

# The Sewing Circle Project in Connecticut: Reflections on Ten Years

by Lynne Williamson

Even when immigrants and refugees embrace a move that takes them to a more stable and prosperous place, resettlement poses challenges of physical, psychological, and cultural adaptation. Many new Americans ease transition by continuing, recreating, or reinventing familiar art forms. For many members of refugee communities now living in New England, practicing their familiar arts of weaving, knitting, basket making, lace making, music, dance, and storytelling helps them cope with the trauma of displacement—often resulting from war and genocide—that their families have suffered (Greene 2009, Dunne



2011). Several folklorists in arts and cultural agencies around the United States have developed arts-based programs with newcomer groups to learn about the traditions within refugee communities and assist them with artistic practices that may enhance health and healing<sup>1</sup>. One of these programs based in Hartford, Connecticut, has worked with newcomer artists for a decade to encourage the continuation and sustainability of their traditional arts<sup>2</sup>. The program, named [The Sewing Circle Project](#) has also stimulated artist-to-artist and intergenerational learning and introduced new understandings about refugee communities to a variety of audiences.

## Our Origin Story

In January 2007, the Connecticut Cultural Heritage Arts Program (CCHAP), then based at the Institute for Community Research (ICR) in Hartford, held a public conversation with Bosnian weavers living in Hartford. This event took place as part of our showing of the exhibit [Weavings of War: Fabrics of Memory](#), a powerful, evocative traveling display of textiles created by women who had experienced war and trauma in countries such as Afghanistan, Peru, Laos, Palestine, Chile, and South Africa. Realizing that Greater Hartford was home to members of these communities, CCHAP and ICR designed a series of events featuring performances, storytelling sessions, and arts workshops given by those who had lived through events depicted in the exhibit.

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*The Goat Bag was woven by Sewing Circle Project participant Fatima Vejzovic. All photos courtesy Lynne Williamson/CCHAP.*

Nilofer Haider, an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher for Catholic Charities Refugee and Migration Services, introduced CCHAP to several Bosnian women in her class, all skilled in weaving, knitting, and crochet hand work. Their stories of surviving genocide in the former Yugoslavia, migrating to Hartford as refugees, and finding comfort through their crafts deeply impressed me. The women's experiences, personal resilience, and eloquence seemed to offer a compelling educational opportunity for public audiences. We presented an afternoon of weaving demonstrations and dialogue with visitors to the exhibit, attended by several other textile artists from different cultures. In the course of questions from the audience, one of the Bosnian women spoke about how knitting, crocheting, and weaving helped her forget painful memories of the war. These pursuits also gave her a feeling of productive contribution. The mutual interest and camaraderie shared by the women was immediate, so I invited them to meet to continue their interaction outside a public setting. The group bonded over coffee, pastries, shared experiences of dislocation, and deep love for their textile arts. Ten years later, the Sewing Circle Project endures, in new and different ways but keeping the same spirit of sustaining traditional fiber arts and, even more significantly, the artists who practice them.

My inspiration for convening the original Hartford group came from the visionary work of the folklorist Laura Marcus Green, who was then in Portland, Oregon, where she and the Oregon Folklife Program partnered to create and coordinate the [Arts for New Immigrants Program](#) with the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization from 1999 to 2003. One of Laura's initiatives with newcomer artists led to a sewing circle in which women from many cultural groups shared materials and techniques with each other and public audiences through outreach programming. For the many Bosnian women I had recently met in Hartford, the idea of a sewing circle that would bring together immigrants and refugees who had remarkable textile skills seemed a powerful tool to reduce social isolation and encourage more production and marketing of their work. Over time, we would see that the effects of the Portland Sewing Circle applied to our group too: improving English skills, involving the artists in American society, learning to negotiate new social roles, helping to support their families, and sharing a healing connection with others harmed by political and personal trauma.

### **Sewing Circle GOALS**

- ~Provide social interaction among the artists
- ~Sustain the cultural heritage that newcomers bring with them
- ~Offer technical assistance to encourage artists to continue their artistic traditions
- ~Enhance opportunities for newcomers to contribute to American society
- ~Expand newcomers' access to cultural resources
- ~Bring new Americans' rich cultural expressions to public attention
- ~Stimulate literacy improvement
- ~Develop marketplaces for newcomer artists and their artwork

Our Sewing Circle Project began with monthly meetings on Saturdays in the ICR conference room, where several women worked on their art forms, learned new skills from each other, and shared coffee and conversation. Participants located through CCHAP fieldwork included Bosnian weavers, knitters, and crochet artists; a Romanian macramé artist; a lace maker from the Assyrian community; Burmese Karen weavers; and a Hmong embroiderer. As I met other fiber artists in the course of my fieldwork, they joined the group—now a dozen strong—as we gathered every month. Language barriers were easily transcended—the artists communicated through their work and delighted in teaching each other new techniques. There were memorable moments

when personal stories, sometimes difficult ones, arose as the women engaged in their needle work. We listened to each other, often without words. The supportive environment fostered our shared goals: providing social interaction among the artists, sustaining the cultural heritage that newcomers bring with them, offering technical assistance that encourages artists to continue their artistic traditions, enhancing opportunities to contribute to American society, expanding access to cultural resources, bringing their rich cultural expressions to public attention, stimulating literacy improvement, and developing marketplaces for their artwork.



*Florence Betgeorge showing Rola Mattar her lace.*

### **Learning and Growing Together**

In 2008 new members from Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Colombia, Peru, Liberia, and Sri Lanka joined us from ESOL classes at our new meeting place in the Hartford Public Library. Hoping to expand into marketing initiatives, CCHAP applied for and received a \$5,000 grant from the Avon Hello Tomorrow Fund to develop promotional materials, hold regular sales events, purchase fabric and wool, and participate in an ICR international conference in Hartford. In collaboration with Catholic Charities Migration and Refugee Services and the Hartford Public Library, we offered small business training to the artists and hired a part-time assistant, thanks to new support from the Aurora Foundation for Women and Girls from 2009 to 2013. Other activities sprang up—we participated in many weekend craft shows and markets, where several pieces won prizes for craftsmanship; we created a banner, logo, artist flyers, and marketing tags for sale items. We also began an ongoing association with Hartford Open Studios Weekend, holding an open house at ICR and now at the Connecticut Historical Society, where CCHAP moved in 2015.



Developing a business education track for Sewing Circle participants also taught the project team, which now included several interns and volunteers, the benefits of applying public folklore skills to our work. These lessons have stayed with us as the project expanded to classrooms and other outreach settings. In particular, we have emphasized a commitment to building relationships of trust as a central first step. Service—helping out, giving back—is also central to the project as a way to develop reciprocity. We encouraged each other to view the women as carrying skills, wisdom, personal strengths, and agency, as opposed to a perception that they were passive consumers of social services or that they needed to be “educated” in American ways.

Some examples may help show how these values were put into practice and what we learned from the process. Several interns from a Trinity College (Hartford) class in community psychology and a Vassar anthropology student spent many hours beyond class requirements driving the women to markets, tagging products, creating lists of items for sale, logging sales, researching locations for sales and resources, organizing donations of materials, helping at events, and learning about post-traumatic stress disorder and how to mitigate its effects. Most importantly, through their diligence and respectful approach they gained the women’s trust and understood how that process of trust building underpins all other activities.

In 2009 the Sewing Circle welcomed a local Girl Scout who asked to work with us to fulfill her Gold Award requirements. Over the summer she demonstrated quilting techniques and proposed that the group create a collaborative quilt. This ambitious project, while well intentioned, required considerable negotiation to fit into the business training syllabus we had established for our meetings. The quilting project also needed to accommodate what the artists could comfortably produce. In response to these needs, she adapted her design to incorporate the hand work of each group member, arranged around a central quilted motif and a pattern using outlines of everyone’s hands. This solution honored artists’ skills rather than asking them to adopt an unfamiliar American technique. The women benefitted from working alongside an American as equals, the artists contributed their own work, and they gained prestige from exhibitions of the quilt. We all learned a lot about flexibility and how not to overextend artists’ time commitment or overwhelm them with new information. We liked the quilt’s central motif of a globe covered with Bosnian crochet lace so much that we made it our Sewing Circle Project logo.





*Fatima Vejzovic teaching a Bosnian weaving student at Hartford Arts Academy.*

An underlying value that CCHAP holds for all our work also guided this project—fostering diverse cultural expressions and aesthetics rather than coercing artistic assimilation. Marketing the women’s work sometimes tested this principle, and as usual, the women showed us the way. We wrestled with an occasional need to create new designs or items for an American market as customers at sales events suggested preferences and new ideas. Fatima Vejzovic, an expert knitter and master Bosnian weaver, started making fingerless gloves because she noticed their popularity. When I became enthusiastic about a whimsical goat design Fatima had woven with the phrase “*Tuzlanska Koza*” (Goat from Tuzla) because she missed her farm, she began to make and sell a lot of them, especially at farmers’ markets. Also, weaving lettering and names into a rug (*ćilim*) created a narrative feature that led to a multi-year commission to produce commemorative banners for the Aurora Foundation’s board members.

Developing business education for Sewing Circle participants also taught the project team of staff and interns the importance of skills of folklore in any classroom or outreach setting: the insistence upon building relationships and trust with the women rather than seeing them as passive recipients of social services and aid, as well as valuing diverse cultural expressions over assimilation for newcomer arts and aesthetics benefited the project.

One of the most challenging issues that artists face stems from the need to find appropriate materials or consider whether to use new threads, fabrics, and types of wool. Seeing how artists address this creatively has been impressive. The Karen weavers prefer a very fine cotton thread that we could not locate, but they wove beautiful scarves with a thicker variety that we sourced from a yarn outlet in Massachusetts. Now the family of a weaver enlists relatives to send the best thread from Thailand in bulk (although shipping is expensive), and I solicit friends who travel there to bring some back. Somali basket maker Fatuma Ahmed substituted baling twine for the warp of her baskets, actually preferring its durability to the palm reeds she was used to but were difficult to access in the U.S. Her market baskets had handles woven from the weft yarn she used for the body, but they needed improvement for aesthetics and strength. Florence Betgeorge, an Assyrian lace maker and seamstress from Iran, crafted a solution that Fatuma uses all the time now—double weaving the same yarn into an inch-wide sturdy self-handle that attaches inside of the





*Fatuma Ahmed teaching Karen weavers Somali basket weaving.*

basket. Family members have made looms using whatever can be found, for example, PVC pipes in place of bamboo for the Karen backstrap looms. For several years the Bosnian weavers bought a cheaper commercial wool to make carpets when they ran out of wool from Bosnia. We found a wonderful new material that improved the quality, beauty, and feel of the rugs—a local farm whose Shetland sheep graze on the grounds of the Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington sold us the processed wool in the natural colors of the sheep<sup>3</sup>. This soft but durable wool, along with a new strong linen weft thread we found, helped artists create gorgeous weavings that have sold for high prices. The interplay of tradition and innovation seems to come naturally to the Sewing Circle artists, whereas I as a folklorist tend to focus on one or the other process, especially in written or spoken descriptions. They “live” the traditions, demonstrating the most effective way to sustain them.

### **Essential Education and Outreach**

Sewing Circle members believe that sharing their traditions forges stronger connections between their communities and public audiences. They teach young people in their families and the community. They love to showcase their cultural practices and teach others to sew, knit, and weave as a way to connect with their new neighbors. Exhibits also allow viewers to meet these talented artists, learn more about their cultures, and try some of their art forms. For example, in 2011 we partnered with the social justice organization the [Advocacy Project](#) of Washington, DC, to present handwoven rugs (*ćilimi*) and wall hangings by our Bosnian weavers alongside the [Srebrenića Memorial Quilt](#) from Bosnia that was touring the U.S. Called [Rugs of Remembrance: Fabrics of Memory](#), the exhibit at the ICR Community Gallery also featured weaving demonstrations as well as Bosnian music, dancing, and food. The Hartford weavers created their own memory *ćilim* of squares with the names of their villages woven in. I had asked if they wanted to make their squares with names of relatives lost in the genocide, as the Memorial Quilt artists had done in Bosnia, but this was too painful for the Hartford women. Their creative solution incorporated the names of beloved hometowns woven in white, yellow, and blue—the colors of the Bosnian flag. When the Srebrenića Memorial Quilt arrived for the exhibit, it showed some damage from its long journey. Fatima, Ajsa, and Fikreta took it to their home and lovingly mended the fraying fabric, a profound act of connection to homeland and transcendence of sorrow.



### Teaching and Learning Traditional Textile Arts

Several Sewing Circle artists teach young people in their community, helping pass on traditions in their new homeland. In 2008 CCHAP's Southern New England Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program with a grant from the Long Foundation supported Fatuma Ahmed to teach her daughter Nurta to make Somali woven baskets, connected Hmong embroiderers from Connecticut and Massachusetts, and enabled Fatima Vejzovic to work with two Bosnian women who learned the basics of weaving. Florence Betgeorge, master Assyrian lace maker, taught her daughter Sharokin a knotted lace technique. Sharokin now produces her own lace, and they demonstrated together at the Lowell Folk Festival in 2015.

Connecting with other newcomer artists has also been powerful for the Sewing Circle women and has helped them see the significant learning and personal growth happening through their participation in this project. In 2011 Bosnian weaver Fatima Vejzovic, Romanian social worker Doina Lechanu, and I traveled to Utica, NY, for a gathering organized by the New York Folklore Society<sup>4</sup>. The occasion was a workshop on building an arts and culture support network for newcomer artists led by folklorists Amy Skillman and Laura Marcus Green through their national initiative Building Cultural Bridges<sup>5</sup>. We presented the Hartford Sewing Circle Project and participated in small group discussions on developing activities that could sustain traditions as well as community social and economic health. Such meetings inspire connections, critical thinking, changes, growth, and ideas, and show artists how much others value their skills and their beautiful work (Overholser and McHale 2013). Based on our participation at that gathering, the New York Folklore Society developed a microenterprise project in central New York, and CCHAP has collaborated with folklorists in New England to implement a regional project for convening newcomer artists and exhibiting their work.

Likewise, [New Lives/New England](#), a 2013-2017 partnership among CCHAP, the [Vermont Folklife Center](#), and [Cultural Resources, Inc.](#) in Maine, brings together several dozen refugee and new immigrant artists living in our states for a series of activities that build on existing connections among the groups. The artists and folklorists developed a traveling exhibit that explored the role that traditional arts play in maintaining artists' sense of community while building a new home in New England. Participants have been inspired by meeting so many peers and encourage each

other to continue familiar artistic traditions and share them with new neighbors. This is seemingly simple, but so necessary as an important part of acculturation as people negotiate and shape new roles and identities in a new land. An unexpected outcome for CCHAP was the discovery that the young Connecticut Karen and Somali Bantu women who traveled with us to Vermont are now learning to weave cloth and baskets from their mothers. The opportunity to visit older women from their cultures, living in another state and very devoted to community, proved to be a watershed for these young women, expanding their sense of community and the value of tradition when so much of American culture pulls them away from that. Farhiyo Aden, a Somali Bantu woman whose sister Sadiyo has been a member of the Sewing Circle from its beginning, is proud to be learning the family tradition of palm basket weaving. Seeing the second generation of artists continue this craft is wonderful. After the trip to Vermont Farhiyo wrote, “It was a great experience to see different backgrounds of cultures. Please, if there are more events let me know. My mother made more baskets that are beautiful. She said she can't wait to meet with you whenever you're available.”



*Myint Khin at Bellizzi Asian Studies Academy, Hartford as a part of a Weaving the World Residency. See the Weaving the World educator's guide featuring both Karen and Bosnian weaving at <https://database.hartfordperforms.org/artist/92>.*

### **New Education Partnerships**

Since 2014, CCHAP's work with Sewing Circle artists has focused on educational outreach. Hartford area educators have shown a strong interest in the artists and their communities, asking us to bring public school students closer to understanding cultures through engagement with artistic practices and personal connection with culture bearers. These activities generate considerable pride (and income) for the artists as they see their skills and life work recognized and respected. CCHAP often serves as a presenter, introducing the artists, describing the Sewing Circle Project and the context of the art form while encouraging questions and hands-on student activities. CCHAP also lines up English interpreters from artists' families to translate.

Based on pilot projects with educators, CCHAP was invited to join [Hartford Performs](#), a new arts education initiative that places artists in schools for workshops and residencies. We designed two in-school weaving workshops and standards-based lesson plans featuring Karen and Bosnian weavers from the Sewing Circle. These workshops have been accepted for the roster that Hartford Performs markets to schools. Since 2015 we have presented the weaving workshops in seven classrooms as part of Hartford Performs, and we have also taken the Karen program to Trinity College and Miss Porter's School<sup>6</sup>. Our program, [Weaving the World: Exploring Cultures Through Textiles](#), serves 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>-grade in either an arts or social studies classroom and aligns with the Common Core State Standards for each subject and grade. Fatima's husband and grandson made



ten small looms that we bring to a classroom for students to try Bosnian weaving. There is a strong need for artists who reflect the communities of the students in Hartford, and the artists CCHAP works with can contribute diversity and rich content to local arts education programs. Collaboration with Hartford Performs has created exciting opportunities to involve folk artists more widely and brings new earned income to CCHAP and the artists. We plan to expand by adding additional folk artist programs to the roster and developing curriculum materials for each program. CCHAP's educational work with immigrant and refugee artists was supported by an Ignition Grant from the Greater Hartford Arts Council, with funding from the United Arts Campaign and the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.



*The Sewing Circle Group, 2010.*

## Reflections

Not surprisingly, members of the Sewing Circle have changed over ten years, many moving away and others having less time for cultural pursuits as their families grow and they find jobs and educational opportunities. At present, CCHAP focuses on cultivating artists who are able to make a commitment to producing art or participating in outreach activities. What can be said about the effects of the project? Although we have not engaged in a formal program evaluation, some outcomes can be identified through long-term observation and informal qualitative interviews. The Sewing Circle Project has stimulated greater artistic production among several artists, expanded their access to cultural resources, helped to generate income, and acquainted public audiences and students with these newcomers and their unique cultural knowledge. Our initiative has also enhanced health and healing through positive, tradition-based practices that are shared with others from similar circumstances, and it has promoted social integration. Building on the inherent thread

of education that runs throughout the project has strengthened each of us with new knowledge and individual growth. Several Sewing Circle members are passing on fiber art traditions to young community members, and are presenting their cultural heritage in Hartford schools.

Public activities have fostered social engagement, leading to artists' increased confidence in approaching, conversing, and negotiating with local citizens. This has been particularly true for the women who attend farmers' markets regularly to sell their work. Enhanced English language skills arise from these connections, leading to better comfort levels in communication and more independence for the artists. The artists develop a deeper sense of belonging and acceptance by society—rather than being consumers of social services. They demonstrate the skills they have brought with them and feel that they enrich society through their art. We believe that our work has led to a greater public awareness of newcomer groups and the positive contributions they make. In most Sewing Circle Project activities and sales events, we offer written information about the art form, the artist's community, and the artist's traditions. This contextual background, along with the opportunity to connect directly with women from other cultures, increases both the social and financial value of a transaction.

The approach I have taken as a folklorist emphasizes sustaining traditions, rather than developing products according to a marketing imperative. Respecting artists' traditions as well as any innovations that they choose to make remains a central project value and honors the historical and cultural knowledge they carry with them. While integration into American social networks is an important goal, I also encourage artists to maintain links to their homelands and language. Passing on skills and artistic knowledge, opening doors to public awareness, and creating opportunities and funding for this process, are the foundational objectives for the project that have evolved as a joint endeavor between folklorists and artists.

Sometimes expectations—of funders, project partners, myself—have not been met. Small business training, in the usual way of presenting the topic (keeping records, banking, investment, outreach, promotion) has not been effective for our group. We held trainings, but they were in English and did not address the scale of the women's production capabilities or the time they had available to work on artistic projects. Instead, we have concentrated on pragmatic concepts such as returning a portion of sales income to purchasing materials, appropriate pricing, attractive presentation of work at sales events, and communication with audiences.

The artists have to negotiate the place that their work with the Sewing Circle Project holds within their family dynamics. In some cases, other family members do not see the value of spending time making art, even traditional art, especially if the artist has childcare or other family responsibilities. The income from sales and fees for demonstrations and teaching has helped enhance families' respect for the women in the group and can improve family engagement in their artistic activities. It can be a delicate process for the folklorist to maintain a helpful but neutral role, requiring self-reflection and attention to artists' needs as they express them. Watching a talented woman stop making her traditional arts when she gets a fulltime job can be hard. I remain in touch and support what she CAN do, when she can do it. Other vitally important considerations for me include sustaining a long-term commitment to the group as well as a consistent and supportive approach that builds and maintains trust, because the population the project serves is so vulnerable.



The Sewing Circle Project continues with many of the women originally involved taking on new roles as educators and mentors, and we welcome new members often, which bodes well for the future. Our bonds remain strong. For example, although she has moved to Minnesota to join a thriving Somali community there, Fatuma Ahmed will represent our group in October 2017 when she joins me on a newcomer arts panel at the American Folklore Society conference in Minneapolis.

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#### Notes

1. For examples of folklorist- and community-led programs see [www.newcomerarts.net/newcomer-arts-collectives.html](http://www.newcomerarts.net/newcomer-arts-collectives.html).
2. For more information see <https://chs.org/connecticut-cultural-heritage-arts-program/connecticut-cultural-heritage-arts-program-projects/sewing-circle>.
3. The Clatter Ridge Farm is where we found this material <http://clatterridgefarm.com>.
4. Find a report of the conference and program information see: [www.nyfolklore.org/progs/conf-symp/newcomer.html](http://www.nyfolklore.org/progs/conf-symp/newcomer.html).
5. See the article by Nicholas Hartmann (this issue) to learn more about a recent Building Cultural Bridges workshop and see *The Art of Community* at <http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/The%20Art%20of%20Community%202006.pdf>.
6. CCHAP also presents Caribbean, Laotian, and Ugandan artists in Hartford schools. Find all the artists rostered with Hartford Performs from the CCHAP at <https://database.hartfordperforms.org/artist/92>.

#### URLS

**The Sewing Circle Project** <https://chs.org/connecticut-cultural-heritage-arts-program/connecticut-cultural-heritage-arts-program-projects/sewing-circle>  
**Weavings of War** <http://museum.msu.edu/?q=node/395>  
**Arts for New Immigrants** <http://www.nyfolklore.org/pubs/voic32-3-4/refugee.html>  
**The Advocacy Project** <http://www.advocacynet.org>  
**The Srebrenica Memorial Quilt** [http://www.advocacynet.org/quilts\\_archive/bosfam](http://www.advocacynet.org/quilts_archive/bosfam)  
**Rugs of Remembrance** <https://chs.org/connecticut-cultural-heritage-arts-program/chap-exhibits/rugs-of-remembrance-bosnian-weaving-in-hartford>  
**New Lives, New England** <https://chs.org/connecticut-cultural-heritage-arts-program/connecticut-cultural-heritage-arts-program-projects/new-lives-new-england>  
**Vermont Folklife Center** <http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org>  
**Cultural Resources, Inc.** [http://www.cultural-resources.info/organization\\_n.html](http://www.cultural-resources.info/organization_n.html)  
**Hartford Performs** <http://www.hartfordperforms.org>  
**Weaving the World** <https://database.hartfordperforms.org/artist/92>

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