

Helping Refugees at the Hartford Public Library

By Douglas Lord

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The Bridge is a project by the Hartford Public Library to help recently settled refugees adjust to America with the library as their living room.

"Cajalado Loogu Talgalay Dadka Af Ingriisida Baranaya Ingriisida Loo Rogay" means "Learning to Speak English" in Somali. It's the title of an ESL tape obtained by Hartford Public Library librarian Homa Naficy for the benefit of refugee families resettled in our capital city. Somalian refugees in Connecticut? Yes. Though their countries of origin continually change, most new arrivals in Hartford now come from Bosnia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the former Soviet Union. Somali families arrive each year, as do Turks, Cubans, and Liberians. These are people who have been persecuted in their native lands because of political or religious beliefs, or who have come to America to escape war or natural disasters.

One might think that the story ends with everyone touching down at Bradley International and living happily ever after, but the reality is that these individuals and families, while now 'safe,' have been uprooted from their homes, lives, and cultures to a place quite alien to them. Although free to seek the American dream, they have few tools with which to do so. Literacy skills are generally low, even in their native languages. Their job skills, most likely, offer little or nothing to prospective employers; they arrive in a new world with what they can carry in their hands, heads, and hearts.

In July 2005, Naficy, The American Place (TAP) coordinator, with \$20,000 in LSTA funding, began an ambitious effort to position **Hartford Public Library** as a bridge institution for refugees resettled in Hartford. Naficy's project partners with Catholic Charities' Migration and Refugee Services Program, which provides resettlement services and helps clients become acculturated to and self-sufficient in the United States. **The American Place** is an assemblage of the **Hartford Public Library's** services for the city's ethnically diverse and immigrant populations. Since its inception in 2000, TAP has formed dynamic partnerships with immigrant service providers, local nonprofits, city, state and federal agencies, and providers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to better serve clients.

Staff is knowledgeable about issues important to clients; passport services, the VISA lottery, citizenship, and attaining English language skills are all core components of TAP. Newcomers arrive in many guises-former bush women, opticians, teachers. Whatever their credentials, those sponsored by Catholic Charities will probably take low-paying jobs in as little as four months, in keeping with a mission statement that includes promoting the self-sufficiency of humankind.

In addition to helping refugees gain language skills with a core collection of basic ESL materials, Naficy's project also acknowledges the severe effects of political trauma they often experience by including programming that addresses the turmoil and isolation they feel. Of her new clients, Naficy says, "It is amazing for me to see such collegiality and kindness of spirit amongst a community that has suffered so much. They are always smiling."

Refugees come to know the library as a place to learn, as a partner in helping their children grow and develop, and as a non-threatening haven for interacting with each other and with the larger community. Library days, say Catholic Charities staff, help the refugees get out of the offices on Market Street where they usually spend the majority of the day.

The stylish Naficy, an Iranian born in Paris turned U.S. citizen, drinks pomegranate juice, enjoys Dire Straits, and visits her family in Europe at least once a year. She has a warm smile for everyone-one of the reasons why people everywhere adore her. "I'm comfortable with chaos," she asserts, adding that her Persian background helps her to communicate diplomatically with most everyone, the kind of talking that lends dignity to conversations and has the refugees bringing her loaves of homemade bread. Perhaps it also explains how she can go from high-energy ESL instruction to the reference desk with just a sip of tea to sustain her. Indeed, Naficy spends most of her time talking-with refugees, volunteers, and coordinators-about funding and programming.

At Catholic Charities one can see what Naficy terms "The Chaos." Volunteers have cobbled together a sanctuary of sorts in one dimly lighted room, furnished with scarred, third-hand furniture and worn-out books. The tiny waiting room is crowded and hot, but the clients help themselves to donated food, make appointments, and are hopeful instead of disheartened.

The Office of Migration and Refugee Services has received its share of kudos but also has been accused of poorly managed finances. It was the target of a recent protest by Hartford Area Rallies Together (HART) that was joined by the refugees themselves. Despite being the second largest supporter of social service agencies in Connecticut, Catholic Charities relies on volunteers to teach ESL - mostly with teachers who are resistant to or unfamiliar with new methods. While it works, it's not optimal. In a recent development, Goodwin College has agreed to work with Catholic Charities to provide higher quality ESL instruction; Naficy expects to still accommodate classes around town and in the library, especially for the more basic learners. Naficy operates in this chaos, remarking that both saber rattling and dissent are par for the course in the nonprofit world.

On a typical Wednesday morning, the library buzzes with activity as refugees work in the computer lab. The refugees have to walk everywhere but, despite heavy rain, ten of them show up this morning: five Turks, four Somalis and a Cuban. Even with the small class size and with three people helping, the session is tumultuous. *English Discoveries* software accommodates today's main languages, Somali and the Russian that the Turks speak.

The Cuban acclimates to the computer-based learning in just five minutes because Spanish is both oral and written and because he's familiar with computers. The Turks, although quick, are nowhere near the five-minute mark. In contrast, with almost no reference point whatsoever, it will take many, many hours for the Bantu Somalis to 'get it.' They have never used computers or libraries and they lack school experience. To top it off, they have precious little, if any, knowledge of writing-their language is almost completely oral. The chasm separating them from where they are to where they need to be is unimaginably vast.

Naficy's Somali patrons, primarily Bantu tribes people, are a special concern. Festive, colorful hijabs (headscarves) covering the women's heads belie the fractiousness of the larger Somalian culture. Both Bantus and Somalis (two different ethnic groups who both speak Somali) are

struggling to find a unified, representative voice. A hundred or so Liberian refugee families in Hartford have had an easier adjustment; many speak English and are Christian, and Western culture and clothing are familiar to them.

Naficy runs some group exercises ("Look up." "Put your right hand up.") and an ESL lesson. The students watch a video covering "How much is bus fare?" on the smart board. When the software fails to run a Somali language example immediately following the same lesson in English, Naficy quips, "They're sending men to Mars, but they can't figure this out?" Her project culminated with a professional development workshop and a World Refugee Day celebration on June 20 at the Main Street library, featuring lectures, performances, and food.