



by Julianne Morse

In 2013-2014 the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts (NHSCA) embarked on an initiative to develop relationships with immigrant, refugee, and new American community members as part of our commitment to bring and support arts in underserved communities. Over the past two years we have funded fieldwork to identify 11 artists, developed relationships with social service providers, and given noncompetitive pilot support for a traditional Rwandan dance program for middle and high school youth. These efforts were in support of several strategic plan goals to “respond to changing economic, cultural, and demographic conditions of the state to create a culture of inclusion in the arts.”<sup>1</sup>

As the Traditional Arts Coordinator, I arranged meetings with many of the social service organizations that provide resources for the Bhutanese, Rwandan, and other new American groups to share information about NHSCA, our grants, programs, and services. This outreach took longer and presented more challenges than I’d anticipated. After only my first year in the position as a public sector folklorist, I was quickly learning that each organization had very different cultural approaches to operating, providing services, and connecting with community members. I am always learning that the most important thing is to keep showing up in person and demonstrate you are committed to helping.

One group NHSCA connected with was New American Africans (NAA).<sup>2</sup> NHSCA first approached NAA because of their successful academic afterschool program attended by 10 to 25 youth three days a week. We wanted to encourage NAA to apply for one of our general project grants to expand their afterschool program to include the arts. NAA had held many cultural celebrations and

The two largest populations of refugees to New Hampshire in the past decade are Bhutanese and Africans from the eastern region of Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burundi. Most Rwandan youth here grew up in Congolese or Ugandan refugee camps. Although their parents identify as Rwandan, many youth born after the 1994 conflicts and resulting genocide have never lived within the national borders of Rwanda or live among ongoing, residual ethnic tension. Rwanda's current borders were drawn in 1884 by Germany at the start of the European colonization of Africa and, as happened in much of the region, the existing ownership of land by different ethnic groups was not acknowledged.<sup>3</sup>



community potlucks that featured lengthy programs of music and dance. Their executive director, Honore Murenzi, has described the important role music and dance can have as a tool for community members to stay connected with their Rwandan cultural heritage.

NAA's expansion of adding an arts component to their successful programming we felt complemented both NHSCA's and NAA's missions. It has been demonstrated through many anecdotal stories and in research how engagement in the arts can have numerous positive outcomes for youth. James Caterall's 2012 research funded by the National Endowment for the Arts looked at four long-term studies of the impact of arts engagement on at-risk youth:

Socially and economically disadvantaged children and teenagers who have high levels of arts engagement or arts learning show more positive outcomes in a variety of areas than their low-arts-engaged peers. In middle school, high school and beyond they do better on a host of academic and civic behavioral measures than do at-risk youth who lack deep arts backgrounds. To varying degrees those outcomes extend to school grades, test scores, honors society membership, high school graduation, college enrollment and achievement, volunteering, and engagement in school or local politics.<sup>4</sup>

The reality of the trauma that these youth and their families have experienced from generations of conflict, living conditions in refugee camps, the long-term lack of access to nutritional foods and education, and now being part of a diaspora that is assimilating to a new culture, climate, and language is one that many of us will never be able to comprehend. At the local high school there are over 200 English Language Learners (ELL) with only five fulltime ELL staff. The goal in encouraging the expansion of NAA's programming to include the arts was for Rwandan and Congolese immigrant and refugee youth in Concord to engage with a traditional artist and art forms that celebrate and honor their cultural heritage. This engagement aimed to engender personal pride in culture, a greater sense of self-worth, and acknowledgement of their diverse cultural traditions as enriching the fabric of the Concord community. The program also hoped to instill confidence in the youths' ability to overcome academic challenges that arise from cultural and linguistic barriers and involve parents in the shared responsibility of celebrating traditional culture.





Hear Master Teacher Thierryne Dusabe and the youth sing traditional songs and share their dances on the *Journal of Folklore and Education* YouTube channel [https://youtu.be/1DuE\\_a6oL4k](https://youtu.be/1DuE_a6oL4k).

### **Youth and Traditional Arts: A Study in Dance**

Over the course of a year I met with Murenzi and different board members several times to discuss possible options to include the arts in their afterschool program. Approaches that both the board members and I thought would be a good route were sometimes not culturally appropriate or aligned with the overall goals of the afterschool program. Even within the organization's board of largely American community members, it could not be assumed that their good intentions for community bridging and engagement would be culturally appropriate or fit the commitment of the NHSCA Traditional Arts Program to support culturally specific art forms. One suggestion was made for a Nigerian artist to do batik with the Rwandan youth, another was for an American teaching artist to lead drawing programs. There were brainstorming sessions on a culminating cultural celebration that could build on an existing series of community ice cream parties, yet in Rwandan culture sweets are not valued or celebrated. These discussions and negotiations of possible opportunities allowed a relationship to develop between myself, Murenzi, and board members, and we gained a better understanding and articulated goals for everyone involved in the program.

Ultimately, Thierryne Dusabe became the lead artist to teach and engage youth at NAA's afterschool program in traditional dances of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She grew up in Rwanda and attended the College of Medical Technicians in Gitega, Burundi, where she participated in the dance group Inyange. She was later resettled at the Zaleka refugee camp in Malawi where she joined a Rwandan traditional dance group, Imanzi, which performed in weddings and cultural shows. Dusabe is currently a student at Nashua Community College studying nursing and working at a healthcare facility. At age 25, she is an excellent role model for the high school youth in the NAA afterschool program. She also understood the importance of passing on these traditions and was able to provide a significant link between the youth in the program and her teachers in Africa. It is this link that powerfully connects youth with their community and provides youth a better understanding of their own personal identities through a cultural lens.

The dance program met for 15 weeks on Friday evenings from 5 to 7pm at a local church during the 2014-15 school year, with 12 to 25 youth attending each Friday. Dusabe, Murenzi, and I collaborated to develop a work plan that focused on traditional dances and the cultural significance of dancing within Rwandan and Congolese culture. Dances include *Ikinimba* and *Igishakamba*, *Umushayayo/Umushayagiro*, and *Intore*. *Ikinimba* and *Igishakamba* are similar dances, only different in their origins. They are accompanied by instruments like *ingoma* (drums) and *ifirimbi* (whistle). They require both strength and self-confidence and can be done by boys and girls. *Umushayayo* and *Umushayagiro* are the dances of women and girls. They symbolize and celebrate the elegant movement of various animals from elephants and gazelles to the traditionally most revered bovine, the cow. *Intore* was performed by warriors to scare their opponents and is traditionally performed by boys. *Intore* was perhaps the favorite dance of the youth as it included improvisational chanting and dancing that usually sent the youth into fits of giggling as they tried to outperform each other creatively.

While there are many arguably subjective and anecdotal positive outcomes of the program, there were at the same time missed opportunities in evaluation. This was not due to a lack of foresight on building evaluation measures into the program, but to a lack of understanding of the cultural and linguistic barriers that would prevent conventional evaluation measures from being implemented. Just as the length of time it took to develop a relationship with NAA was underestimated, so was the capacity to implement high-quality evaluation into this pilot program. The students primarily speak in Kinyarwanda when together, and it took time for both them and me to gain trust to exchange phrases in English and French. Boys in general had higher proficiencies in English, and the girls were very timid to speak with me. I found that girls typically have more responsibilities at home beyond the school

### **Tips for Developing Relationships with Immigrant and Refugee New Community Members**

**Try multiple methods of communication.** Email, call, show up. All or none of these may work. Keep trying to make a connection and don't be discouraged. Until you develop a relationship, you will not know the preferred communication style of different groups.

**Share and listen.** Make repeated meetings to share information about your services but also show up to their programming even if it isn't directly related to yours. By showing up to community conversations and other programming you gain insight into what is important in their lives and develop connections to ways your agency may support their needs.

**Find creative ways to provide services.** Some individuals and organizations may be weary of state or public programs. If you are unable to provide support for services or identify an artist who would be ideal for an apprenticeship, for example, you may want to find a fiscal agent or social service organization that has the capacity to be a good partner.

**Be open and respect cultural norms.** If you enter a partnership or provide a service, it may be implemented in a different way than you imagined. Trust that different communication styles and approaches will still achieve the desired goal.

**Good intentions may not be the best path.** Listen carefully and prompt dialogue about what kinds of programming or services are most appropriate. Ideas that you, the organization's board, or social service organizations think would benefit new community members may not be culturally appropriate. Be patient. Involve community members to help develop a plan so you do not assume what will be the best program. Constituents may be grateful for any support and feel uncomfortable sharing how they might approach programming differently.

day with cooking and therefore were potentially spending more time with non-English-speaking parents and guardians. Most weeks I would bring snacks and built trust by always showing up, trying to participate in the dances, and engaging the students in conversation. It was not the level of evaluation I hoped for, but the relationship building and experience will allow me to understand evaluation possibilities for future programming.

Despite these evaluative shortcomings, I feel confident in claiming that all partners, participants, teachers, and community members involved have strengthened practices for working together, listening to each other, and understanding our diverse cultural perspectives. If I could quantify the joy each week on the faces of the dozens of youth who participated and repeatedly attended the program, the success would be undeniable. While most aspects of life for these youth center on assimilating to a new culture and learning a new identity, it is our hope that by engaging in a celebration of traditional Rwandan dance they will be able to retain cultural pride in their heritage.



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All photos are courtesy Becky Field, Fieldwork Photos ([www.fieldworkphotos.com](http://www.fieldworkphotos.com)).

Audio recording of singing by New American African youth, recorded by Julianne Morse.

#### NOTES

1. *Arts Ingenuity: NH State Council on the Arts Strategic Plan 2014-2018*, 2013. Retrieved from [http://www.nh.gov/nharts/aboutus/pdf/2014-2018\\_nhscstrategicplan.pdf](http://www.nh.gov/nharts/aboutus/pdf/2014-2018_nhscstrategicplan.pdf).
2. New American Africans formed in 2004 to help newly arrived Africans integrate into their new community by building bridges with local institutions to help families meet their basic needs. Through African leadership, NAA develops strong immigrant communities by promoting collaboration, equity, resilience, and opportunities to thrive with dignity and respect. NAA has a one paid staff member, Executive Director Honore Murenzi, and is overseen by a board of directors. Murenzi is the only service provider for the organization. Services include vocational training; translation at healthcare, educational, and legal meetings; English as a Second Language courses; and afterschool programs for increasing academic achievement.
3. In 2014 New Hampshire had a population of 1,326,813 with shifting statewide demographics from 97% Caucasian in 2000 to 91.6% in 2013. (U.S. Census Bureau, New Hampshire, 2010. Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/33000.html>.) While French Canadian, Irish, Scottish, and English ancestry still dominate the region, we have seen an increased diversity with the availability of web and technology jobs in the southern part of the state. In 8% of households English is not the first language. NH has four refugee resettlement cities that have welcomed 3,317 new community members in the past five years (NH Department of Health and Human Services, 2013. *Who Are Refugees*. Retrieved from <http://www.dhhs.nh.gov/omh/refugee/facts.htm>). In these cities the non-Caucasian population ranges from 10 to 21%, marking significantly more diverse areas than the state average.
4. Catterall, James, Susan S. Dumais, and Gillian Hampden-Tompson. 2012. *The Arts and Achievement in At Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies*. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts.