

In the world of ethnic museums, there is often a focus on both art and the everyday life of immigrant communities, often in a historic context. They are often linked, but the focus on art and everyday life as part of historic pasts often forgets the importance of art and everyday life in current newcomer communities.

In the conclusion of the publication *The Art of Community: Creativity at the Crossroads of Immigrant Cultures and Social Services*, the folklorist Laura Marcus Green writes about the indivisibility of art and everyday life for refugees and immigrants: “...in the case of traditional cultural expression, art is organically woven into the fabric of daily life, inseparable from the way we think, eat, build shelter, work, celebrate, or create family. For newcomers who have made the United States their home by choice or necessity, traditional culture is often a thread of continuity between a person’s homeland and a new neighborhood” (Marcus 2006, 30). Through their focus on immigration stories, creative expressions, and tradition, ethnic museums play an important role in bridging homelands old and new. In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the National Czech &

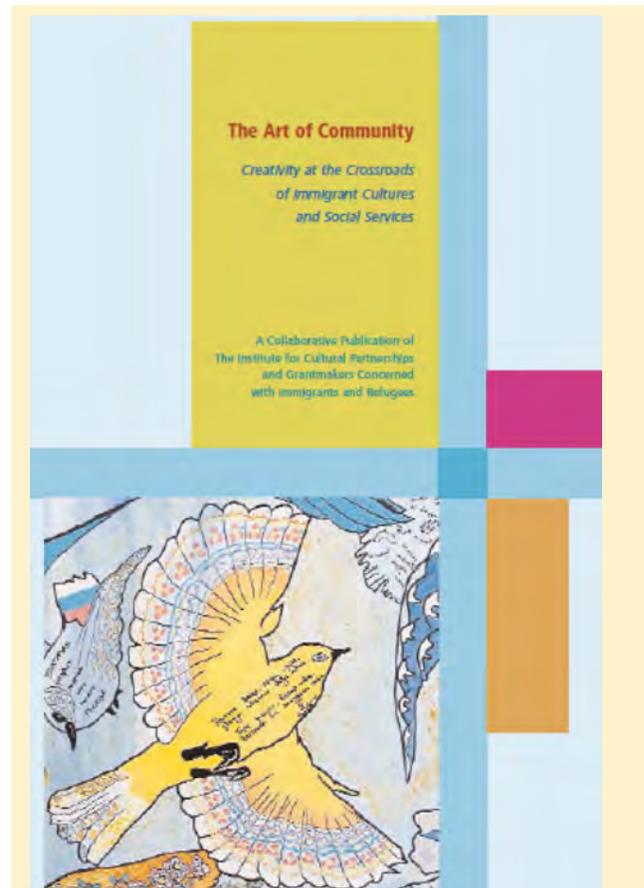
### **Cedar Rapids, Iowa**

Known for its Czech heritage, Cedar Rapids and its surrounding area now include a wide variety of cultures, languages, and ethnicities. Roughly one in every 25 residents is listed as “foreign-born” (U.S. Census Bureau), and this represents statewide change; the percentage of immigrants living in Iowa has tripled since 1990, and it is now estimated that one in every 13 Iowans is either predominantly Latino or Asian (American Immigration Council). Eastern Iowa is home to many sizable immigrant communities, including a large Arab American population in Cedar Rapids, a sizable Latino community in Columbus Junction, and large populations of Burmese and Bosnian refugees in the Cedar Falls-Waterloo region. Other communities in the area include refugees from countries such as Bhutan, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Slovak Museum & Library (NCSML) has focused on celebrating the lives and contributions of Czechs and Slovaks throughout the world, while also promoting visitors to reflect on their own experiences. According to their mission, the NCSML is “a museum that celebrates life. Czech life. Slovak life. American life. We are a museum that encourages self-discovery, a museum that asks what it means to be free. Through extraordinary exhibitions and experiences, we tell stories of freedom and identity, family and community, human rights and dignity. Our stories connect yesterday with today and tomorrow” (National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library).

As part of a new initiative on intercultural collaboration, freedom, and human dignity, the NCSML initiated a series of programs to highlight global experience while promoting local community engagement. Titled *Global Voices, Local Actions*, the series has so far included a public talk by Czech humanitarian Šimon Pánek, a panel discussion on genocide and cultural differences, and a workshop on refugee and newcomer arts led by folklorists Amy Skillman and Laura Marcus Green of Building Cultural Bridges. This workshop is the focus of this article, which highlights how the NCSML is using the work of public folklorists to promote refugee and newcomer traditional arts in Eastern Iowa.

In terms of traditional arts, relatively few programs in the region are set up to support refugees and newcomers who wish to promote their work. Partly this is because there is no statewide program for traditional arts; the folk arts program at the Iowa Arts Council ended in the early 2010s, leaving a major gap in terms of fieldwork, infrastructure, and support for traditional artists. In terms of local resources, there has only recently been an interest in strengthening and developing refugee and newcomer arts. As home to the University of Iowa, Iowa City has a large amount of support for such programs, and events such as the Iowa Dance Festival are inclusive of many forms of traditional dance. In Cedar Rapids, there is interest among newcomers in developing stronger networks and programming for the arts, but such programs are only in the early discussion stages. By bringing the Art of



*The Art of Community* comes out of Building Cultural Bridges, a national, interdisciplinary project with the goal to bridge the arts and social services to support cultural continuity and artistic growth among refugees and immigrants in the United States. Community-based workshops and conference panel presentations bring the project to local, regional, and national audiences, providing tools and encouragement for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Community workshop to Cedar Rapids, the NCSML strove to act as a catalyst for future program development in the region.

Through local gatherings of human services personnel, museum professionals, and refugee and newcomer communities, we built the workshop audience. Participants included representatives of multiple community groups, arts and cultural organizations, several local universities and colleges, and a variety of local residents who were intrigued by the topic. Interest in the workshop was strong enough that it filled up two weeks beforehand; after expanding the number of slots, there was a full house on the day of the event.

To build community, starting with oneself and affirming shared goals with one's partners and allies are important. Likewise, to build a cultural community it is imperative for everyone to recognize their personal cultural knowledge. To begin this process, participants were invited to describe and share an experience that made them have a connection with culture. The following themes emerged:

- 1) *Mitigating loss*. Moves--both transnational and more local--can include loss or the feeling that there are "holes" where something is not available in the new place. How does one maintain culture and creative life in new spaces that may not have the same supports, materials, or community-wide appreciation?
- 2) *Travel*. Participants mentioned the process of becoming fully enveloped in a community, and doing so in a familial, communal way that transformed them from outsider status to community insider. People do not often recognize their own traditional culture until viewing it side by side with something that is unlike theirs.
- 3) *Unusual situations as a marker of cultural differences*. Discussions about awkward, funny, or uncomfortable situations arising from cultural differences, new situations, or new cultural experiences were a part of this theme.

The final session was devoted to small group breakouts to brainstorm plans for potential projects. Most participants lived near Cedar Rapids and/or Iowa City, which made the feasibility of such collaborations better. Four ideas for projects resulted from these productive sessions:

### **1) "Lost and Found" Project**

Participants in this group thought about the ideas of what gets left behind with change, and thought about it in terms of objects. It was proposed that local community members work with local refugee populations to facilitate regular opportunities for people to bring an object into a circle to tell a story about it. Stakeholders would be involved in producing these circles. It was also suggested that this could become a statewide initiative because, according to one group member, "there are repositories of objects across the state, we could involve those objects to involve people who don't sense themselves as immigrants at all...[there are] multiple levels building up from grassroots [level]." It was noted that objects "are such a powerful universal tool to generate stories."

### **2) Festival of Cultures**

In this group members proposed a cultural festival to "break down barriers and create understanding through activities—dance, fashion, and soccer—to move forward we have to understand each other...to improve communication...to allow immigrants to be more productive

than when they are unable to communicate.” It was proposed that cultural ambassadors could help their communities as a public presence in the community. Others mentioned the power of music, such as an instrumental jam session involving multiple cultures, and culturally specific sports events.

### **3) Storydory**

This project, a play on the words “story” and “corridor” (in reference to the nickname of the metropolitan area around Interstate 380), was described by a group member as “a pop-up series of ongoing art programs in public spaces, ongoing, instead of a yearly festival.” This was proposed as an alternative to renting larger, more expensive venues and is similar to pop-up museum exhibitions. According to a group member, “it’s a space for dialogue, more one-on-one conversations possible, going where people are instead of expecting them to come...the city is a cultural space...people may be economically/geographically disadvantaged in terms of access...” Examples were a refugee foodways demo at the regional grocery chain Hy-Vee, where ingredients might be easily acquired for interested parties, and a group like the Amen Choir performing at a public park. It was discussed that such a project could take six months for social media/marketing but could be quickly implemented afterward. Group members were interested in doing something “unconventional...to be more democratic,” and to “give performers the opportunity to perform in their community.” This could be easily replicable in other communities, particularly rural communities. One person provided the example of bus story time in Iowa City, when the library staff presented story times on the public bus system to reach more neighborhoods and use bus stops as gathering spaces.

### **4) International Farmers’ Market**

This group was interested in reaching out to the Cedar Rapids Metro Economic Alliance to work with churches and other sponsors to help promote refugee and immigrant booths and other events at the Cedar Rapids Farmers’ Market. One idea was to create an intercultural activity to represent different cultures at the market. Refugee and immigrant vendors may also welcome economic development opportunities for their businesses.

### **The After Effects**

Currently, multiple initiatives are taking place in the Cedar Rapids area. Akwi Nji, founder of the local storytelling nonprofit The Hook, has initiated a storytelling event called “The Things We Carry” in collaboration with Brucemore Mansion (a historic house museum) featuring immigrants and refugees sharing stories in a living room setting. Additionally, Akwi has included themes from the Lost and Found Project in her ArtLOUD! Series, which combines storytelling, music, dance, and visual art to “tell the true stories of our community.” In her January 2017 installment, Akwi described her event:

*It's not traditional theater. It's not spoken word. It's not like anything we've tried before or even anything you've perhaps seen before. We're combining dance, music, visual art, and monologues and spoken-word poetry to tell the true stories of our community.*

*We're telling stories of an artist who left Sudan and the loss of freedom that sent him packing, memory loss, a suitcase with quite the travel history, the loss of the will to live (thank you, Flattop*

*Mountain Trail*), a final goodbye to a little boy's cowboy hat, and the many beautiful things FOUND in the context of loss. We want you to join us. (“ArtLOUD”)

The local refugee and immigrant advocacy group Wake Up for Your Rights! has begun to plan a cultural festival that will take place later in 2017, while staff from the Catherine McAuley Center (a human services center dedicated to serving refugees and newcomers) are working to initiate collaboration on opening the Cedar Rapids Farmers’ Market more easily to newcomers. There is currently no word about the Storydory project.

The NCSML has started dialogue with the Catherine McAuley Center, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Bruce Moore, and the African American Museum of Iowa to create more structured learning opportunities for newcomers and refugees of all ages to develop English language skills through museum visits. In this process, several museum professionals in the area noted that, before any program can be put into place, there must be further training and education for staff on the needs and experiences of newcomers and refugees. Catherine McAuley Center staff are providing this training to the various museums. Additionally, the NCSML staff are working with staff from the Cedar Rapids office of Catholic Charities to develop refugee and newcomer awareness opportunities to students and the public. Overall, the Art of Community workshop has been a catalyst in raising awareness of the need for structured programs that promote refugee and newcomer traditional arts in Eastern Iowa, and it has also demonstrated the need for further education about the cultures, lives, and experiences of those who settle, or are resettled, in the area. Anne Duggar of the Catherine McAuley Center said that, although the Center does not have artistic endeavors, they bring communities together, and “that is the art of community; the art is, in fact, the community.”

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