

*Onondaga Citizens League*

*2012 Study Committee Notes—Meeting on August 22, 2012*

*Meeting held at United Way, 518 James Street, Syracuse*

*Attendees: Sandra Barrett, Krishna Baskota, Mark Cass, Michael Collins, Janet Connors, Kate Copani, Dil Dahal, Andrea DeFelice, Salvator Dikerbagabo, Daryl Filer, Innocent Hakasimana, Sean Haley, Melissa Hidek, Heidi Holtz, Sarah McIlvain, Don MacLaughlin, Pat MacLaughlin, Helen Malina, Kristen Mucitelli-Heath, Hamadi Mukoma, Theresa Pagano, Jennifer Roberts Crittendon, Peter Sarver, Barbara Schloss, Lois Schroeder, Nancy Shepard, Munu Shrestha, Jai Subedi, Amy Thorna, Lisa Warnecke, Judy Yoest*

*Presenters: Nicole Watts of Hopeprint, Theresa Pagano of Northside Learning Center, Jennifer Crittenden of Women Transcending Boundaries, Jai Subedi of the Bhutanese community and Hamadi Mukoma of the Somali-Bantu community.*

*Co-chairs: Heidi Holtz, Kristen Mucitelli-Heath*

*OCL: Sandra Barrett*

**OCL Study Committee Schedule**

Starting this fall we will be changing our Wednesday meetings to Thursday, and all meetings will now be held at PEC. The study committee schedule for September and October will be as follows:

- Thursday, Sept. 27 at 12 Noon—PEC, 650 James St.
- Tuesday, Oct. 9 at 9 a.m.—PEC, 650 James St.
- Thursday, Oct. 25 at 12 Noon—PEC, 650 James St.

**Future Events**

Fall Film Festival—Heidi Holtz announced the refugee film schedule—October 2, 16 and 30 at 7 p.m. Film showings will be free and open to the public. They will be held at Progressive Expert Consulting's Inspiration Hall (formerly St. Peter's Church), located at the corner of James and Catherine streets in Syracuse.

**Meeting Summary**

Members of grassroots community groups as well as Ethnic Community Based Organizations (ECBOs) presented brief overviews of the types of services they provide, challenges they face and what their organizations hope to achieve with the refugee populations they serve in Syracuse. Presenters included: Theresa Pagano of Northside Learning Center, Jennifer Crittenden of Women Transcending Boundaries, Jai Subedi of the Bhutanese community and Hamadi Mukoma of the Somali-Bantu community. Nicole Watts of Hopeprint facilitated the conversation.

**Northside Learning Center**—Theresa Pagano of Northside Learning Center, a “refugee-focused learning center”, emphasized that successful literacy programs for refugees have four components: early childhood education, adult education, parent-and-child education, and a parent networking class. She referred to this as a “family literacy model,” and said it’s particularly effective for newcomers.

Then, she reviewed how the Spanish/English program works at Westside Learning Center. Families come to the center together. As some of the adults, say the mothers, take a literacy class, another group of adults, perhaps the fathers or grandparents, along with some volunteers, work with children. Then, the mothers and fathers exchange places. For the parent networking class, adults share advice on anything from parenting skills to navigating their children's educational system. The centers are flexible for when and how often classes are held, and parents can bring their children to the sessions. "It's a nonintrusive introduction to the English language.... [and] it works," she said.

Pagano invited members of the ECBOs and other community groups to contact center representatives to learn more about the family literacy model and its four components. If an ECBO is going to apply for grant money for a literacy project, she said, most often it will need to show how the project addresses all four components. Northside Learning Center can help them with this.

**Northside Urban Parntership**—Nicole Watts of Hopeprint provided a brief overview of Northside Urban Partnership and how it develops strategic partnerships to help improve quality of life on the Northside.

**Hopeprint**—One of the partners is Hopeprint. Located on Lilac Street, Hopeprint is a home-based organization that seeks to improve the lives of refugees and the community at large by nurturing and facilitating relationships. "We believe that relationships change lives," she said. "It is our desire to be a part of the fabric of the community in order to facilitate those relationships taking place."

And Hopeprint is growing. Watts said that the organization is purchasing another house and will close on the purchase within a month.

**Yeshua Restoration Ministries**—She then offered a summary of the work that Yeshua Restoration Ministries does with young boys. Commonly known as the "home of Lou and Anne," the North Townsend Street organization offers a soccer club to boys to help provide them with a sense of community that fosters their development. Participating boys range in age from 10 to 15 years old and come from at least seven different countries. In order to play soccer, the boys must give back to the community; they often help with such projects as neighborhood clean-ups.

**Women Transcending Boundaries**—Jennifer Crittenden of Women Transcending Boundaries described the group's history. Originally, it was a social group in which women of diverse ethnicities and religions would get together and do various activities, including the "Hokey Pokey" song and dance. Crittenden would offer sewing lessons to women as the activities took place, but it became difficult to teach with the singing and music in the same room. So, she offered to teach a separate sewing class (the original social group had run its course). Classes are held in eight-week sessions to a group of eight women, and eight volunteers help so that there is one volunteer per student. At the end of each session, the group tries to give each

woman a donated sewing machine. The group meets at Interfaith Works.

Watts explained that the Women Transcending Boundaries sewing program is an example of how refugees can thrive and opportunities can develop as various community groups inter-network (Hopeprint--and other--volunteers help teach sewing, classes are held at Interfaith Works, and Women Transcending Boundaries provides the programming). "You can come to America and survive," Watts said, "but why not thrive?"

**Blessed Sikhosana Foundation, Inc.**—Blessed Sikhosana Foundation, Inc., helps, primarily, refugees and immigrants from Africa. Rev. Sikhosana, Watts said, works on the Northside "to amplify the voices from the people."

Other organizations listed on the "Grassroots Organizations" handout that Watts distributed at the beginning of the meeting include: PEACE, Inc., a community action agency; and White Branch Library, a public library located on Syracuse's Northside.

Watts emphasized that there are many other organizations not mentioned at the meeting today that also assist in serving the refugee population. "There are a lot of little things going on all over the place," she said, "that are seeking to participate actively in this community."

Watts reported that for the first time representatives of various ECBOs came together to discuss shared issues at a meeting on Aug. 19, 2012. Two of the participants addressed the study committee. Watts said they asked the leaders and representatives to discuss what their ideas and concerns were to improve the lives of those in their community. The ECBO heads all expressed an interest in continuing to meet.

**Bhutanese community**—Jai Subedi, a member of the Bhutanese community, has lived for three and a half years on the Northside. He hopes to become a U.S. citizen in November 2013. "I'm totally involved in the community," he said. "Most of you see me everywhere...." Subedi is the vice president of the Bhutanese ECBO, president of the Butternut Community Police Center and a member of Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner's Citizens Cabinet. He also volunteers at the police center.

One challenge the Bhutanese ECBO faces is in funding. There is no official space for community members to meet, he said. "Sometimes we meet in my home," he said, "and sometimes we meet everywhere...."

It doesn't have an official 501c3 status yet, but it is incorporated and in the process of getting 501c3 status.

One of the ECBO's goals is to assist refugees with preserving their language, religion and culture while helping them transition to life in America. Also, it tries to raise awareness in the community about the Bhutanese culture. This helps "prevent

culture shock,” he said.

Another challenge the ECBO members face is unemployment.

To help improve English and literacy skills, the ECBO offers classes at Franklin Elementary School, and it has a collaboration with Say Yes to Education and Syracuse University. Another class the ECBO offers is a citizenship course.

Also, members of the ECBO offer free yoga classes at White Branch Library.

**Somali-Bantu community**—Harmadi Mukoma represented the Somali-Bantu community. The challenges it faces are similar to those of the Bhutanese community.

In addition, it suffers from a lack of volunteers, particularly from members of his own community. Part of the problem, he said, is that there is no word for volunteer in his language. They had volunteers quit because they weren’t getting paid. Volunteers are needed to help with the ESL classes and with tutoring children in the afterschool program.

The ECBO rents space on Pond Street now, but because of a lack of funds, it must collect money from its community members to pay the rent. “We cannot afford anything,” he said.

Another challenge the community faces is transportation. “Most of our members are single mothers with a lot of children,” he said. They don’t speak English, and it becomes very difficult to get to doctors’ appointments, etc. Compounding the problem, he said, is that to get a driver’s permit, the individual must understand English, and since most don’t know English, they can’t get a permit to drive. Catholic Charities and Interfaith Works used to offer interpreters for helping with this, but that program has been cut due to funding gaps.

Besides the ESL courses and after school tutoring help, the ECBO also offers a citizenship class, soccer team activities, and jobs training through JOBSPlus! Many of the refugees who don’t know English have a difficult time finding jobs.

The ECBO would like more help communicating with the police department. If two children get into a fight, he said, and one is a refugee and he and his mother don’t speak English, the police will “only listen to the one who speaks English...and they don’t consider you a victim.”

Another issue it would like to address with the police department and within the Somali-Bantu community is in regards to domestic violence. Mukoma said they would like to stop domestic violence situations before they escalate to calling 9-1-1. So they need to educate the police about the cultural differences between his home country and the United States, and they need to educate the community about diffusing and preventing domestic violence.

Watts wrapped up the panel discussion by reiterating the need to “translate all of those challenges into opportunities; there are so many opportunities we can have in this community.” Refugees offer us “a gift in their presence,” she said.

Watts invited representatives from other ECBOs to speak briefly from the floor. Generally they offer similar services for their population, as well as sharing similar concerns and needs (housing, jobs, ESL, etc.).

During the question and answer session, co-chair Heidi Holtz said that the next stage the study committee approaches is the “ideating” stage in which the committee can review what is happening in other resettlement communities and “ask whether or not we want that here.” One community to look more closely at is Utica, she said.

A brief discussion of JOBSPlus!—including suggestions that it should allow those who receive JOBSPlus! training do the required service component in the ethnic and other grassroots organizations that serve trainees’ immediate communities—encouraged Holtz to ask the group whether or not the committee should invite JOBSPlus! to lead a presentation. Many in the audience said they would be interested in such a discussion.

Lisa Warnecke asked whether there will be or whether there is a centralized source of information for resources for refugees or those who work with refugees in their resettlement, and Holtz said that this could be a suggestion of the study committee for such a resource to be created.

The next OCL Study Committee meeting will take place on Tuesday, September 11, at 9 am at PEC, 620 James St., Syracuse.