



New Americans

An occasional letter from the Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylees

New Americans, Spring 2012, Volume 7, Number 2

The BRC Celebrates International Women's Day

Baltimore's Creative Alliance was the scene of a grand International Women's Day celebration on March 10, which drew more than 150 guests and featured a multimedia presentation, panel discussion, international food and music.



Ghazi Ahmed charmed guests by performing on the oud, a traditional instrument in Iraq.



The program included an array of international cuisine featuring American, Burmese, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Honduran, Iraqi, Mexican and Salvadoran foods.

The *New Americans* is an e-newsletter intended as an occasional companion to the *MORA Memo*. It features brief news items on refugee resettlement and immigration issues in the region.



Locally made merchandise by recently arrived Kurdish refugees and Treena Moore from the Women's Industrial Exchange were on display. Presentations included a multimedia piece by the National Geographic Photo Camp featuring a partnership between female students from BCCC's Refugee Youth Project (RYP) with young women from the Baltimore Leadership School.



The highlight of the evening was a panel discussion featuring women from Bhutan, Burma, and the Democratic Republic of Congo sharing their personal experiences as immigrants..

Suburban Washington Resettlement Hosts Open House



The March open house captured the spirit of enthusiasm and optimism clients and SWRC staff feel in the new location.

On March 15th, the Suburban Washington Resettlement Center (SWRC) opened its doors to friends and neighbors at its new location in Silver Spring. The Center quickly filled with music and chatter, and the smell of delicious food. Traditional attire from the home countries of both staff and clients added to a bright and vibrant atmosphere.

Over 200 attended the

event, including volunteers and interns, former SWRC staff, off-site partner agencies, government officials, representatives from the UNHCR, the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the American Red Cross, StreetWise Partners, ImaginAsia Youth Art Program, Vietnam Veterans of America, Montgomery County and Prince George's County Public Schools, the Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylees,

businesses and doctors who serve or hire SWRC clients, and many others. Special thanks to the following for contributing food and drink to the evening:

- Panda Express
- Corner Bakery
- Buca di Beppo
- Blind Dog Café
- Lebanese Taverna
- Bete Restaurant
- Safeway
- Adega Wine Cellars and Cafe.

Now in its fifth year,

SWRC is a collaboration of the International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area, the Ethiopian Community Development Council, Baltimore City Community College, and the Maryland Department of Human Resources under the auspices of the Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylees.

Baltimore City Community College's Refugee Youth Project Volunteer Honored

On March 12th, Governor Martin O'Malley presented Refugee Youth Project volunteer mentor Amy Pucino, with the Compassionate Marylander Award. This award is part of the Governor's *Maryland: Stronger Together* initiative and celebrates citizens who help neighbors in need. Since August 2009, Ms. Pucino has mentored a single mother with seven children from Iraq. She has helped the family navigate landlord/tenant issues, assisted them with acquiring health insurance, guided them through accessing social services, connected them to mental health services and accompanied them to doctor and dentist appointments.

Volunteering with this family reflects Amy Pucino's professional interests and pursuits. As a doctoral candidate in Language, Literacy, and Culture at University of Maryland, Baltimore County, she studies the complexities of refugee social integration and academic success. She is researching how educators and mentors are perceived by the refugees they serve, and how educators can effectively support this unique population.

"I am seeking to contribute to the store of knowledge on how 'caring' differs across cultures. Hopefully, research like this will help those of us who work with youth in an educational capacity to understand how our work is perceived," explains Ms. Pucino.

Amy was nominated by RYP's Volunteer Specialist, Moira Fratantuono. CareFirst, BlueCross/BlueShield provided a \$5,000 award, which Ms. Pucino donated to the RYP. Amy was also mentioned as one of the five award winners in a recent article by the [Baltimore Sun](#).

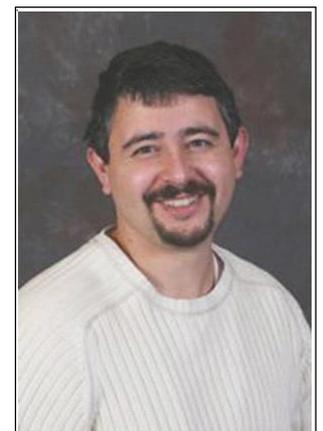


Moira Fratantuono introduces Governor O'Malley who recognized Amy Pucino with the Compassionate Marylander Award.

Refugees Smile Brighter Thanks to Dentists Without Borders in the Community

For most Americans, going to the dentist as a child is a rite of passage, but many refugees who come to Maryland have never set foot in a dentist's office. They may arrive needing expensive dental procedures such as root canals, surgical extractions, and deep cleanings. Some refugees spent many years in refugee camps with severe dental problems while lacking access to even basic dental care. Without care, they risk

pain and infection which can harm their mental and physical well-being, as well as their ability to obtain and maintain employment. Yet, public funding for dental care



Dr. Qais Musmar

for this population is scarce. To help alleviate this problem, two dental providers, Dr. Usa Bunnag and Dr. Qais Musmar are currently helping SWRC provide pro bono dental services for refugees and asylees.



Dr. Usa Bunnag

patient, Dr. Musmar offered to provide pro bono dental services on a case-by-case basis to SWRC clients.

When Dr. Usa Bunnag first immigrated to the United States from Thailand as a teenager, her family often struggled to pay for her dental care. This inspired her to become a dentist and ultimately provide care to thousands of under-privileged children and adults. Dr. Bunnag currently has a dental practice in Bethesda, and is the CEO of a nonprofit organization, *Smiles on Wings*, which provides dental and medical humanitarian aid to under-privileged populations in

Southeast Asia. Quoting Dr. Bunnag: “I get my energy from giving. I have been so blessed in my life. If I am able to help others and give

complex, played a few games to get to know one another, grocery shopped together, and then cooked and ate the meal for the day: lasagna.

Community Cooking at the SWRC

On April 1, the Silver Spring’s Cultural Orientation Program hosted an afternoon of cooking and community for recently resettled refugees from Eritrea. Together with volunteers from SPACIOUS, a DC-based community organization, the group met at a local apartment

The Cultural Orientation program provides training opportunities for refugees and asylees served by partner agencies at the SWRC. These trainings give refugees and asylees the information they need to begin their lives in a new country, while also creating space for them to express feelings, share experiences and make connections with one

Former new Americans themselves, both professionals understand the challenges that immigrants often face after arriving in the U.S. Each has a dental practice and gives back to the community.

Dr. Qais Musmar was born in the West Bank. He and his family immigrated to the United States, where he met his wife, a Cambodian refugee. Dr. Musmar currently has a practice, *Reflection Dental*, in Alexandria, Virginia. Upon learning about the International Rescue Committee from a



Staff from SWRC, members of SPACIOUS, and clients enjoy a moment together in the kitchen.

another and members of their local communities. Special events such as the community cooking day are particularly suited to supporting newly arrived families.

The Cultural Orientation program relies on the support of volunteers and the local community. If you have ideas for events or ways to be involved, please contact Katherine Rehberg, IRC Cultural Orientation Coordinator, Katherine.Rehberg@rescue.org.

Staff Profile: Matthew Fortier

Matt Fortier works as the Employment Program Supervisor with the International Rescue Committee in Silver Spring, where he started in January 2010 as an employment specialist. Originally from New York City, Matt taught in Guinea and traveled throughout West and North Africa, before joining the IRC. Matt's love for travel stems from two study abroad experiences in France through Tufts University, where he received his undergraduate degree in international relations and philosophy.

Matt is a serious athlete who played baseball in

high school, and still plays basketball and football, in addition to mountain biking. Matt recently started the IRC Soccer Club, consisting of refugee and asylee youths, who begin their second year with the club this spring.

Matt says his greatest challenge is helping clients achieve a livable wage in a state where the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 hardly comes close. Matt's goal for the employment program is to serve every eligible individual, and to do so with increasing effectiveness by expanding

program capacity, networking and partnering within the Silver Spring community, and coordinating with other IRC Employment Programs throughout the country. "What I like most about my job," states Matt proudly, "is working with an incredible team of hard-working, caring and capable individuals. Every day I am inspired by their work, as well as by the clients we serve!"

IRC Baltimore Gets New Director

Finally, the New Americans would like to welcome the new Director of the Baltimore IRC to the position.

This past March the IRC in Baltimore got a new Executive Director when Acting Director Ruben Chandraeskar was promoted into the top position. Chandraeskar has been with the IRC since 2009, when he started as a Program Coordinator to develop a network of leaders with the ability to reconstitute a Bhutanese community in Baltimore to provide services for vulnerable Bhutanese women. Ruben was then promoted to create and manage the Community Integration Program in 2010. In that role, he managed the daily operations of several



Despite the rigorous demands of his position as Employment Program Supervisor at SWRC, Matt still finds time to devote to activities like coaching soccer for local refugee youth.

programs, including those responsible for safety and security, community interpretation, immigration, and cultural orientation. Prior to that, Ruben worked for six

(formerly “SUNY Binghamton”) in New York, where he received his master’s degree in sociology and completed coursework for a doctorate.



Ruben Chandraeskar brings a wealth of knowledge and experience into his new role as Director of IRC Baltimore.

years as the Program Director for the Baltimore branch of the American Friends Service Committee providing direct service, program management and advocacy for various immigrant and refugee communities. He has also served as an adjunct lecturer at Baltimore’s Towson University and Binghamton University

Ruben is excited to be in the director’s position, and says, “I will prioritize programmatic initiatives that build on the strength and resilience of our clients and develop their capacity to become economically self reliant and socially integrated resources in Baltimore City. I will also work hard to strengthen the partnerships that constitute the Baltimore Resettlement

Center (BRC) so that we continue to develop effective and innovative services for humanitarian migrants and contribute positively to Baltimore City and the State of Maryland.”

MORA is happy to be working with a proven colleague, and wishes Ruben well.

Links

The Asylumist is a blog about political asylum in the United States. It is a forum for discussion about the law, policy, and politics of asylum by asylum seekers, lawyers and advocates, academics, policy-types, health professionals, and activists.

[The Asylumist](#)

Soccer Without Borders

Currently there are two Soccer Without Borders’ Baltimore City teams, who are all refugees or political asylees.

[Soccer Without Borders](#)

Gazette.net

(Maryland Community News Online)
March 28, 2012

[Silver Spring Group Celebrates Five Years Helping Refugees](#)

USA Today

May 17, 2011

[Motherhood Links Refugees](#)

Washington Post

December 18, 2011

[Refugees from Bhutan Face Strange New World in Maryland Suburbs](#)

ABC News

[Refugees Face Unique Challenges as College Students](#)

Gazette.net

(Maryland Community News Online)

[Refugees in Montgomery Share the Cheer of an American Thanksgiving](#)

The Baltimore Sun

March 2, 2012

[Orientation Program Helps Refugees in Baltimore](#)

The Baltimore Sun

January 11, 2012

[Put Out the Welcome Mat](#)

USA Today

May 17, 2011

[Pregnant Refugees Bond in Their Adopted Country](#)



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