. We are trying to seek special help for them because they have hard lives. They say bad words, when you try to redirect them they kick you. They don't listen when we try to talk. So I started to sing to them, "Can you sit by me so we can play..." It worked! They came and they sit! And then they imitated me, they sing because I sing. I sing, "Why did you do this? Go tell sorry to your friend. Sorry? Sorry for what?" And they sing, "Sorry for hitting you." I then keep singing, "Okay. Let's all play nicely, play nicely with our friends." Then they go get the guitar and sing to their friend, three times, "I am so sorry, for hitting you!" They're singing about how we disciplined them! Some specialists who visited were all so happy that these children now sing what we teach them. It's just our song. I went home, I go to take shower, and I find myself still singing the song! So song helps me a lot, and not only me, but the kids and the people around me. It is not very different from singing in the African village. Music cheers us. Music teaches us to be good.

[Listen to Kaleba](#) from *Simba La La: World Music for Children* CD, produced by the Erie Art Museum ~ Sung and led by Victoria Angelo, Drum by Tasana Camara

This Acholi song is used when a baby starts to toddle. One person calls the child to toddle toward him and then to turn around, and then another person calls the child to toddle to her. Victoria simply inserted her own toddler's name, Henry, into the song. The drummer, Tasana Camara, is a *djeli*, or griot, from Guinea who now lives in Oil City, PA.

Henry agenda (Kaleba!)

Henry mutiti (Kaleba!) 2x

Cho cho chee (Kaleba!)

Chuka nenda bah (Kaleba!) 2x

Choo choo choo (Kaleba!)

Chuka nenda bah (Kaleba!) 2x

Henry is walking! (*Kaleba!*)

Great big Henry (*Kaleba!*) 2x

Cho cho chee (Kaleba!)

Jump and turn around (*Kaleba!*) 2x

Choo choo choo (Kaleba!)

Jump and turn around (*Kaleba!*)