

Eleven Members appointed to the New Hartford Commission on Refugee and Immigrant Affairs

By Judy Wyman Kelly, July 2014

Have you ever considered serving on a city commission? Eleven Hartford area residents have and on July 7 they were enthusiastically welcomed by Councilman Larry Deutsch to the newly-created Commission on Refugee and Immigrant Affairs. These 11 nominees had already submitted an application and been vetted by the Mayor. Once approved by the Subcommittee on Health and Human Services and then the City Council, the Commissioners will meet monthly to discuss and act upon matters of concern to refugees and immigrants in the Hartford area and beyond.

The nominees assembled first at the Hartford Public Library where Linda Bayer, Office of the Mayor, gave a short briefing on what to expect. She reassured them that the process was informal--they might be asked a few things about themselves and why they were interested in serving on the Commission. After a few questions such as, "What happens next?" "How often does the Commission meet?" etc., we all walked across the street to City Hall.

I am always dazzled by the majesty of Hartford City Hall. Built in 1914 on land donated by Hartford resident and financier J.P. Morgan, the building is adorned with gilded décor and vaulted glass ceilings, as well as a beautiful centrally located marble stairway. One cannot help but feel both inspired and humbled by the grandeur of the architecture and interior design.

We made our way to the Council Chambers on the 2nd floor where the subcommittee meeting was just beginning. The nominees filed in and were offered seats in the row of wooden chairs facing the council members. Chair Deutsch warmly welcomed everyone, took care of a few small business matters, and then opened the floor to the nominees.

Each person was invited to say a few words about themselves and their reasons for joining the Commission. Michael Akapan of Nigeria has lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years yet remembers well when he first arrived as an immigrant: “By serving on the Commission I hope to help other immigrants and refugees, and to solve problems in humanitarian ways. There are a lot of challenges and we brace ourselves to make significant marks during the periods of our contribution to the Commission.” Padam Bharati of Bhutan was resettled in Hartford in 2009, along with 35 other families. He recently passed his U.S. citizenship test and is studying to become a nurse. Bharati hopes to “serve according to the needs of refugees.”

Indira Petoskey of St. Lucia is assistant dean in the School of Continuing Education at Eastern Connecticut State University. An immigrant herself and adviser for many international students, Petoskey has a “major interest in working with immigrants and refugees.” Estela Morales of Mexico “knows how it feels to come to a new country.” Balam Soto of Guatemala hopes to “build a bridge for immigrants in the city,” and Georges Annan Kingsley of Côte d’Ivoire wishes to “take positive actions in the lives of immigrants and refugees.” Mui Mui Hin-McCormick, formerly of Laos and current Executive Director of the Connecticut Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission, wants to “make sure that the Asian community is not forgotten.”

Joseph Morris Kalapele, a refugee from Liberia, has lived in Connecticut for ten years. As a lack of support and information upon arrival in Hartford proved challenging for Kalapele, he hopes to share his experiences with the Commission in order to help other immigrants and refugees. After much hard work, Kalapele earned a master’s degree from Central Connecticut State University. Anne Dombrowski, who has worked with immigrant communities abroad and in the U.S. for decades, hopes to “bring about a community in which we can recognize the richness of our ethnic heritage and the contributions of all

immigrants and refugees among us.” Letticia Cotto, born and raised in Hartford, “looks to make Hartford a more welcoming city.”

Several of the nominees attested to the important role that the Hartford Public Library played in facilitating their adjustment to the United States. Kingsley described how the library helped him when he first arrived, and Elizabeth Cuentas of Peru credited the library for helping her become a citizen last year after 20 years in the U.S. Chair Deutsch described the library as “being immensely helpful” in getting the new Commission up and running.

Once the nominees were voted in, Chair Deutsch jumped right into business urging the newly-appointed Commissioners to draft a resolution for the City Council addressing the humanitarian issue of undocumented children at the U.S. border with Mexico. Immediately upon leaving the meeting, several Commissioners chatted in the hallway about next steps—a conversation that was followed by many email exchanges.

By the following Monday, a resolution had been passed by the City Council urging Hartford “to play a role in alleviating these oppressive conditions affecting children through influencing federal immigration policy with letters to the Administration AND through offers to receive those children who may be permitted to remain in this country.” The “small United Nations,” as Chair Deutsch referred to the members of the Commission, was already hard at work! Commission member Dombrowski remarked, “I left Monday’s meeting feeling hopeful and energized, by all of you and members of the Council. I am looking forward to working together!”



Linda Bayer, Office of the Mayor, explaining the appointment process to the nominees at the Hartford Public Library



Walking across the street to City Hall to be interviewed at the subcommittee meeting on Health and Human Services



Councilwoman Cynthia Jennings and Councilman Larry Deutsch (chair, Subcommittee on Health and Human Services).



Hartford Commission on Refugees and Immigrant nominees telling a bit about their backgrounds and interest in the Commission.



Linda Bayer, Office of the Mayor (second from left), with newly-appointed Commission members (left to right), Elizabeth Cuentes, Letticia Cotto and Anne Dombrofski.