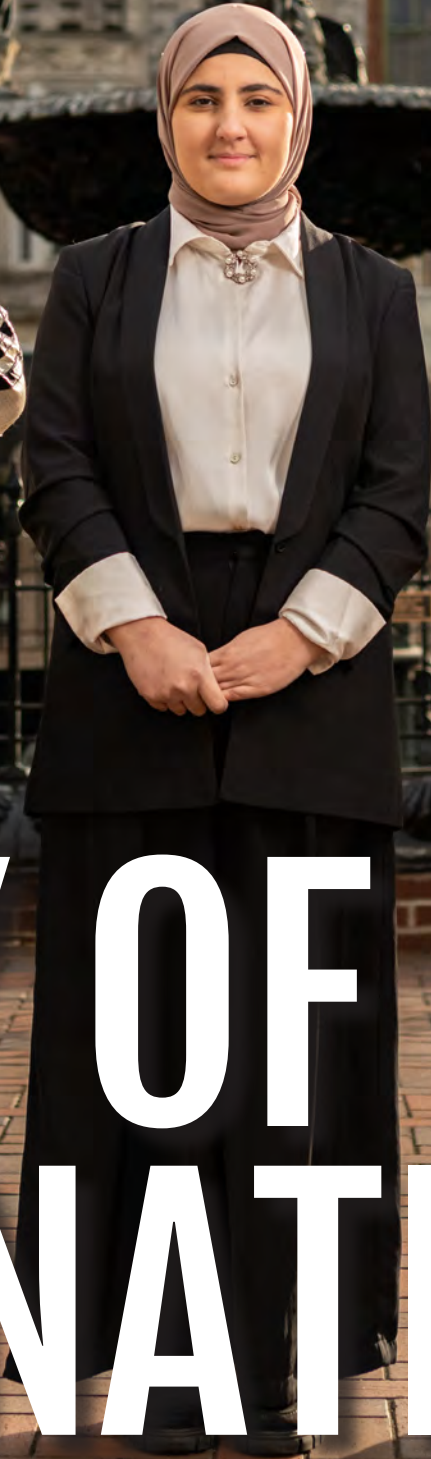


College Heights Herald



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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

This is a very special issue of the College Heights Herald news magazine – one that looks at a unique quality of Bowling Green that many who live here take for granted, and maybe don't even notice.

The journey to the issue in your hands started early last fall in Muncie, Indiana. There, the mayor was searching for ways to revive a struggling mid-size city in the Rust Belt, home to Ball State University, where manufacturing jobs have left, and its population is falling. He wanted to turn Muncie's fortunes around. Ultimately, he came upon Bowling Green – similar in size with a comparable regional university, also not far from a region-anchoring major city, but with a quite different trajectory.

The more he looked, the more he noted one of the most significant differences between Bowling Green and Muncie – the substantial share of Bowling Green's population that was born in another country, and how integral they are to the community and its successes.

Bowling Green is not what one might expect to see, especially for a mid-size city in a largely rural state. Driven by refugee resettlement and substantial immigration, more than 1 in 6 Bowling Green residents were not born in America. More than that, the refugee and immigrant populations, and their first-generation American children, have rewoven the fabric of the community.

Aided by programs established to be welcoming open arms, the new arrivals found a new home where they could open businesses, enter professions and, in the process, turn Bowling Green into an unexpectedly diverse community where its multicultural, multinational heritage gives it a distinctive glow.

Bowling Green not only became a model for the Muncie mayor's hopes of turning around his struggling city, but it also captured the attention of student media at Ball State. Students and advisers at the Ball State Daily News and the university's WIPB public broadcasting outlet reached out to their counterparts here on the Hill, involving the College Heights Herald and WKU-PBS. We all came together in a collaboration to tell the story from vantage points of both Muncie and Bowling Green.

The resulting collaboration between student media outlets at WKU and Ball State is something rarely attempted in college news organizations. It also involved the rarity of private benefactors stepping forward to cover the costs associated with researching, reporting, editing and publishing this kind of work.

At WKU, Julie A. Harris Hinson, a former member of the Board of Regents and a longtime philanthropic supporter of student work on the Hill, provided \$25,000 to cover costs for

both the Herald and WKU-PBS. In Muncie, The Ball Brothers Foundation provided a \$25,000 grant to cover the costs of the Daily News and WIPB. In our case, Hinson's generosity means our Herald students will get more than the standard \$12 for a story that took months of research, reporting, writing and editing. And Hinson's contribution allowed the magazine you're holding to be printed on a much better grade of paper than the Herald, which relies on advertising revenues to cover 100% of its costs, can normally afford.

The work you're reading in the Herald aims to tell a Bowling Green story – how work by people like Marty Deputy and leaders at the International Center of Kentucky helped this city become a welcoming refuge for people fleeing genocides and persecution, which in turn made it a more welcoming place for immigrants from across the globe. The result is a significant piece of why Bowling Green and its surrounding region is thriving – the fastest growing city in Kentucky and a place more and more people want to be.

We hope you find this special issue informative and even inspirational. Other works, from WKU-PBS as well as the Ball State Daily News and WIPB, will be collected on the WKUHerald.com website when those companion packages are completed, giving readers a sweeping view of an important story of how our community has evolved and how it could be the model for another to thrive once again.

Thank you for reading.

**Chuck Clark, director
WKU Student Publications**



PHOTO BY CARRIE PRATT



BEHIND THE SCENES

PHOTOS BY CARRIE PRATT

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hi everyone, you're holding the final Herald issue of the semester. This wraps up our second semester as a newsmagazine – an interesting and exciting journey with new lessons unfolding each issue.

This Herald in particular is one of the most exciting projects the Herald has done to date. In collaboration with Ball State University, we have created a project that reflects the immigrant and refugee communities in Bowling Green. This project has allowed each Herald staffer who is involved to have the opportunity to connect with Bowling Green in a new way and to share these stories with our readers. In this issue, you'll find stories regarding the immigration process, the history of this community in Bowling Green, culture, food and more. We hope that our subjects and our readers, you, feel that the Herald has provided a deeper glimpse of the community around us.

For those who want to become involved at the Herald, apply at apply.wkuherald.com. The newsroom is a place for everyone and we are constantly looking for fresh faces. Open positions include newsletter editor, sports reporters, news reporters, commentary writers and staff photographers.

As always, I hope you enjoy reading.

Debra Murray
Editor-in-Chief



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'EVERYONE DESERVES A CHANCE'

How Bowling Green
developed its
foreign-born population

By Debra Murray and Madison Carter

Seeking the “land of opportunities,” 19-year-old Vilson Qehaja alongside his family and his sister emigrated from Kosovo during the war 24 years ago.

With only a pillow and mattress, Qehaja found himself knocking on the door of Christ Episcopal Church on State Street for help, just one block from the apartment where he and his refugee family had been placed.

“They asked me what type of help, and I said ‘any kind,’” Qehaja said. “All I have is a mattress and a pillow.”

Within 24 hours, the church had provided Qehaja and his family with everything he would need to get started in America. He was given beds, a couch, a small TV, kitchenware and even a small computer.

Qehaja, a Muslim in Kosovo who has since converted to Christianity, said the church members showed him motherly love and guided him.

“It made me feel that people care about other people,” Qehaja said. “Humanity was not lost in people. Today, I try to imitate them as much as I can.”

Qehaja became fond of Bowling Green and the people here. The southern hospitality in the city is hard to find in other places, he said.

Qehaja’s journey from war-torn Kosovo to Bowling Green was part of a wave of refugees who have largely been welcomed with open arms and who have played a significant role in reshaping the fabric of the region. Refugees from the war on eastern Europe helped make the city a resettlement center that has since brought people fleeing persecution and genocides from around the globe and, in turn, made the community more welcoming to immigrants of all sorts.

Now Qehaja is now able to see how far he’s come.

Today, he runs a well-known restaurant in a refurbished church right across State Street from Christ Episcopal Church. The building, with its large columns and vibrant stained glass windows, is known as Anna’s Greek Restaurant. Qehaja’s wife, Anna, uses her Greek upbringing to provide Bowling Green with a previously untapped food genre.

One of the first places Qehaja and his family turned when they arrived in Bowling Green was the International Center of Kentucky, a refugee resettlement nonprofit that helped the family get IDs and Social Security numbers. Soon, Qehaja started working

in the International Center, translating between Bosnian, Albanian and English.

“... As soon [as] I got my Social Security, I had my first job literally the next day,” Qehaja said, “and then two days later, I had my second job.”

Bowling Green has welcomed waves of refugees over four decades, beginning with the Cambodians in the 1980s and then Bosnians in the 1990s, as well as Iraqis, Burmese, Rwandese and Congolese and others, who have helped make the city of approximately 74,000 a diverse and economically thriving place.

Prior to the 1990s, the immigrant population remained in the 1-3% range, but in the 90’s, that number began to accelerate steadily. The U.S. Census data shows that immigrants made up 10% of the city’s population in 2010 – now that number stands at 14%, according to the City of Bowling Green – a number that many think underestimates the number of community residents born in another country.

From 2017-2021, 1,973 foreign-born



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

First-generation Kosovar immigrant Vilson Qehaja pose for portraits at Fountain Square Park in downtown Bowling Green. He received a lot of help from the community when he came to Bowling Green. He has since opened several successful businesses here.

people arrived in Bowling Green through the International Center, according to the Kentucky Office for Refugees.

The International Center, a Bowling Green establishment founded in 1981, was a key to open doors for refugees.

Today, it is at the heart of the refugee community that has adopted the city as home.

The center aims to help refugees have a safe and comfortable transition to living in the United States. Their services include job preparation, English second language classes, hygiene training and help with transportation. Since its founding, the center has helped more than 10,000 refugees or immigrants from more than 30 countries.

But immigration in Bowling Green has developed significantly over the past four decades – starting with one woman’s passion for helping others.

‘HER PASSION WAS MAKING LIFE BETTER FOR PEOPLE’

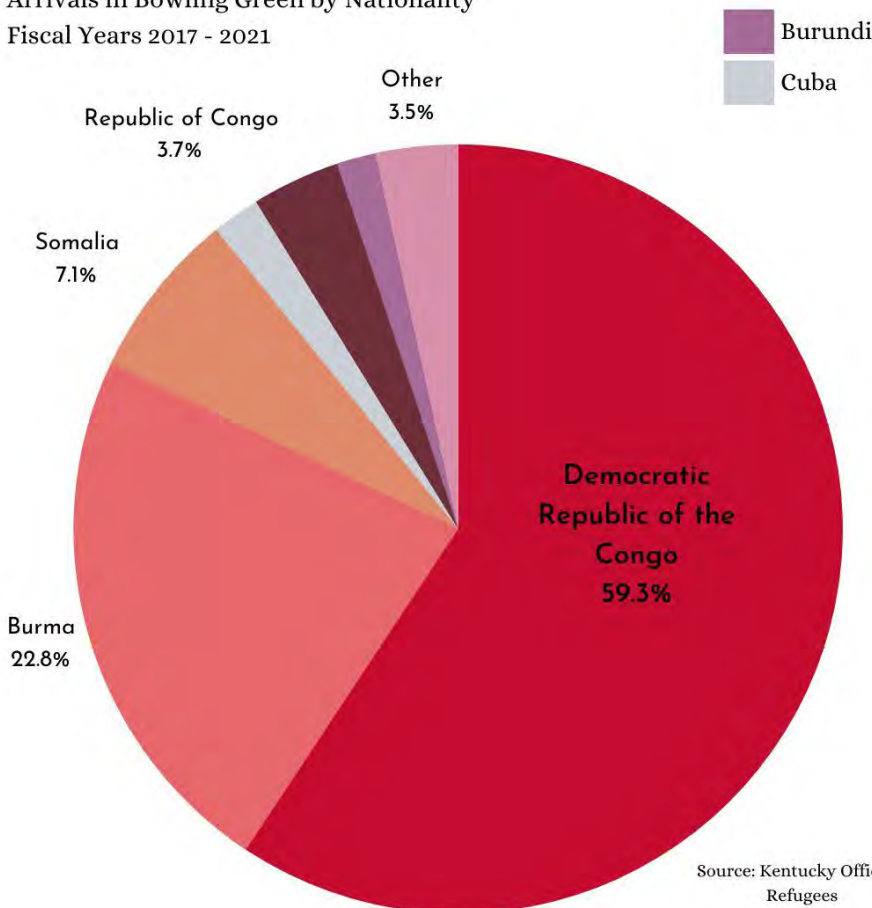
Martha “Marty” Ann Deputy was a spearhead for creating a community for refugees and immigrants in Bowling Green. Marty learned that more than a million Cambodians died during the regime of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979 following the country’s civil war, and decided she had to do something.

“Marty was a very, very humble lady with a big heart for a lot of people,” Qehaja said.

Amy Deputy, Marty’s daughter, described Marty as an inspiration.

“She started a nonprofit called the Western Kentucky University Refugee Assistance Office,” Deputy explained.

Arrivals in Bowling Green by Nationality Fiscal Years 2017 - 2021



Source: Kentucky Office of Refugees

“And that was housed up on Western and she started getting ESL grants under the (Jimmy) Carter administration, to start providing more services for the families that were coming in. And a lot of the churches, local churches would sponsor families and that’s how she was able to initially begin.”

Amy grew up watching her parents take care of refugees. Bouray and Thourn Sun found a new home in Bowling Green in the 1980s after they fled Cambodia. They were the first refugees the Deputys sponsored to move to the United States – Amy calls them her brothers.

“She worked for a greater good and it was, you know, at that time,” Amy said. “During that time Bowling Green was basically a monoculture, [it] was a diversity wasteland. So she had to really fight and promote and push to get people jobs, housing, language interviews, access. Her passion was making life better for people.”

Growing up, Amy said her mother would remind her: “Love is not a feeling. Love is an action word.”

“Love is not a feeling. Love is an action word. And that’s what she did,” Amy said. “She didn’t talk about it. She did it. She didn’t talk about how she cared for refugees. She got in her car and she did something, and she helped the people in the community that helped her become a better version of themselves.”

Marty started as a volunteer and later became the executive director of the International Center, a job she held until her retirement in 2006.

“She refused to give up because she was fueled by passion and unshaken, unshakeable belief [that] everyone deserves a chance and those are the foundation upon which our country was founded,” Amy said.

Kathy Hunt, Marty’s sister, said Marty’s empathy and love of people was a reflection of their upbringing.



PHOTO BY DEBRA MURRAY

The late Martha “Marty” Ann Deputy poses next to her husband, Kenny Deputy. The photo remains framed in Marty’s sister, Kathy Hunt’s living room.

“It’s in your heart from when you’re young and has a lot to do with your upbringing,” Hunt said. “Both of our parents, my birth mother and dad, took people in and helped them. It gave me a much more open mind to respect people’s differences and their cultures so that we’re all different but God loves us.”

Marty died in 2016 after battling cancer, but her love of people and dedication to the growth and diversity is everlasting, Hunt explained.

“When she was diagnosed with cancer, people came to her home from everywhere to see her. She had Buddhist monks who came in and had prayer ceremonies over her. She accepted everybody,” Hunt said. “When I think about back when she was fighting cancer, there’s just the images that flood back into my head, just of all of the faces of people that I saw from all walks of life, from all corners of the world, who came into her home, to tell her goodbye and to tell her what she meant to them.

“She knew that she was loved.”

Kenny Deputy, Marty’s husband, started the Martha Deputy scholarship fund for local high school students who are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Kenny passed away in 2021.

“Her husband set it for an ongoing scholarship fund for the students to continue their education if they graduate from high school, and it’s not totally based on their grades,” Hunt said. “It’s based on their abilities. Because if you just have been here, three years and you’re learning the language, you might be plainly smart, but you might not get straight As.”

‘A WARM WELCOME’

Nasir Ahmed is Afghan community navigator for the city of Bowling Green for the recent 351 Afghan refugees who’ve been relocated to the city. His position is unique to Bowling Green as he guides other Afghan refugees to become accustomed to living in the U.S.

Ahmed arrived in Bowling Green the day after the December 2021 tornadoes.

“The generosity and a warm welcome that we received was amazing,” Ahmed said.

When refugees enter the resettlement process, they don’t typically have any say in where they may relocate, Ahmed said.

“Many of these people who were resettled across the United States, including Bowling Green, didn’t know anything about it,” Ahmed said. “We ended up being here, and I found it amazing. A lot of people like it because of the help. And because of this, there has been an influx of these people and also an influx of people from charity and other organizations coming up with their blankets and foods and everything.”

Refugees face many challenges when they arrive in a new land – chang-



PHOTO BY BRITTANY FISHER

Mayor Dan Ridenour of Muncie Indiana visited the Bowling Green City Hall in early February to explore how Bowling Green has made a success of its refugee and immigrant community. Ridenour was looking for ways to invigorate Muncie's economy.

es ranging from cultural or language barriers to learning to drive.

"The number one challenge is the language and driving license because I'm helping them to get a driver's license so that they have more employability," Ahmed said. "They can travel longer distances and they can choose to work ... in a place which pays better."

According to Ahmed, children are normally better at adapting in the U.S., allowing them to help their parents.

"Younger people are rapidly adjusting to today's environment and I see 6 or 7 or 10-year-old girls and boys speaking with great contact and an English accent," Ahmed said. "They're adjusting super quickly. This is a great thing because they're coming interpreters for the parents who don't speak it [English] will take probably longer time to learn because a lot of people I know here, they're not adjusting well because of the challenges specifically of language."

THE FUTURE OF IMMIGRATION IN BOWLING GREEN

Bowling Green is the fastest growing

city in Kentucky. The city had a 21% growth rate in 2000-2010 then an additional 15% growth rate from 2011-2016, according to the "Welcoming Plan for New Americans" created by the city of Bowling Green.

Despite still being the third largest city in the state, Bowling Green has the highest percentage of immigrants at 14% of the overall population, according to the plan created by the city.

Deborah Highland West, public information officer for the city of Bowling Green, said visitors are surprised to learn the amount of diversity here.

"If you think about it, if you look at small towns in the south, the size of Bowling Green, you don't see this kind of diversity," West said. "When I tell people that we have, you know, over 50 languages spoken in our school. They are shocked. They're also shocked to find out that we've now got to the county schools and have an international high school in the city schools."

Bowling Green Mayor Todd Alcott described immigration in Bowling Green as a success and said he is proud to see how the community has grown in the last 40 years.

"We're probably one of the most diverse cities [in Kentucky] for a population," Alcott said.

Alcott said the city is constantly working to make new services available to immigrants and refugees who stay in Bowling Green. Most recently, A Room in the Inn, a local non-profit, is working with the city to provide transportation to those with language barriers or who do not have a driver's license.

"I holistically support immigration to the United States," Alcott said. "It's successful for us. We need people to come into our economy, to help take jobs. We have well over 7,000 jobs that are available. And then you know, we have more jobs coming in every day to Bowling Green. We're growing and we need our immigration community to come here. So we're very happy and we want to see continued success with it."

The International Center resettled 826 people during the 2022 federal fiscal year. As reported by WKU Public Radio, that number included 255 refugees resettling through the traditional resettlement program, 351 Afghan natives, four Ukrainian natives under two special federal programs, and

nine special immigrants visa holders. Special immigrants visa holders are granted permanent residence to people who aided the U.S. government abroad.

'THE AMERICAN DREAM'

Trung Trinh became an American citizen in 1986 after fleeing Vietnam in 1979.

"We migrated from Vietnam to America in 1979. And actually, the better word will be we escaped from Vietnam," Trinh said. "After the war, we just wanted a better life and a better future. And so during that time, the family had to make just a life changing decision, whether just to stay in Vietnam, or just put your trust and faith in God, to get you somewhere."

Trinh said making this journey at 6 years old made him appreciate the American dream as he grew up in America.

"It gives you a lot of appreciation for

what America stands for, you know, the symbol of freedom, liberty, independence, greatness in America," he said.

Hung Trinh Automotive in Bowling Green was owned by Trinh's father as a way to provide for his family – now Trung Trinh owns Trinh Pharmacy on Campbell Lane.

"He's [Hung] the one that's established the foundation of our business name. He's an honest man, integrity is an important character," Trinh said. "We've been in Bowling Green for a long time. And so the people will get to know you, they get to know the name, and I take pride in having the last name of Trinh."

"He's worked a long time. He's worked hard. And it was just the right timing that we felt that he could still retire and enjoy life and then transition that over into a pharmacy basis."

Prior to opening Trinh Pharmacy,

Trung worked at a corporate pharmacy, but wanted an opportunity to put his customers first.

"If you have a plan, you just need to put it to work," Trinh said. "Because nothing beats being your own boss. Because then you get to run things the way you want to run things, for the right reasons, but it always falls back to family and taking care of people."

As of April, the pharmacy – which includes a tropical fish store – has been open for seven years.

"Coming to America was just a blessing," he said.

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News reporter Madison Carter can be reached at madison.carter312@topper.wku.edu.



Martha Berry Garvin holds Martha "Marty" Ann Deputy fromm. The photo was provided by the WKU Archives.

A LOOK AT MARTY DEPUTY



Martha "Marty" Ann Deputy poses alongside a refugee she spent time with. Photo provided by Kathy Hunt.



Kenny Deputy, husband of Martha "Marty" Ann Deputy, at a refugee camp in Thailand. The photo was provided by Kathy Hunt.

BY THE NUMBERS

Immigrants in the United States



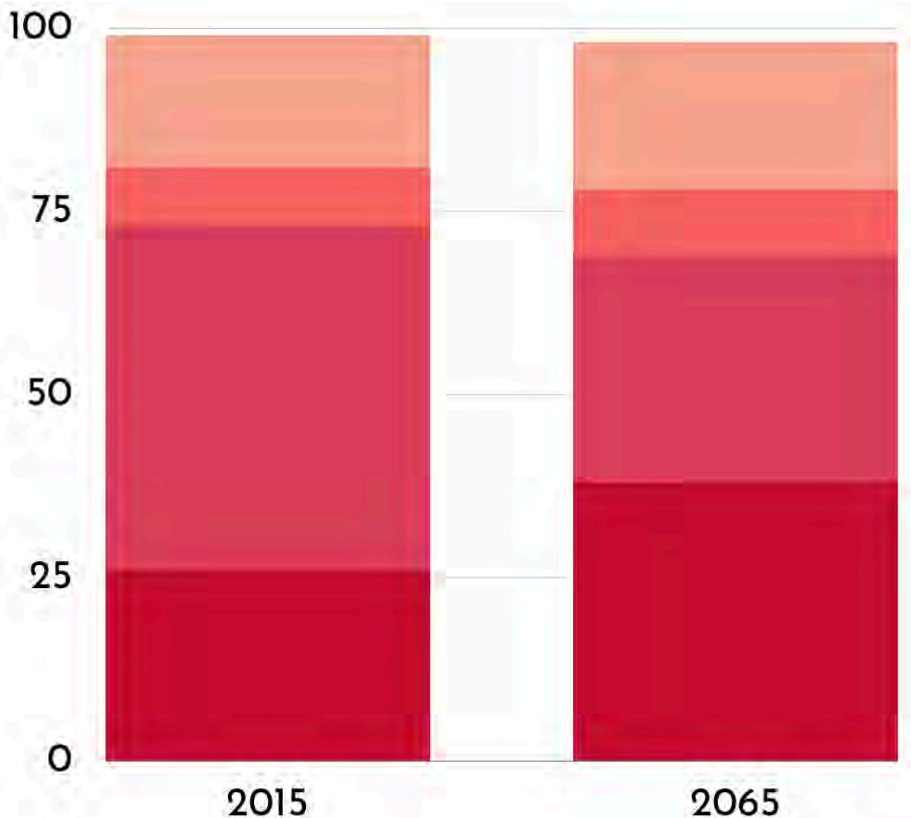
14.6 percent of the total U.S. population is foreign-born, according to the Center for Immigration Studies.

Immigrants in Bowling Green



Roughly 14 percent of the total local population is foreign-born, according to the City of Bowling Green.

BY 2065:



Asians are projected to become the largest immigrant group in the U.S. by 2055, according to a study by Pew Research Center. Immigrants and their descendants are projected to account for 88% of U.S. population growth through 2055, according to the Pew Research Center.

FINDING A NEW HOME:

The United States immigration process

By Michael Crimmins

After roughly six months in a refugee camp near the Thailand and Myanmar border, 19-year-old Tee Mo and her family, her husband Lureh and her 3-year-old, were accepted into the United States.

While in the camp, a place she said was restrictive and sometimes frightening, she and her husband applied to emigrate to the U.S. They first landed in Houston, Texas, before moving to Owensboro then Bowling Green.

Mo said it was scary coming to the U.S., a place where she didn't have a job,

couldn't speak the language and had no connections, but she is grateful to be in America.

"I didn't know anybody here," Mo said. "But we're thankful because we are here. We have a safe place."

Mo is just one of the roughly 2,200 immigrants and refugees that arrive in the United States daily, according to the Population Reference Bureau. With that many new immigrants coming to America, each with their own unique situation and needs, the process is understandably complex.

According to resources provided by the U.S. government, there are multiple types of visas one must obtain that depends on a person's "reason for travel."

These include an immigrant visa, both family-based and employer-based, used for permanent residency in the United States, a visitor or business visa, a student visa, a transit visa, a business or professional visa for citizens of Canada and Mexico and a "Fiancé visa" to marry your U.S. citizen fiancé, and live in the U.S.

"When you arrive in the United States, you must show valid travel documents as





PHOTO BY MICHAEL J. COLLINS

Dan Ridenour, the mayor of Muncie, Indiana, speaks with Jeff Meisel, the city manager for Bowling Green during a meeting at The Bistro in downtown Bowling Green. Ridenour visited Bowling Green in February to learn more about the city, in hopes of attracting refugees to Muncie. He spent several days with officials of the city learning about how the refugee program started here, as well as how the system works today.

part of the entry process,” the government website states. “The documents you need and whether your passport needs to be valid for six months after your travel dates depend on the country you are arriving from and your citizenship or status.”

Along with the other visas, there are also people who come to America who are considered refugees, like Tee Mo and her family. A refugee, for the purposes of the government, “are people who fled their homes for a variety of reasons, including persecution (or the fear of persecution) and war, to find protection elsewhere.”

“The refugees’ entry process into the U.S. involves many government agencies as part of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, which explains the resettlement and a refugee’s arrival,” the website states.

The key difference between an immigrant and a refugee is their departure from their home country. An immigrant leaves freely for a variety of reasons including the hope for a better life while a refugee is forced to leave based on persecution, natural disasters, war or a “well founded” fear

of such things happening if they returned to their home country, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Regardless of a person’s reason for immigrating to the United States, the process is time-consuming. Mo said her entire process of coming to the U.S. took roughly 10 years, but she knew of some that stayed at the camp for 15 to 30 years waiting to immigrate to another country.

Boundless Immigration, a corporation aimed at making the process less stressful, faster and more affordable, states that while the length can vary depending on external factors as well as the type of visa one is requesting, the entire process can take up to three years.

In addition to the multiple visas available to immigrants, there are also Green Cards that offer more flexibility to individuals and grant them the same rights as natural-born U.S. citizens. The main difference between the two is “that US visas allow the bearer to enter the country and stay for a certain period of time for a specific purpose, while a Green Card is a permit

for immigrants that grants permanent residency in the United States,” according to Handy Visas.

Unlike visas, a Green Card can only be applied for after entering the U.S.

“About a million people a year receive Green Cards, designating them as new permanent residents of the United States,” the U.S. immigration website states. “Many of those people arrive in the U.S. through an immigrant visa.”

As with most things, immigration has been a political issue for decades. Illegal immigration, coming into the country without going through the process, is seen by Americans as a national security issue, according to the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations. This has led some politicians to focus on deportation and an increase in border security and others to making the process easier and quicker.

At the state level, legislatures vary widely on their tactics and stances towards immigration. California allows undocumented immigrants to apply for driver’s licenses while Arizona allows police to question

anyone suspected of being in the country illegally.

“The federal government is generally responsible for enforcing immigration laws, but it delegates some immigration-related duties to state and local law enforcement,” the U.S. CFR states.

The differences in policy from state to state make the immigration process difficult and complicated, but can be navigated.

According to Jeff Meisel, Bowling Green city manager, the city has thrived as immigrants come into Bowling Green and establish businesses that invigorate the community.

Dan Ridenour, mayor of Muncie, Indiana, echoed Mo’s remarks that it “takes a lot of courage” and requires strength of character for a person to leave their home country and start anew.

“It’s overwhelming,” Jeff Meisel, Bowling Green city manager, said in an interview with Ball State University. “Think about all the challenges assimilating to that new environment, that new culture.”

Just as each person is unique, so are their reasons for immigrating to the U.S. Some come willingly in search of a better life, both for themselves and their children, others are forced to flee from their countries for fear of violence or death, like Tee Mo or any of the various Bosnian immigrants.

The 2020 census records roughly 45 million people who are foreign born in the U.S. These people do not cluster in one area but rather spread to every corner of the nation.

According to the same census, the Commonwealth of Kentucky has over 180,000 foreign-born individuals. Perhaps surprisingly, the city of Bowling Green, with 9,162 foreign born people, seems to be high on their list of nice places to settle down.

Dominique Gumirakiza, associate professor of agricultural economics at Western Kentucky University, who volunteers his time helping Rwandan immigrants in the city, said there were multiple reasons this city appealed to the Rwandan community, including the city’s proximity to the interstate and the numerous job options available.

Gumirakiza said the Rwandan community in the city has grown from ten to roughly 50 families.

Most Rwandan immigrants do not speak English or rather speak it as their second language, Gumirakiza said. Most speak Kinyarwanda, their native tongue, so he and his wife spend around eight to ten hours a week helping translate documents,



PHOTO BY CARRIE PRATT

Dan Ridenour, the mayor of Muncie, Indiana, is given a tour of city hall from city clerk, Ashley Jackson, during a visit to Bowling Green in February. Ridenour was on a multi-day visit with students from Ball State University, to learn more about how the refugee population has been able to adjust to living here.

schedule doctors appointments and connect them to resources.

The city government also offers no shortage of resources to the immigrant and refugee community.

Leyda Becker, the International Communities Liaison for the city, said her position was initially assigned to a police officer but after “extensive information gathering” made it a full-time position serving all city departments.

“[T]he role was meant to be city services to assist all city governmental departments,” Becker said. “And that’s why it was created.”

Becker said it is not uncommon for her office to have between 800 and 1,000 “contacts” in the span of a month from people needing assistance for things like how to reach the police or utilities department or when to put out their trash for pickup.

The liaison’s department also offers a variety of programs both for the immigrants and educational opportunities for the people of Bowling Green, like Language Access Services which “ensures that limited English proficient constituents have equal access” to written or spoken materials through interpretations.

The city also has the Academy for New Americans that aims to “empower New Americans to understand and participate in city government.”

In addition to the in-person events the liaison offers, she also hosts a weekly show on “La Nuestra,” a Spanish radio program, about city services and important city

information.

Bowling Green is also home to the International Center of Kentucky, a refugee resettlement agency started by Marty Deputy in 1981. To date, the Center has assisted in the resettlement of over 10,000 refugees.

Meisel said that while the government and the Center do a lot of helpful things, it is individuals, the schools, the churches and neighborhoods that play a big part in making Bowling Green feel like home.

Tee Mo now has a job working at Christ Fellowship Church by the Parker-Bennett-Curry Elementary school where she, among other things, helps refugees and immigrants with things like transportation, English and schooling.

Mo said the first year in a new country is typically the most difficult due to the language barrier and the transportation, so she is glad to be able to help.

“[The] first year in America was difficult for my family,” Mo said. “We didn’t have job[s], we also did not have enough food to eat for three months [...] So, difficult not only for our family but also [for] families [who are] like our family.”

In the end, the immigration process can be daunting. It takes a copious amount of time and energy and it can be quite scary moving to a foreign country, but Mo said she is grateful to live in Bowling Green.

“We support each other,” Meisel said. “We’re here to serve them.”

Administration reporter Michael Crimmins can be reached at michael.crimmins416@topper.wku.edu.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL J. COLLINS

During his visit, Dan Ridenour was able to learn a lot about Bowling Green, where 9,162 foreign born people reside. As mayor of Muncie, Indiana, Ridenour is trying to study Bowling Green's success in bringing refugees to the city.





IMMIGRANT-OWNED RESTAURANTS PROVIDE INTERNATIONAL FLAVORS

By **Madison Carter**

Thousands of refugees have found their home in Bowling Green over the past three decades, changing the landscape. The city has come to reflect the abundance of cultural cuisine that hail from the homelands of the many immigrants who now live here.

Bowling Green residents can find an array of dishes from different ethnic backgrounds. Mexican cuisine was one of the first to grow in popularity in the city from the 1990s to early 2000s. During this time period, Italian and Chinese restaurants were also becoming numerous. Since then, Bowling Green's food diversity has grown to include Bosnian, Chinese, Greek, Indian, Italian, Japanese, Mexican, Thai, and Vietnamese cuisines.

Vilson Qehaja and Anna Qehaja are the creative minds behind Anna's Greek Restaurant, a staple Mediterranean restaurant in the city. Myanmar refugees Thang Khap and Lian Vung own a small but distinct restaurant that offers a broad taste of Asian cuisines. Sasa Mandrapa, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, has been setting high standards for the food scene in Bowling Green since 2006 when he opened his first of six restaurants. The powerful stories and unique contributions of these refugees have made Bowling Green the city we know today.

SAŠA MANDRAPA

Since the early 1990s, Bowling Green has become home to almost 5,000 Bosnian refugees, many of whom were fleeing war and ethnic cleansing.

These refugees brought with them culture and creativity, which made Bowling Green what it is today.

Shortly after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended in 1995, Saša Mandrapa came to Bowling Green as a refugee.

Mandrapa, who was only 17 at the time, was sponsored to come to America by his uncle who came in 1994.

"I always wanted to come to Ameri-

ca, so this was the perfect opportunity for me to," Saša said. "For the future of me and other people, this was the only chance."

Being a young boy when the war broke out, Mandrapa said he tried not to take the war too seriously, even though it was scary at times. He said he tried to have fun through the hard times.

"As a kid you don't think about certain things," Mandrapa said. "When certain things strike, then reality check comes in."

Saša said he is fortunate to have survived such a hard period in his life.

"A lot of people lost their homes," Mandrapa said. "A lot of people went through different experiences through that. A lot of people didn't make it, too, so I was fortunate enough."

Mandrapa said some of his experiences you would need to live through to understand.

"I mean no water, no electricity, no internet, no roof over your head in

certain parts," Mandrapa said. "Being a kid, you try to make the best out of it, but a lot of people died, too, so it's not fun."

Coming from a small town in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mandrapa said arriving in America was dreamlike.

"When you come from a different part of the world, where food is scarce, simple things as swiss rolls, donuts and chips go a long way," Mandrapa said. "America was like a movie – la la land, Disneyland."

Mandrapa said the first challenge he encountered when he came to Bowling Green was the language barrier. Although he learned English when he was in school, he said speaking and putting long sentences together could be challenging.

After graduating from Bowling Green High School in 1997, Mandrapa got a job at a local company to start earning his own money.

Throughout his life, Mandrapa had always taken an interest in cooking.



PHOTO BY SEAN MCINNIS

Saša Mandrapa sits in the dining area of one of his restaurants, Novo Dolce. Since coming to the United States in 1996, Mandrapa has opened multiple Bowling Green restaurants including The Bistro, Pub by Novo, Burger and Bowl, Toro and Speeza.

“I always liked to cook,” Mandrapa said. “I have brother and sister younger than me, so they always wanted to eat what I eat.”

When one of his friends opened Brickyard Cafe, he started working his first restaurant job as a dishwasher.

When he wasn’t doing dishes, he was working at different stations learning how to make meals. He worked there from 1999 to 2003.

Although Mandrapa never went to culinary school, he became skillful in the kitchen by working with different chefs. He said it became his hobby and passion.

When his wife wanted to go to chiropractic college in St. Louis, they moved there for three years. Mandrapa worked at a few different restaurants while living in St. Louis.

When he returned to Bowling Green in 2006, Mandrapa found himself with an opportunity to open a restaurant.

Debating between working in a restaurant setting, or taking a job at a local food distribution company, Mandrapa ultimately ended up accepting an offer to become a partner at a new restaurant.

In partnership with two of his friends, Mandrapa opened his first restaurant: The Bistro.

Mandrapa describes The Bistro as a higher end dining option that had an extensive Mediterranean menu when it first opened.

It was important to Mandrapa that The Bistro was located in a downtown location to fit the atmosphere of the restaurant.

“I knew I wanted to be in a downtown area because of the concept of the restaurant,” Mandrapa said. “We belonged there, and us moving over there and getting the building where we are now is the best decision we ever did.”

Mandrapa said that without the success of The Bistro, he doesn’t know if any of his other restaurants would have ever happened.

“It was definitely an intro into the rest of the concepts that we have,” he said.

With his partner Jake Petrivich, Mandrapa has gone on to create his own restaurant empire with a total of six restaurants: The Bistro, Novo Dolce, Pub by Novo, Burger and Bowl, Toro,

and his newest, Speeza.

All of his restaurants have a different style and creative flourish.

Novo Dolce is what Mandrapa describes as a gastro pub with different classics executed using better techniques. Pub by Novo is Mandrapa’s version of a sports bar. Burger and Bowl serves gourmet burgers and healthier, fresher bowl options. Toro is a Spanish fusion of cuisines from Spain, Argentina, Peru, and Mexico.

Speeza is Mandrapa’s newest creative venture, set to open in April or May of 2023. Saša said this restaurant will specialize in Mediterranean street style food.

“I think it’s going to be something new for Bowling Green,” Mandrapa said. “So that’s something to come. I can’t wait for the Bowling Green people to try.”

Mandrapa prioritizes diversity and creativity when designing his restaurants and creating unique dishes.

“I like to be creative,” he said. “They say consistency is key, but at the same time consistency kills creativity.”

The Bowling Green community has reacted positively to the restaurants, Mandrapa said.

“People like diversity,” Mandrapa

said. “They like creativity, and that’s the one thing I think we bring. Bringing different things to Bowling Green is good, and I think that people love that.”

The Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce recently named Mandrapa as the 2023 Small Business Person of the Year. This award recognized his work ethic and the impact his businesses have made on the labor force in the area.

To this day, Mandrapa is continuing to challenge himself and learn new skills in the kitchen.

“You’re as good as your last dish,” Mandrapa said. “You’re as good as your last plate.”

K&L ASIAN RESTAURANT OFFERS THE CITY A DIVERSE ASIAN MENU

(Cing Dim, server at K&L, translated for Khap and Vung)

One of Bowling Green’s largest refugee populations is made up of people from Myanmar, a Southeast Asian country formerly known as Burma.

From 2017 to 2021, 442 Burmese refugees arrived in Bowling Green, according to the Kentucky Office for Refugees.

Many Burmese refugees left their country due to ethnic persecution, civil



PHOTO BY SEAN MCINNIS

Thang Khap (left) and Lian Vung owners of K & L Asian Restaurant sit in one of the booths in the restaurant. Khap and Vung have owned K & L for four years and offer a variety of traditional Asian cuisine.



PHOTO BY DEBRA MURRAY

Dishes at K&L Asian Restaurant reflect the Vietnamese culture by bringing flavors from that region of the world to the United States. Seen are a Vegan Pho, which is typically a dish served with beef, and Bun, or Vermicelli Noodle with chicken, which is typically made with pork. The owners of K&L wanted to treat customers to the best of both cultures.

war and widespread poverty.

Cing Dim, an immigrant from Myanmar, sought refuge in Malaysia before coming to America when she was 10 years old. Before coming to Bowling Green in 2021, she lived in Michigan for 10 years.

“We would go from underground to Malaysia, so it was a little difficult with that because I was underage and I had to travel,” Dim said. “When we get to Malaysia we stayed there for two years, and I would go to a school for two years and switch schools a lot because we’re immigrants, so we cannot just stay in one place.”

Dim became connected to Thang Khap and Lian Vung through family friends as well as the Zomi Agape Church in Bowling Green.

Thang Khap and his wife, Lian Vung, are immigrants from Myanmar who eventually found refuge in Bowling Green in 2011.

Khap and Vung lived in Malaysia for many years before coming to America.

Like most refugees, the couple brought their culture and memories of home with them.

In Malaysia, Khap worked as a chef for eight years, and he always wanted to have his own restaurant.

“Opening a restaurant was always one of his dreams,” Dim said.

After living in Bowling Green for a couple of years, Khap and Vung were able to open K&L Asian Restaurant together on Aug. 6, 2019. Dim now works as a server at the restaurant.

When Khap and Vung were looking for a restaurant in Bowling Green, they wanted a location that was previously a restaurant. They were able to find a location on Scottsville Road that had previously served Vietnamese pho.

The name of the restaurant is inspired by the owners’ names: Khap and Vung.

The restaurant offers Bowling Green a diverse Asian Menu that includes popular Vietnamese, Thai, Japanese, Malaysian and Burmese cuisines.

When creating a menu for the restaurant Khap wanted to pick popular foods from different countries to add a variety of taste and style to the restaurant.

Dim said that the people who visit the restaurant are always open minded about trying new food and tend to find that the style of food is exactly what they’ve been looking for.

“If they’ve never been here before, they already have an open mind that it’s going to be spicy, it’s going to be sour,” Dim said. “They already have that open mindset, so it’s not difficult for us to introduce.”

When people in America say they like

his food, Khap gets a feeling of inner peace, Dim said.

Dim’s favorite Asian food is anything that is fried or has fried rice with it. Khap favors pho because it’s good for his health, and Vung loves Burmese kyay oh, a noodle soup made with pork and egg.

Dim said that the restaurant has helped the family support themselves financially, and the people of Bowling Green have been very happy with the restaurant.

When Khap and Vung arrived in Bowling Green, the language barrier they experienced made it hard to find employment. Owning their own restaurant made this challenge easier.

K&L is a family-run restaurant, so the majority of the workers are related or family friends. Servers like Dim help with the language barrier between the staff and customers.

Khap and Vung became more comfortable in Bowling Green after opening the restaurant.

“After opening this restaurant they are more confident in themselves,” Dim said.

Life in America is very different from Burma, Dim said. In order to eat in Burma, you have to work every single day.

Dim said the military coup in Burma made life very hard, and she came to America looking for a better life. She said Khap and Vung wanted their family and children to be safe.

“The main reason is your children,” Dim said. “They want them to have a better life. They don’t want them to suffer how they are, even though they’re scared.”

Dim said when they arrived here they were supported by the International Center of Kentucky.

“When we first go here they would provide food, clothes, shelter, and finding us a job,” Dim said. “They would take care of us for like six months. After that they kind of let you do it on your own.”

America isn’t exactly what she expected it to be, Dim said.

When she pictured America, Dim imagined a country composed of tall buildings and big cities, but that’s not exactly what she found here when she arrived.

“Our life is so hard in Burma, we

think America is like a heaven,” Dim said. “It’s our escape place. But when we first came here, it’s not a lot of tall buildings. It’s not peaceful as what we think it is. We do have to struggle with language barrier and finding a job. It’s not what we thought it would be, but it’s definitely a better place than Burma.”

In spite of the challenges, Dim said that she is grateful for the life she has in America.

Dim said that the people of Bowling Green have been very kind to the workers of the restaurant and they are glad to serve a diverse group of people in Bowling Green.

“Our restaurant is Asian food, so we thought a lot of Asian people were gonna come and it seems like the only customer we’re going to have is Asian people, but it’s not,” Dim said. “We have a lot of American people and a lot of other people too.”

Dim encourages people who are interested in trying different types of Asian food to come visit the restaurant

and try something new.

THE MAN BEHIND ANNA’S GREEK RESTAURANT

Vilson Qehaja- A refugee from Kosovo turned a run down church into a renowned restaurant.

In Kosovo in 1999, a young Vilson Qehaja was presented with an opportunity that would alter the course of his life.

The 19-year-old college student was given the chance to emigrate to America with his family. It was a chance to leave a war-stricken Kosovo behind and begin a journey in which he would learn how to live in America.

Unknown to him at the time, Qehaja would eventually become the owner of one of the most renowned restaurants in Bowling Green: Anna’s Greek Restaurant.

After receiving guidance and support from the Bowling Green community shortly after they arrived, Qehaja and his father opened an information

technology business called Q Electronics. It was his first business in America, but not his last.

Over the years, Qehaja has owned an interior design business, construction company, limousine service and the restaurant inspired by his wife.

Qehaja met Anna on a vacation in Santorini Island during the summer of 2004. On his ninth day there, he found himself in Anna’s restaurant.

“I asked her out, and I got turned down three times,” Qehaja said. “The rest is history.”

Growing up, Anna learned to cook by helping her grandmother, and other women in her family, prepare meals.

“From an early age she developed an interest in cooking,” Qehaja said. “She started her first job as an assistant for a Greek chef in a small restaurant in Santorini Island. After so many job experiences, she ended up owning her own restaurant in Kamari. That’s where I met her.”

Anna eventually immigrated to



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

A waiter sets places at the bar in preparation for customers at Anna’s Greek Restaurant in Bowling Green.



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

Diners order at the start of dinner service at Anna's Greek Restaurant on State Street in Bowling Green.

Bowling Green to be with Qehaja. They now have four children and have remained living and working in Bowling Green for nearly two decades.

Qehaja knew Anna had a talent for cooking that deserved to be in a proper restaurant setting in Bowling Green.

"I met my wife, and I loved her food," Qehaja said. "I didn't want her to flip burgers here."

With financial support from past patrons and other contributors, Qehaja was able to open Anna's first restaurant on Three Springs Road in 2007. After the highway department widened the road, taking the restaurant's parking, they relocated to Glasgow for four years.

With most of the restaurant's customers remaining in Bowling Green, Qehaja was always keeping an eye out for prospective buildings here.

The building that caught his eye was one that 19-year-old Qehaja had become familiar with.

Across the street from Christ Episcopal Church, which had supported him in his first days in America, sat Victory Baptist Church, a building that was over 100 years old.

The Greco-Roman style of the building reminded Qehaja of the domed roofs and columned buildings in his wife's hometown of Santorini.

Qehaja was drawn to the beautiful stained glass inside the church, despite that it was in need of much repair.

Although he loved the building, he knew he didn't have the money to buy it.

Nevertheless, on Aug. 25, 2015, Qehaja showed up to the auction for the church and started the bid at a low price.

The building was his by the end of the day.

"It looked very beautiful," Qehaja said. "It looked authentic, you know something that is hard to recreate today. I never thought I would ever own a place like this and have my name attached to it as a legacy."

Qehaja said God has always had a presence in his life.

"I know God guided me, and I know God had a plan for me because there were a couple moments in my life during the war that I thought that this was the end," Qehaja said.

While his parents are Muslim, Qehaja converted to Christianity and has led over 150 members of his extended family to Christianity.

Qehaja said he explored different denominations including Evangelical, Episcopalian and Baptist.

After purchasing the church, Qe-

haja said he now preaches the gospel and reads from the Bible inside of the restaurant.

“I talk to people all the time about God,” Qehaja said. “How God saved me in the war, and how God gave me everything I have today.”

Qehaja attributes the chance to come to America and the success he has had with his businesses to the plan that God had for him.

“I know this saying I’ve learned here in the United States that when humans make plans, God laughs,” Qehaja said.

Although Qehaja was able to purchase the church, the shape of the building introduced a new challenge for him.

“The building needed a lot of repair,” Qehaja said. “There was a lot of damage, water damage in every area. You could be here and something would just fall from the ceiling. It was in very bad shape.”

Repairing the stained glass was very important to Qehaja in order to maintain the original quality and glory of the building. Individual stained glass panels were taken apart to replace broken pieces. The glass was reframed and installed into new wooden frames. The process of repairing the glass took over three years to complete.

Qehaja and his father Esat have been recognized for their preservation efforts on the church that took place over a five year period. By repairing the building himself, Qehaja

earned a sense of pride in the building and became attached to its history and preservation.

“If you don’t have millions of dollars to hire other people to do it, you buy the material, and you work yourself,” Qehaja said. “If you don’t know, you learn it.”

“People still care and pay attention to unique projects and the work to restore buildings,” Qehaja said. “It requires a lot of skill, research, and dedication.”

‘I never thought I would ever own a place like this and have my name attached to it as a legacy.’

-Vilson Qehaja, owner of Anna’s Greek Restaurant

The restaurant officially opened at the new location in 2019, and the response by customers was positive, Qehaja said.

The combination of both Qehaja and Anna’s cultural backgrounds have designed a diverse Mediterranean menu that includes Greek, Italian, German, French and Turkish entrees.

Qehaja describes the food served as being fresh, flavorful and authentic.

Once customers eat Anna’s food once, they are guaranteed to be craving it in the future, Qehaja said.

The restaurant has been recognized by customers for its great tasting food and unique fine dining atmosphere in Bowling Green.

For Qehaja, the main goal for the restaurant has always been to create a “family atmosphere” among employees and customers.

Qehaja recognized the efforts of the community and his personal connections with people in making the restaurant possible.

He recalled a specific connection with Portia Wimp, a member of Christ Episcopal Church, who had helped organize to support him and his family.

When Wimp had first heard of Qehaja, she was told he was a young man who had come to the church looking for Christians.

Wimp and church volunteers came together to find supplies and donations to give to the family.

“The church helped as much as we could,” Portia Wimp said. “We just met them as people, and just tried to give them the things we thought they needed.”

After the church showed their new neighbors such humanity, the Qehaja family invited Wimp and her family over for dinner.

“His parents were so lovely, we managed to communicate with them even though they did not know English,” Wimp said. “It is amazing how people can communicate through smiles.”

Qehaja recalled Wimp making a comment during dinner that she could see a restaurant coming in the future.

“That’s one of the things that Jesus taught us, to love our neighbors,” Wimp said. “And our neighbors are all over the place.”

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PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

Anna's Greek Restaurant officially opened in 2019, after several years of construction.



THERE IS NO SHAME IN BEING A BEGINNER:

Teranga Academy Bowling Green

By Molly Dobberstein

PHOTO BY ALLIE SCHALLERT

The Avengers team gathers before the start of Teranga Academy's final soccer tournament match at the Bowling Green Learning Academy.

Teranga Academy is just like any other public school in any other state, bustling with students and teachers, but their school environment is different by one respect – all students are refugees or immigrants, learning how to navigate their young life in the United States.

Teranga was established in Bowling Green in 2022, in hopes to help refugee and immigrant students better acclimate to life in the U.S.

“We have seen advances in every aspect of our lives — except our humanity,” Luma Mufleh said, creator of Fugees Family, the school that Teranga Academy in Bowling Green is based on.

The word Teranga is a Senegalese word, defined as hospitality, respect, community, solidarity and sharing, according to the Teranga Academy website.

The logo for Teranga Academy is adapted from the logo for Fugees Family, and includes the BGISD's colors along with an image of the Statue of Liberty, to represent hope, freedom and justice.

Teranga is modeled after another refugee schooling program based out of Georgia, the Fugees Family. According to the Fugees Family, by 2025, one quarter of America's public school population will

be English language learners coming from refugee and immigrant backgrounds.

The academy in Bowling Green is open to students who are at middle and high school levels in education, are multilingual, have been in the United States three years or less and have had their education disrupted in some sort.

The school is an “English immersion program, focused on transitioning to a new country with trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive teaching,” Teranga Academy's website said.

Kristi Costellow, lead teacher at Teranga, explained that students eligible for enrollment might have missed part of their schooling or have not been able to attend school because of certain circumstances.

“The purpose of this school is to fill in the education gaps from schooling that they might have missed in their home country and prepare them to be able to go back to either the junior high or high school here in Bowling Green,” Costellow said.

Currently, there are around 120 students, Costellow said, and when they arrive at Teranga, they are sorted into one of four houses. Students stay in the house they are sorted into throughout their entire

time at Teranga, making it a community of the same students and teachers the whole time.

Along with house sorting, Costellow explained that students are placed into a level based off of their education, not following a traditional level of school. The levels are ranked one through three.

The goal for level one students “will be for students to reach at least a second grade proficiency level in reading, writing, math and English language,” Teranga Academy's website said. “The students will be taught by elementary-certified teachers, with fundamentals of reading and writing and early math skills.”

Costellow said that even though the students at Teranga in level one may be junior high age, they still need to be taught the fundamental basics of their education. Some of the teachers at Teranga are elementary teachers and are there because of their skill and ability to teach those concepts.

The goal for level two students is for them to reach a sixth grade proficiency level, Teranga Academy said. With level three, the goal is “eighth or ninth grade proficiency, including the intentional transition to Bowling Green Junior High or

Green High School,” Teranga Academy’s website said.

It is expected that after one to three years, students from Teranga will be prepared to transition into the Bowling Green Junior or High School. Since students may come in with varying levels of education, it could take different times for different students.

“In general, this is a student’s first stop when they come to the US, and the goal of this school is to help them get acclimated to what does American school look like and what are the expectations,” Costellow said.

Costellow said students are placed into a level when they first begin at Teranga, based on their current ability – not age or traditional grade levels. If needed, students can shift between levels to find the one that is right for them.

“It is meant to be a safe environment for learning, where there is no shame in being a beginner,” Costellow said.

Teachers at Teranga teach different subjects, as well as different level classes. In addition to the primary teachers, the school has “cultural liaisons” that are utilized in the classroom.

These cultural liaisons speak the home language of students, and can be a bridge in communication with students and teachers. There are currently seven cultural liaisons at Teranga Academy, and they are used within the classroom daily.

Sports and physical movement are key factors within the Fugees Family program, and that is being mirrored in Teranga Academy.

Students begin each day with a “move-

ment” class in either yoga or martial arts, Costellow said. Students also play soccer every day as a part of the curriculum.

Soccer is a very important aspect to the school, and it is used to build community among the students. Students regularly play at Lampkin Park, but in the winter or in inclement weather play soccer in the gym area of the school.

‘We have seen advances in every aspect of our lives – except our humanity,’

**-Luma Mufleh,
Creator of Fugees Family**

The soccer teams compete against one another and are highly competitive amongst students. This past winter when playing inside, students created a competition with paired matches against the teams, Costellow said.

Not only are sports important within Teranga, but arts and music as well.

Costellow explained that in art and music classes, less English language skills are needed, so students can learn the concepts easier. Using repetitive language within art and music may be easier for students to understand.

The two main languages of students at Teranga are Spanish and Swahili, with students coming from more countries than

languages spoken, Costellow said.

In order to foster community within students, many events are held at the school. Costellow said that at the beginning of the year there was a block party, a parent night as well as an international event. There is also a parent’s event being planned for the spring.

Currently, Teranga Academy is within the Bowling Green Learning Center, where there are two programs being held. Teranga and the Compass Academy share one building, as well as BGISD Support Services.

The Bowling Green City Schools created Teranga and had a plan for it, so in order to implement it, they had to place it in an existing school building.

“The Fugees model, centered in soccer, has offered specialized education for refugees and immigrants since 2007 and repeatedly demonstrates student achievement growth rates above the national average,” Fugees Family said.

“Teaching there is no shame in being a beginner and that requiring a complex skill requires starting with the basics is a way to show belief in our students,” Mufleh said.

The Fugees model has resulted in a 92% graduation rate, and a 100% college acceptance rate of students, Fugees Family said.

“We are using trauma informed practices to help these students who have experienced difficult things in their past, just trying to give them all the tools that they need to be successful in school in the US,” Costellow said.



PHOTO BY EMILEE ARNOLD

Teranga Academy students, Igranesa, 12 and Mauwa, 12, play in a drum circle during a music class.



PHOTO BY EMILEE ARNOLD

Teranga Academy yoga instructor Liz Heller and a student participate in a morning yoga class.

In addition to Teranga Academy, Bowling Green also is home to the GEO International High School. The GEO International High School is the first and only four year high school for international and refugee students of its kind in Kentucky, GIHS said.

The school was created by Warren County Public Schools in 2016, and is home to “highly motivated students from around the world who have settled in Bowling Green and want to obtain a high school diploma,” GIHS said.

Shannon Schulter, dean of students at GEO International High School, said that GIHS is an alternative high school for refugee students who have been in the country

for less than five years. “They are flagged as ESL students, and we have about 150 students here.”

Schulter said that the students within the GEO International High School represent 27 countries as well as 21 different languages.

“Since we are an alternative school, sometimes we can do acceleration... we also offer [students] summer school or extra courses to get done on time,” Schulte said. “Students can attend until they are 21, which is something a little bit different.”

Within GEO, all students are striving to learn English, Schulte said. They utilize a strategic pairing system to pair students with higher English language skills with

other students who may need a bit more assistance learning, Schulte said.

“Whenever they leave GEO’s walls, we want them to be able to successfully transition into either a job or... dual credit classes,” Schulte said. “We have a percentage of students who go straight into college as almost sophomores because they have earned dual credits while they are in high school.”

For GEO International High School students, “post secondary success is the absolute mission of this school,” Schulte said.

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PHOTO BY EMILEE ARNOLD

Bawili Ilangyi, 14, draws his name in graffiti during an art class at Teranga Academy.



PHOTO BY EMILEE ARNOLD

Mask artwork made by students is seen in the hallway at the school.



PHOTO BY EMILEE ARNOLD

Samir Abdulqadir, 14, talks to Mohammad Omar Imbrahimi, 13, during an art class.



PHOTO BY ALLIE SCHALLERT

Byaombe Matendo, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, prepares to kick the ball across the gym during the final match of Teranga Academy’s soccer tournament at the Bowling Green Learning Academy.

WKU AND THE IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

By Molly Dobberstein

WKU and the Bowling Green community are hosting multiple events in order to assist immigrants within the community.

John Sunnygard, associate provost for Global Learning and International Affairs, said that two main programs will be hosted in the coming weeks, particularly for immigrants.

WelcomeCorps will be discussed at the event, “a service opportunity for Americans to welcome refugees seeking freedom and safety and, in turn, make a difference in their own communities,” as posted on the WelcomeCorps website.

Sunnygard said the program enables small groups of Americans to sponsor certified refugees into their community.

“Faculty and staff from colleges and universities from around Kentucky will participate in this training supported by NASH Catalyst Fund, CPE, and WKU Global,” Sunnygard said. Registration is required and space will be limited, representation from the university and community will be balanced, Sunnygard said.

In July 2022, the Commonwealth of Kentucky created the Kentucky Innovative Scholarship Pilot

Program, Sunnygard said. With this, WKU has received \$914,000 in scholarship funds to send WKU students abroad and support refugee students, Sunnygard said.

With KISPP, the commonwealth of Kentucky is the first state to develop a scholarship program intended to support refugee students at public universities and colleges.

WKU welcomed 16 students this year who fit into the category of a displaced student, who qualify for scholarship, with more than 30 students expected in the fall of 2023, Sunnygard said.

Additionally, the Resilient Refugee Program was developed as a refugee task force for WKU in January 2022 with support from the NASH Catalyst fund to implement a “student-to-student Navigator program,” according

to the website. The Resilient Refugee Program offers displaced students eligible for the KISPP “access to personalized support navigating the complexities of life at an American university,” WKU website said.

The WKU Resilient Refugee

Program consists of English language instruction by Refuge BG at WKU, peer-to-peer support, international pathway to academic success then graduation.

“We quickly learned that refugees faced significant barriers and deep gaps when trying to enroll at our university,” WKU website said.

WKU offers two different programs for refugee students, the WKU Pathway to International Success, and the WKU Student-to-Student Resilient Refugee Navigator Program.

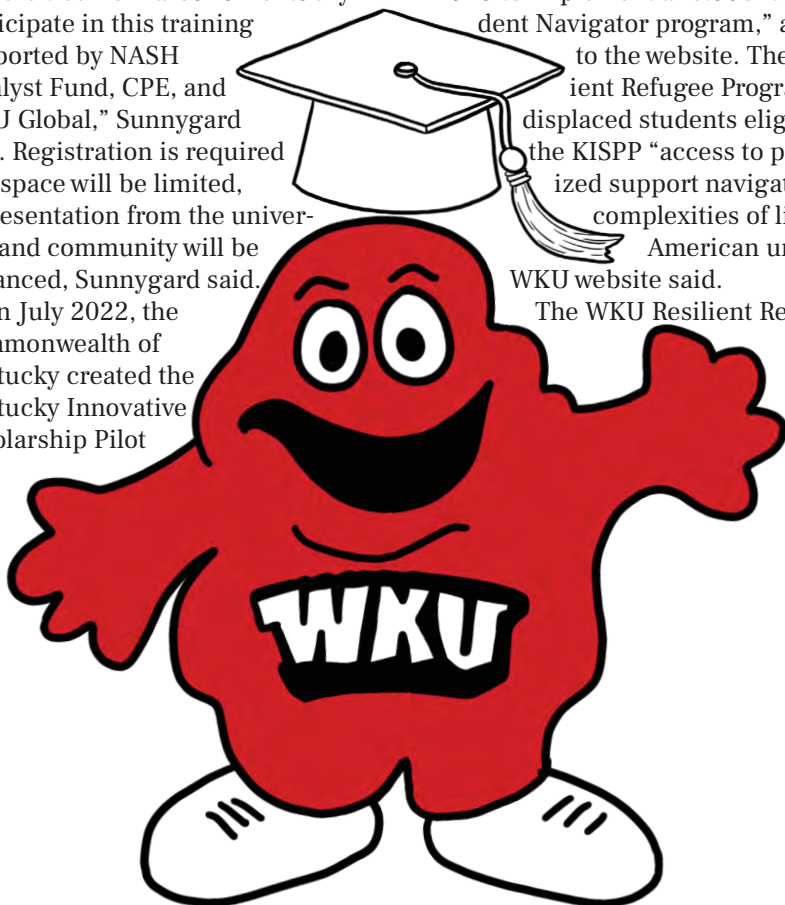
The WKU Pathway to International Success includes specific courses for first year international students, experienced faculty, co-curricular support, like tutoring, and enrichment experiences to foster friendships and a sense of belonging, WKU website said.

“Courses typically fulfill Colonnade requirements, so students are making progress toward their degree right away,” WKU’s website said. “Enrollment in IPAS can span just one semester or the entire first year on campus, depending on the needs of each student.”

The WKU Student-to-Student Resilient Refugee Navigator Program pairs current students with one to five displaced students enrolled, WKU said. “Navigator” students are in charge of assisting displaced students with tasks like learning Blackboard and Microsoft Word, attending advising appointments with students and supporting other needs, WKU’s website said.

“Through these and other initiatives, we aim to improve education access and career opportunities for displaced students,” WKU website said.

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WELCOMING WORLD RELIGIONS

By Molly St. Clair

At the age of 13, when Vedad Hadzikadunic and his family immigrated to the United States from Bosnia in order to escape the atrocities of war, they first found a home in Houston, Texas. Soon after, they moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky.

For Muslim refugees, settling in a rural area in the Bible belt of America can present challenges; however, not only did Bowling Green embrace the refugee community, but Hadzikadunic found mentorship, support and lifetime friendship with the pastor of Hillvue Heights Baptist Church, Steve Ayres.

“You know, we’ve shared conversation and we respect each other’s position and we get along, and we want the best for each other,” Ayres said. “Vedad and I are a testimony that you listen and learn from each other instead of just to automatically draw a conclusion about each other.”

Ayres and Hadzikadunic put to rest any beliefs that differing religions cannot coexist closely together by seeing each other as human beings, not just representatives of their religions.

“It’s more about just, you know, just respect,” Hadzikadunic said. “Respect others, love yours.”

Ayres met Hadzikadunic as his defensive line coach at Warren Central High School. Ayres often gave rides to players after practice and eventually took Hadzikadunic to college visits.

Despite their differences, the two have been able to have educational conversations about life as well as religion. To this day, the pair stays in touch and encourages one another.

The pair is just a small piece of Bowling Green’s ability to bring often unlikely people together.

The growth of Bowling Green as a refugee and diverse community began in the 1980’s. Today, according to the 2020 census data, Warren County ranks as one of the most diverse counties in Kentucky and it only continues to grow.

Several churches in Bowling Green, such as Living Hope Baptist Church, have created outreach programs to help refugees start a life.

Benny Stofer, the local impact pastor at Living Hope, points to a passage in Acts in the Bible, as his guide to the role of the church in welcoming refugees to Bowling Green. He says that their job isn’t necessarily to convert people to christianity, but to help them as human beings.

“...I feel a great responsibility to serve them that way,” Stofer said. “Just help them. I mean, all I am is a messenger, all we are messengers... That’s the focus is to have compassion for people

who really have made this tough journey.”

To serve the growing population of immigrants, Living Hope offers several different congregations in which different ethnic groups can worship in their native language. This, in addition to other outreach programs in the community, is an attempt to help refugees connect so that cultures have room to flourish.

Approximately 76% of adults in Kentucky are Christian with less than 1% being Muslim, according to Pew Research Center. In 2020, 0.6% of the population in Warren County practiced Islam, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives.

Imam Sedin Agic immigrated to the United States from Bosnia in 2007 after accepting the Imam position at the Bowling Green Islamic Center.

In the Islamic faith, the holy month of Ramadan honors the creation of the Quran, the holy book of Islam. During this month, strict fasting is observed from sunup to sun down. When the fast is broken outside of the restricted times, it is called Iftar.

Agic sees this as an opportunity to bring muslims of all nationalities together.

“We try to share some days like by communities if you want like to make your food; let’s say, Bosnians one day, let’s say Pakistani one day, Turkish people one day, the American people one day and Middle East one day,” Agic said, “Then you know, you’re trying everything. It’s fun. You’re together. We have a couple hundred people in one place.”

The Bowling Green mosque is no stranger to diversity and community. Since opening in 2005, the mosque hosts over 27 different nationalities. Similar to Living Hope, the Islamic Center also has services in different languages.

Much like Ayres and Stofer, Agic believes religion connects people of all backgrounds. He believes sharing cultures and experiences creates opportunities to grow as a community.

“God created us to be together,” Agic said. “It gives you relief and it’s good you’re not alone.”

Beyond community within different religious groups, sharing religion can help people have a stronger grasp on the world and creates appreciation.

“People have brought opportunity to Bowling Green through us having a diverse community so I think we’re richer for it,” Ayres said. “It’s challenged us all; it’s allowed us to be more global. It’s allowed us to have a deeper perspective of people all throughout the world.”

Sports reporter Molly St. Clair can be reached at molly-jane2020@gmail.com.

PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

First-generation Bosnian immigrant Vedad Hadzikadunic who was muslim was introduced to christianity through his high school football coach. He says ehe learned about the similarities and differences through their relationship.



A NEW IDENTITY

Photos and words by Tucker Covey



About six miles from the Western Kentucky University campus in Bowling Green lies a small unassuming house that is covered in Khmer script and Buddhist prayer flags. This is Wat Ahram Meinjai, a Theravada Buddhist Temple that rests just outside of the city center. Here, the small, insular Cambodian immigrant community that practices in the city, is able to find a small piece of home, including Kheang Socheata and Sarith Nan, two monks who have spent much of the last three years involved in the community and becoming stronger friends.

Both Socheata and Nan recently took part in a naturalization ceremony in downtown Louisville. For one of the men, Socheata, the occasion was marked with not only a new identity as a US Citizen, but the decision to leave the religion. After 34 years as a monk, this decision was not one made lightly, and with it, the opportunity and risk of entering the job market. His friend, Nan, helped honor Socheata with a ceremony where he was given a great deal of money and other items to bring him luck in his pursuit of the American dream.

This leaves Nan as the only monk left in the monastery. He will, alone, be in charge of all the holiday gatherings by himself and traveling across the country by himself for various religious gatherings. This, however, exemplifies the Buddhist lifestyle -letting go of attachments and finding contentment in solitude and what is. Though Nan and Socheat were friends, all things must come to an end. Now it is Nan's job to ensure that the others who depend upon him for guidance are able to seek the help from him.



Top right: Kheang Socheat along with several other ne



Kheang Socheat, right, receives gifts from congregation members along with his superior, Sarith Nan, during the Buddhist holiday of Navam Full Moon Poya at Wat Ahram Meinjai in early February.



The congregation of Wat Ahram Meinjai pass... ang Socheat (right) to celebrate the Navam



new citizens, states the oath in the United States Customs and Immigration Field Office in downtown Louisville, while receiving his citizenship. Many attendees speak little English, therefore, USCIS provides them a listing of their oath. **Top left:** The main shrine in Wat Ahran Menjai, a Buddhist Temple in Bowling Green, Kentucky.



food they prepared for Sarith Nan (left) and Khe- Full Moon Poya holiday celebration.



Sarith Nan leads a sermon during the Navam Full Moon Poya holiday at Wat Ahran Menjai in early February.

BLUEGRASS DHARMA

By Michael J. Collins

Worshippers in the Shree Swaminarayan Hindu Temple hang “Happy Birthday” balloons as the smell of incense and spice fill the air. They are not for a person, but a god — Lord Rama.

Ramanavami, held on March 30 this year, is the Hindu celebration of the birth of Lord Rama, held annually in temples across the world. This is the first Ramanavami celebrated in Bowling Green since the temple opened in 2022.

One by one, devotees kick off their shoes and file into the temple, stopping by a framed image of the god that sits within a cradle.

Intricate statues of watchful gods stand all around them, some carrying trinkets or posed as if to bless their subjects. Lord Rama stands tall and straight, pinching a rose and holding an archer’s bow, with balloons strung above him.

Donations are collected in aluminum pie tins, each containing a small hand-made wick of frozen oil. As devotees throw bills in, they wave the smoke in their faces as a blessing.

Attendees recite bhajans — devotion-

al songs — through the night, stopping midway for an all-vegan dinner. Then, they dance.

The women form a circular chain, gliding and moving in unison to the music, colorful saris billowing left and right. The men hop and raise their hands, the crowd growing thicker and faster as more guests finish their meals and join.

It is nearly 10 p.m. now, and worshippers pick up instruments and pass around tambourines, starting slow and swelling to a roar of voices and drum beats. The attendees are building to the exact time of Lord Rama’s birth.

The time comes, and cheers ring out from the crowd. A large standing basin is brought out alongside a pot of saffron and water. In the basin stands an infant Rama made of gold, rose petals laying at his feet.

Devotees form a long line and take turns decanting the liquid over the statue’s head, then return to singing and dancing in the crowd. A man with the calloused feet of a religious pilgrim rings a bell and offers a final offering from a conch shell.

The guests take their time exchanging goodbyes, many staying late into

the night, but soon wandering back outside. Every celebration must come to an end, even the birthday of a god.

Across town, away from the music and festivities, Ram Pasupuleti sits at his desk, working late as he often does.

Born in India, Pasupuleti moved to the United States after marrying his wife, Kavita, in 1996. As she was already a U.S. citizen, Pasupuleti received his green card and moved to the U.S. to further his pain management education.

Pasupuleti worked in New York, Lubbock, Texas and Louisville before settling in Bowling Green to begin his own pain management clinic. In 2013, he moved into an office just off 31W Bypass.

“When I came in here, I wanted to know what the needs of the Indian community were,” Pasupuleti said. “Within about one month, I organized a meeting for all the Indian families I came to know, which were just a handful of families, maybe 15 families or so.”

At these meetings, he found that Bowling Green did not have a nearby temple. This initially didn’t bother him too much — most Hindu households have their own “temple” in the way of shrines. What did bother him was the lack of cultural variety his daughter, then eight, experienced.

In India, Pasupuleti was surrounded by a plethora of faiths and often attended other places of worship outside Hinduism. When he was young, he’d even attend Christmas services with friends — though, he admits the good food had a major role.

He wanted the same experiences for his daughter, but found them difficult to find. He wanted to change that.

His daughter had learned Indian dance and ballet in Louisville, so Pasupuleti took her to lessons in Nashville once they moved. Each time, the pair would make a stop at the Sri Ganesha Temple in Nashville.

“I wanted to at least give the opportunity for her to know what roots she has



PHOTO BY MICHAEL J. COLLINS

knowledge systems she comes from,” Pasupuleti said. “Even the dance that she practices is over 3000 years old, and so you have such a rich heritage.”

Still, it was difficult to manage the travel, and many families around him lacked the same opportunity. This led him and his wife to establish their non-profit organization, the India Culture and Heritage Group, in 2009.

They began teaching classes on Indian culture and language at WKU’s ALIVE Center every Saturday for classes of around 30 students. In addition, Pasupuleti began conducting classes for WKU students from India to help them integrate into the U.S.

‘Whenever you see something, you feel something, that is Hinduism, that is a part of human life.’

-Ram Pasupuleti

“I realized that it’s a culture shock for anybody who comes here, so my whole idea was to lessen the impact of that culture shock,” Pasupuleti said. “They loved it, because they were completely, totally lost. They were by themselves, very young guys and young girls, and I

could see it in their faces.”

Despite the work the Pasupuletis put in across the community, they still lacked a local haven for their faith. As early as 2010, Pasupuleti spoke with others about potentially building a temple but quickly found the funding wasn’t there.

“We talked about it and talked about it for about a year, two years, three years, four years — the discussions went on, but they didn’t go anywhere, so the idea was dropped,” Pasupuleti said.

Meanwhile, more and more Indians came to the city. With this growth, Pasupuleti said, came hundreds of families and a renewed desire for a local temple.

Things began to change when Nick Patel, a local businessman, approached Pasupuleti with plans to finance a temple.

“The problem with constructing a temple is that there are so many denominations,” Pasupuleti said. “There’s so many different belief systems in India that you can’t have all of them together, because each one is demanding their own representation.”

The new arrivals came from every corner of India, many speaking completely different languages.

The temple’s funding came in part from the International Swaminarayan Satsang Organization, which aids local temples with charitable contributions.

In 2017, as plans were finalized and funding was secured, Patel located a spot he thought was suitable: a lot containing three vacant buildings, formerly

utilized by a furniture business.

Over the coming years, Patel and the community would convert the buildings into the sprawling temple seen today. Construction finished in 2021, but COVID-19 delayed the opening to the following year. When it opened in 2022, community leaders such as Mayor Todd Alcott and then-State Representative Patti Minter joined in the celebration.

A year later, the temple hosts numerous Hindu celebrations, often several a month, and every Saturday bakes a sprawling Indian dinner for attendees. Event space is available for rent for any private function, Hindu or not.

For Pasupuleti, this is the point of Hinduism – bringing people together.

“[Hinduism] has always existed, since the day that the first human being was cast into this world, because whatever experience you have, that is Hinduism,” Pasupuleti said. “Whatever experience you have, that is what the Vedas say. Whenever you see something, you feel something, that is Hinduism, that is a part of human life.”

Locals and out-of-towners attend daily in search of something greater than themselves.

“People from the West have all gone all the way to India to find some peace, asking ‘how do I find solace? Where’s god?’” Pasupuleti said. “I told him ‘Look inside yourself, not outside. If you’re looking for god outside, you will never get god.’”

City reporter Michael J. Collins can be reached at michael.collins527@topper.wku.edu.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL J. COLLINS



PHOTO BY MICHAEL J. COLLINS

'AN ELEMENT OF MOTIVATION' AN IMMIGRANT'S EXPERIENCE IN HEALTHCARE

By **Alexandria Anderson**

Handmade artwork decorates the walls of SKY Pediatric Dentistry, and echoing out from multiple treatment rooms are some of the many languages spoken by Bowling Green residents as employees communicate with patients and their families.

"We have patients from all over the world," Sabina Avdic, a SKY Pediatric dental assistant originally from Bosnia and Herzegovina, said. "The Japanese, the Burmese, Bosnian, Spanish, like anything, you name it, we have it."

SKY Pediatric Dentistry has over 12 languages spoken by its employees. Somali, Burmese, Spanish and Arabic are just a few of the languages provided to patients and family members who need

translation services.

Dr. Amanda Ashley, a dentist originally from a small town in upstate New York, owns the practice – and put into place its position as a cultural hub for staff members and patients in Bowling Green.

After opening in August 2013, Ashley recognized how strongly language barriers impacted how some Bowling Green residents received dental care. SKY Pediatric now provides translation services by employees for these residents, covering a diverse set of languages necessary for a refugee city.

"The main part was starting with Spanish and just realizing that there were so many people in the community that needed to access care," Ashley said. "But just the simple fact of having

difficulties picking up the phone and calling or feeling like if they came into the office, they would kind of be lost. I'd like to have a guide or point person in their language taking the family through, start to finish during the appointment, and now that we have so many languages."

These languages are provided by employees from other countries, those that moved to Bowling Green as immigrants or refugees. According to the Migration Policy Institute, approximately 18% of healthcare workers are immigrants.

"It [the staff] is very reflective of the community that we're serving," Ashley said. "If you look at our Christmas card or our holiday cards, you can see, basically this is the breakdown of what



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

Nadia Houchens, program coordinator for the Bachelor of Science in Healthcare Administration at WKU, poses for a portrait at the Academic Complex on campus in Bowling Green.

Bowling Green looks like nowadays, and I'm very proud of that."

A core issue in providing care to patients who do not speak English is the difficulty in accurately translating complicated health topics or medical guidelines. Rules such as no eating before a procedure or specific appointment times can lose their meaning when translated directly.

In most healthcare settings that provide translation services, a "language line," or interpretation services over the phone for patients, are what is used. This direct translation service can limit how healthcare is communicated "with empathy," Ashley said.

For this reason, Ashley said having employees who can directly speak the language of patients is much more effective, since they are able to communicate in a way that makes more conversational sense to the patient.

that would access that language [and] open up a new patient population."

The stories of the refugee and immigrant employees at SKY Pediatric are vastly different,

Avdic immigrated to Bowling Green with her family at 16. When war broke out in Avdic's home country of Bosnia and Herzegovina when she was 11, her father was given the chance to move his family anywhere.

In 1996, the refugee center in Bowling Green was accepting refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Avdic and her family didn't know what to expect when chosen to come here.

"We didn't pick it," Avdic said. "I have no clue what kind of city [it was] or anything. In 1996 is when we came to the United States."

Avdic used the ESL resources at the refugee center to pick up English during the summer before attending

challenge in trying to receive care in the United States.

Avdic said healthcare is just one factor in adapting to living in the United States.

"It's a different lifestyle in general," Avdic said. "Not just health care. It was just like learning to talk, learning to walk, learning to live like all over again. It's still super different. But then, over the years, it just becomes your new normal."

As a dental assistant, Avdic has connected with patients from her home country and from others. Avdic said the most important thing she and other employees can do is simply extending kindness, as the patients have been through so much.

"You can tell they've been through a lot," Avdic said. "So what can you do? Just talk to them nicely. If you can't help them, don't add to that [difficulty],

"THE LANGUAGE BARRIER ACTUALLY STOPS A LOT OF REFUGEES FROM RECEIVING ANY KIND OF HEALTH CARE TO BEGIN WITH,"

-Nadia Houchens

"You can pull up the little cell phone language line, but it doesn't do anything in the way that like having one of our staff members there and having her talk through everything," Ashley said. "I feel like we're providing such a better level of service for families when we have a point person there that speaks their language."

Ashley hopes that other healthcare offices understand the necessity of employing those from the refugee and immigrant community. She believes the key to increasing this employment is by making healthcare training programs more accessible financially.

"If there was some type of partnership, like funding available, I think that there would be a lot more offices that would employ people from the refugee community," Ashley said. "If they knew that they could have a great employee

Bowling Green High School. She explained the difficulty in adjusting to her new life.

"I did not speak a word of English," Avdic said. "Everything was super new to me, like a new lifestyle. It was super hard. I cried for months. After I couldn't get used to that, I said to my dad, let's just go back. Can we just do that? It was a really hard experience at first, but then I got started."

Avdic attended Bowling Green High School after arriving and then pursued a degree at WKU. After working at Lost River Elementary School for years, she became certified as a dental assistant and was employed at SKY Pediatric in 2018.

Healthcare across the globe differs vastly. Whether in specific practices or an overall healthcare system, immigrants and refugees face an immediate

just be nice to them to fill their needs. That's it. That's what I try to do."

Outside of direct healthcare, immigrants and refugees are finding places in healthcare administration and business - and are hoping to see structural change.

Nadia Houchens, a WKU healthcare administration professor and program coordinator of the undergraduate health administration program, immigrated to Bowling Green from Bangladesh in 2015.

Houchens did not grow up in Bangladesh. Although she was born there, she spent her childhood in Saudi Arabia and her middle and high school years in the United States. She then returned to Bangladesh for college and got into an arranged marriage, but never felt a true sense of belonging.

"It just wasn't for me," Houchens

said. “That lifestyle, that culture. It wasn’t 100% me. Now that culture is a huge part of me, but it’s not entirely where I belong [...] then education was always on my mind, because my family has this thing like, it doesn’t matter what you do in your life, you have to be educated.”

Houchens immigrated to Bowling Green with her infant son specifically for the WKU health administration masters program.

“For some reason, Kentucky called out to me and I really don’t know why,” Houchens said. “I’m not a very spiritual person, nor am I religious, but something inside me said you need to go to Kentucky.”

She worked at a hospital for less than a year after graduation, but five years ago, applied for a faculty position in healthcare administration at WKU, and said that it has been the “best five years of my life.”

Houchens calls herself a “third culture kid,” a term used to describe those born in one culture and raised in another that often move to the United States.

“For people like us, if you ask me where I’m from, yeah, I was born in Bangladesh, but am I Bangladeshi?” Houchens said. “Not 100%, not even 50%. Am I Arab because I grew up in the Middle East? Not even 50%. Am I American? Not even 50%. But am I a mixture of all of that? Probably.”

As a third culture kid, defining who she is has been difficult.

“It’s hard for us to define who we are,” Houchens said. “It’s hard for us to figure out what our values and cultures and traditions are that we agree with 100%. And America is a place that kind of allows you to just be whoever however you want to be with all opportunities. So I’ve always wanted to come back here because I wanted to feel like myself.”

Throughout her first few years in the United States, Houchens described the “really, really hard work” to settle here, as well as the detrimental effects on her mental health, not only as an immigrant but as a single mother.

She also explained the help she tries to give international students as a faculty member who understands their

stories.

“I think what I try to do even now is when I have international students in the department in my program, or even around the university, I try to tell them my story because WKU was a place where you can make yourself at home, all the resources are there,” Houchens said. “But the problem is that when we come in from outside of the country, we don’t even know what resources to look for [...] that’s one way I tried to support students here as a healthcare professional.”

Houchens said a key part of providing reliable healthcare to immigrants and refugees is tackling the language barrier and differences in health literacy in these communities.

“The language barrier actually stops a lot of refugees from receiving any kind of health care to begin with,” Houchens said.

Even though services like the language line and telehealth appointments with translators are available, Houchens said those that need these services most don’t know about them. She also said cultural barriers and traditions could interfere with how medicine is received.

“These people are not even aware of those services,” Houchens said. “So that’s part of what I want to do. I want to spread that message. I want to create that awareness that ‘hey, it doesn’t matter what language you speak, we will figure out for you that service [that] is available for you.’”

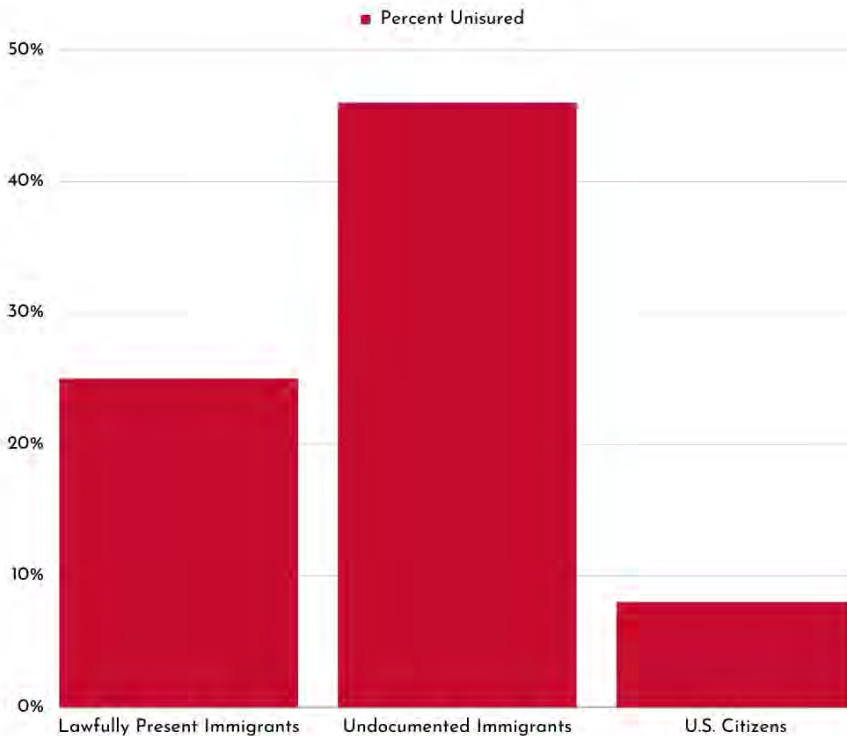
Moving to the United States gave Houchens the opportunity to become self-sufficient and “do something for myself I could have never done sitting in Bangladesh.”

“I’m a Bengali woman coming from a very, very strict patriarchal society, having lived through a very patriarchal lifestyle,” Houchens said. “I was able to break all of that and come to this country and establish myself as an independent person, not just a woman.”

Houchens said being an example to the women in her home country has been one of the most rewarding things she has done here.

“I have been able to inspire other women back home, friends, cousins, sisters, whatever, to do the same, to break out of that society, and come

HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE FOR IMMIGRANTS



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

here and build a life for themselves,” Houchens said.

She also explained the rewarding part of working at WKU as a healthcare educator – sharing her experience and point of view with students across the university.

“As a healthcare educator, I’m able to serve the Commonwealth, and thus serve the United States,” Houchens said. “I feel like I am giving back what little I can in return for the space that you guys have allowed me to live in this country. That’s the rewarding part for me, that I’m able to contribute something to the country by educating the people of this country.”

Healthcare is changing to meet the needs of increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees, with healthcare professionals working to solve language barriers, cultural differences and administrative issues.

Manzar Rzayeva, a U.S. citizen and former immigrant from Baku, Azerbaijan, graduated from WKU in spring 2022 with a degree in biochemistry, with plans to attend medical school. She is currently pursuing a masters degree in public health from WKU and works as a medical laboratory technician at Med Center Health during her gap year.

Rzayeva immigrated to the United

States with her family in July 2015.

“[We] literally had everything you could imagine back home, and we chose to start from zero in a different country just because my dad wanted to provide us a better future,” Rzayeva said.

She began as a sophomore at Bloomington High School, but then transferred to Greenwood High School, where she was placed in regular classes.

“All I knew was just basic English grammar,” Rzayeva said. “I started my sophomore year and I served as an ESL student. Then, I passed my ESL classes and I was supposed to continue on with ESL until the end of the year, but they put me in regular classes when I moved to Greenwood, so you can just imagine the transition.”

After graduating high school, Rzayeva was accepted to the Mahurin Honors College at WKU. She chose WKU because she “did not want to go anywhere else” after already starting her life here from “zero.”

“It was really tough, especially as a first generation [student],” Rzayeva said. “Because you don’t have anybody to ask things, you don’t have anybody that you can look up to and you don’t really have a person to guide you. My experience was probably the craziest one that could ever happen to anybody.”

Coming into college as a STEM major, Rzayeva was told by one of her high school teachers to take a chemistry class by Lester Pesterfield, a chemistry professor and pre-med advisor. Rzayeva said he helped her find the right path to take after meeting him during M.A.S.T.E.R. Plan.

“It was just a lot of trial and error of me figuring it out, of me taking an exam and failing it and then saying okay, we have to change your studying, going to my professor’s office asking questions, being afraid to ask questions,” Rzayeva said. “Even in my Honors 251 class, which was discussion based. I was still learning English [...] Overall, it was just filled with a lot of emotional roller coasters of trying to figure things out. I managed 19 credit hours at 17. I think I turned out fine.”

Rzayeva did not always want to go into medicine. After experiences with her own health in the Azerbaijan



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

First-generation Azerbaijani immigrant Manzar Rzayeva recently graduated from WKU with a degree in biochemistry.

healthcare system, she said “it didn’t feel the best.” Rzayeva received a new perspective on medicine after going to doctors appointments in Bowling Green with her mother and learning medical terminology to be able to translate.

At one appointment, she had to translate her mother’s possibility of having breast cancer.

“It’s just that process of translating to your mom and knowing before your mom that she could possibly have breast cancer,” Rzayeva said. “It was just horrifying. It was terrifying, to say the least, but we made our way through.”

Seeing and understanding these healthcare inequities inspire Rzayeva to be a physician, and also inspired her to pursue a public health degree. She explained that “being a doctor is more than the clinical aspect of it.”

“I saw medicine in the United States and I also saw the gaps where I would love to be able to fill in in the future as a physician,” Rzayeva said. “That was also one of the reasons why I’ve been enjoying public health [...] We’re also learning about health inequalities, health inequities of persons with limit-

ed English proficiency not having that healthcare and not receiving the care from your doctors in the best way possible compared to those who do speak English proficiently.”

At WKU, Rzayeva found a community not only in academics but through her extracurricular activities. Through the Honors College, she served as an Honors Topper as well as president of the Honors Social Planning Board.

“One of the things that the Honors College did to me was bring people into my life, which is important in my opinion throughout your college experience,” Rzayeva said.

Rzayeva also worked as a chemistry lab teaching assistant, including working as the only undergraduate lead TA of a chemistry lab. She hoped to help her students in the way that her TAs helped her.

“I tried to be that person for my students,” Rzayeva said. “Be the TA [teaching assistant] that you wish you had, be the TA you wish would have helped you out. And when I had an opportunity to be a lead TA, that was life changing.”

Rzayeva described these moments as vital to her motivation as a first generation student, immigrant and hijabi

woman.

“It’s just these little pieces of experiences and moments where as much as it felt like I was the only one, I was the only immigrant from Azerbaijan and I was a hijabi woman in a group of 100, 500, 20 [people] even, it was just that it was also an element of motivation for me to keep on being a person that I wish that I would have had,” Rzayeva said.

In her undergraduate experience, Rzayeva was also able to complete a capstone experience and thesis through the Honors College on research that she conducted.

“It was challenging, but it was a great experience that it provided me that I wanted to be a doctor essentially,” Rzayeva said.

Rzayeva also reflected on the final dedication of her thesis.

“I dedicated my thesis to the 17 year old me who persisted and did not give up through college, and also to my parents who chose to come to the United States to provide [us a] better education,” Rzayeva said.

Content editor Alexandria Anderson can be reached at alexandria.anderson337@topper.wku.edu.

‘I saw medicine in the United States and I also saw the gaps where I would love to be able to fill in in the future as a physician.’

- Manzar Rzayeva

LOCAL BUSINESSES SUPPLY TO NUMEROUS CULTURES

By Bailey Reed

With Bowling Green's large refugee and immigrant population, several families decided to share their culture through local businesses. In this story, four Bowling Green businesses that are immigrant owned are delved into in terms of their founding, origins, and ownership.

CHO VIETNAM MARKET

Cho Vietnam Market is a Vietnamese grocery with cuisine and goods from all around the continent of Asia. The

market opened in 2018.

The owner is Sun Hoang, an immigrant from Vietnam who moved to Bowling Green in 2005 with his family due to Vietnam's poor quality of life at the time. Ai Hoang, Sun Hoang's son, spoke in his father's place due to his English speaking abilities.

"My parents wanted us to have a better life," Hoang said, speaking on his family's decision to immigrate to the United States.

Hoang's family had to wait ten years to be permitted to move to the United

States. They started the immigration process in 1995.

Once they settled into Bowling Green, it was Hoang's mother who came up with the idea of opening the market.

"It was mostly my mom's idea," Hoang said. "She likes this kind of job. It is her passion."

Hoang said that the community response to the business has been positive, and explained that he enjoys being part of the Bowling Green community.

"It was worth the wait," Hoang said.



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

Store co-owner Be Ta, a Vietnamese immigrant, works the register at Cho Vietnam Market in Bowling Green.

ABBY'S AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL MARKET

Abby's African International Market is an African grocery that sells food products customary to African culture.

Nefu Kamalebo, 29, owns the business. The market opened in 2016.

"I am originally from the Congo," Kamalebo said.

He also lived in Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe at different points in his childhood.

Kamalebo moved to the United States in November 2012 after his family started their process in 2005.

"The process was crazy, very crazy," Kamalebo said. "Back in 2005, we requested help since we were refugees. Once your names come up, they start interviewing you to decide if you can come here."

Kamalebo opened Abby's International Market both for cultural and personal reasons.

"As African people, we grow up on international food. Most American food is not international," Kamalebo said.

"Most [African] people are not getting

along with the food. I feel like I can be help."

Kamalebo imports fish directly from Africa, as well as other produce in order to help his community feel at home in Bowling Green.

"My purpose for me opening the business was just because I need my people to feel like they are still home," Kamalebo said.

Kamalebo enjoys owning a business here in the U.S. as it is a good place to start and utilize your own ideas.

"America is a very good place to come up with your own idea, so opening my business here was my goal," Kamalebo said.

LUNGDAM MARKET

Lia Lian owns and runs Lungdam Market, an Asian grocery store close to the WKU campus.

The Lian family are immigrants from Burma. Lungdam Market has only been open for a year, but was previously located in a smaller shop on Pedigo Way in Bowling Green.

When the Lian family initially moved to the U.S, Lia, who was 12 at the

time, could speak very little English.

"I knew 'how are you' and like 'what's your name' [...] just the basics," Lia said.

The Lian family lived in Wheaton, Illinois, when they first immigrated to America.

Since then, the Lian family has grown and progressed within the Bowling Green community. The family previously owned a store in Indiana, but moved their business to Bowling Green so that the family could all be closer together.

"Because we had a shop in Indiana, and our family was kind of apart, my brother who kind of does everything said we needed to open a new one," Lia said. "We reunited the family by being in one place."

Lia acknowledged the influx of people moving to Bowling Green both from out of state and out of the country.

"We are so diverse. There are many more people coming in here since when I came here in 2016," Lia said about Bowling Green's influx of immigrants and refugees.

She believes that having diverse



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

Store manager Lia Lian pulls a pack of noodles off the shelf at Lungdam Market in Bowling Green. Lian immigrated to the U.S. from Myanmar, originally settling in Illinois. From there, she moved to Bowling Green in 2017. "There's a lot of Burmese people here," she says. "It's diverse."



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

Store owner Kam Pu (31), an immigrant from Myanmar, is seen organizing stacks of textbooks for sale on Tuesday at Lungdam Market in Bowling Green, Ky.

businesses and people benefits the community of Bowling Green.

“It [businesses] brings in money, two, it introduces people to diversity, especially since we are so close to the school [WKU],” Lia said.

REFUGE BOWLING GREEN

Refuge Bowling Green is a non-profit organization that assists immigrant and refugee families in Bowling Green with any of their basic needs including clothing, food, shelter, English learning classes, driving school, etc. This non-profit was originally founded by Daniel Tarnagda and his wife Alice Tarnagda, refugees from Burkina Faso.

The Tarnagda’s experienced their own struggles when they first came to the U.S.

“When I got here, I was really struggling,” Daniel Tarnagda said. “I had to bike in the snow to try to find work.”

“It was difficult to try and sur-

vive,” explained Tarnagda.

Tarnagda explained how his own struggles formed the start of Refuge BG.

“It all started from there,” Tarnagda said. “We wanted to help people survive who had the same need.”

Tarnagda and his wife were helping so many families, but didn’t have the resources they needed, so they decided to form a nonprofit.

“We opened our doors to help others, but we needed to do something else. We decided to try a nonprofit,”

Tarnagda said.

The rest is history now.

A large part of Refuge Bowling Green is their partnership with Terenga Academy, an English learning academy. Through the school, students learn English, and also have the opportunity to participate in a soccer club so that their parents can take English learning classes and have access to the resources they need.

News reporter Bailey Reed can be reached at bailey.reed704@topper.wku.edu.



PHOTO BY ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE

Christ Fellowship Church, which holds Refuge BG, is a non-profit in Bowling Green.

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REFUGEE, REFEREE, CUSTODIAN, FATHER: THE BUSY LIFE OF A BOWLING GREEN KOSOVAR

By Jake Moore

Sharp squeaks on the hardwood cut the air inside of the F.O. Moxley Community Center gymnasium. But the familiar noise is not from a game of basketball.

Instead, two amateur soccer teams – Bosnia and Lyons F.C. – are locked in a spirited match under the industrial glow of the gym lights. Shouts in Spanish and Bosnian rattle the bleachers as a Lyons player, decked out in a grey Arsenal jersey, gets free on the sideline and sets up for a shot.

At the last second, one of Bosnia’s defenders intervenes and blocks the attempt with his shin, sending the ball careening off course. An exasperated shout of “mierda!” is sent up to the rafters.

The referee overseeing the match is approached by the Lyons forward, perhaps hoping for a favorable call.

With his whistle clenched tightly in the side of his mouth, the ref doesn’t budge.

“He blocked you,” the ref says, not interested in any argument. “You shot it. He blocked you. that’s why I didn’t call it.”

This referee is Jeton Hyseni, the man responsible for the action in the gym this afternoon. He has managed and officiated this international soccer league since 2011, earning the respect of all who compete. He says anywhere from 7 to 8 languages are spoken by the players.

Play resumed, Jeton returns to prowl the sidelines. It’s hard to miss him in his neon yellow Adidas jersey, scorecard and pen by his side. The match, scoreless in the first half, quickly turns into a rout. Lyons takes advantage of Bosnia’s weak

net and scores a lopsided 8-1 victory.

Jeton mingles with the players after the match. He says this was the first of five games he’ll referee today, and 10 games total will take place under his watch before the weekend is out.

It’s easy to see why Jeton has such a strong work ethic. For starters, he was forced to grow up quickly due to the Kosovo War.

Throughout the 1990’s, tensions bubbled between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Serbs in the Serbian province of Kosovo.

The Kosovo Liberation Army was formed in 1996 and carried out sporadic attacks on Serbian political figures for two years before Serbian police and Yugoslav forces made an attempt to re-establish control over the region.

The use of force made swaths of refugees flee Kosovo. The conflict caught the eye of the international community, and after diplomatic negotiations broke down in 1999, NATO forces began air striking Serbian targets. In response, Serbia and Yugoslav forces drove out and displaced Kosovo’s Albanian population.

Jeton was at the ground floor of the conflict. A Kosovar, he spent the summer of 1999 in a North Macedonian refugee camp, which is where the sixteen-year-old got his first job: distributing food to others fleeing the terror.

“That was my first job and I haven’t stopped working yet,” he says.

The Hysenis, five in all, did not know where they were going to end up when given the chance to move to the States. The International Center of Kentucky

resettled the family, provided them the necessary documents and picked them up from the Nashville airport that July.

He recalls being surprised on the drive up from Music City – he thought Bowling Green would have more tall buildings and didn’t expect to see the little rural towns that dot the landscape.

Because he was the oldest child, Jeton’s father, Aziz, gave him a mission when the family started adjusting to their new life. He was to care for his brother, Driton, and sister, Jehona.

“These are your kids now, not mine,” he remembers Aziz telling him. He made good on his responsibility to lead the family, getting a driver’s license in a matter of months and graduating from Bowling Green High School in four years.

**‘I was a
goal-scoring
machine’**

- Jeton Hyseni

“That’s my little town where I grew up,” Jeton says, sharing photos of Uglari, Kosovo, a little village tucked into the Balkan foothills. Small townhouses with red roofs dot the sloping greenery.

He recalls, long before the war, playing soccer on the river that cuts through town.

“When it gets cold it gets frozen, you could even drive a car on top of it,” he says.

Jeton flies home to visit when he can, his most recent trip coming in 2017. He has been wanting to go back since 2019, but the COVID-19 pandemic and Aziz’s declining health put a wrench in the travel itinerary.

“I hope I get to go visit this summer because six years is a very long time,” he says.

While homesickness might persist, Jeton has no plans to move away from Bowling Green. He’s become too entwined with its people.

When he isn't refereeing the international league, Jeton works as a custodian at the Warren County Area Technical College.

The building's cleaning supplies storage area doubles as his office, the place where Jeton plans out the league's schedule and calculates the current standings when he isn't needed elsewhere.

"I watched all the World Cup in here," he says, pointing to the computer monitor sitting on his personal desk. His soccer fandom revolves around Real Madrid and star forward Cristiano Ronaldo.

Jeton played as a forward, too, in his youth.

"I was a goal-scoring machine," he says, reminiscing on his athletic feats.

The concrete room, filled with the low hum of the building's HVAC system, affords Jeton peace and quiet. He has a little bit of those precious commodities right now - at least until August, he says.

"In August, I start the high school season, and that's even more drama than my adult league," he says.

Running the international league, as demanding as it can be, still has yet to burn Jeton out. The steady carousel of new players and coaches keeps things interesting year after year.

"You're not dealing with the same people over and over," he says. "But even if you are dealing with the same people over and over it's kind of good because you get the hang of how they want stuff to be done, how you communicate with them."

He compares it to a machine - "if you work one machine for 20 years, it might get boring after some years."

Most of his work at the ATC is done in the

summertime, stripping and waxing the classroom floors when the kids are away. He had no idea how the process was done when he arrived, but "now I can do it in maybe 10 days."

That said, he doesn't want to work too quickly, because then there will be nothing left to do.

"If I get it done all in one week, what am I going to do for five weeks or six?"

When he arrived at the ATC almost four years ago, Jeton didn't think he'd stay for very long. He's glad he stuck around.

"I never felt any job that considered me a part of the family," he says. "We here have a group text and any thing that

happens to somebody or their family, they're so good at helping someone out. This place makes me feel like I'm part of the family."

When Aziz passed away last February, his ATC coworkers gave him a card and time off. Some of the carpentry students worked to create a memorial plaque as a gift.

"Just saying you are sorry, that means a lot," he says.

Jeton's household is full of life and sound.

A Premier League match between Manchester City and Crystal Palace fills the television, the Sky Blues winning 1-0. Jeton's son Landrit watches YouTube videos on his blue plastic kids tablet, the sound from the speakers echoing off the home's white cinder block walls.

A small pennant of Albania's flag, one of Jeton's spoken languages, hangs on the key rack just inside the door.

Just above sits an ornate copy of the Quran. The floors are covered in intricate rugs that have seen decades of use.

"This is Liona, she's three years old - this is Landrit, he's five years old," the proud father says.

Jeton and his wife, Blerina, sit on the couch in matching Real Madrid kits with little Liona between them, who rocks back and forth.

"That's pretty much what they do, stay on the laptop or iPads," Jeton says with a hint of playful exasperation.

The couple first met in 2013 through Facebook, with Jeton flying back to Kosovo to visit.

They were engaged a few years later and Blerina arrived in the U.S. on a fiancé visa in 2015, which gave them three months to wed.

The couple are both Muslim, but Jeton says he hasn't been able to actively live out his faith as much as he would like due to his schedule. He is proud of the



Photo By Tucker Covey

Jeton Hyseni refs and manages an international soccer league at the Kummer Little Recreation Center in Bowling Green.

fact that he's only missed two Ramadans since moving to the U.S., going so far as to referee a full slate of games with no water one year.

"He just shed a couple of pounds," Blerina says.

Jeton is usually able to relax a bit on the weekends, but not this time. He is tired. His mother, Magule, is not doing well.

"My mom is in hospital, she's been in hospital since Thursday night," he says. "I spent freakin' nine hours just to get her in the ER, and by the time they took her to her room I went home. I had to get up in the morning to go to work."

Her father's stress doesn't bother Liona, who is all giggles. Jeton finally cracks a smile and blows a raspberry on her stomach, eliciting a joyful shriek.

"She's happy right now, but she might change," Blerina says, smiling at her daughter.

Landrit is now in the kitchen with his tablet, but the volume is still high enough to compete with the television.

"He never likes to play the normal sound, he will speed it up," Jeton says.

Blerina takes a look over her shoulder back at her son. "Most of the time it will be slow motion and it drives people crazy."

The family has called the house, nestled north of downtown Bowling Green, home for about 12 years now.

"I'm in the process of trying to buy a (new) house, but my income isn't all that great," Jeton says.

Blerina says the cinder block walls remind her of how homes are constructed back in Kosovo. Drywall structures seem flimsy in comparison.

"I thought at least all houses were similar, when I went to work the material was like paper or something," she says. "Oh my god, are you trying to make a shed?"

The two weren't used to violent storms, especially ones that could shred houses apart. The strongest storms they'd seen in Kosovo would just yank off a few terracotta tiles.

It's no wonder Bowling Green's tornadoes of December 2021 left a mark on Blerina.

"From that night, every time I hear the alarm, I swear to god it's like a shadow. It's scary," Blerina says. "In



PHOTO BY TUCKER COVEY

Jeton Hyseni (right) plays with his daughter Liona Hyseni, 3, at their Bowling Green house.

our country, we don't have tornadoes. The wind is scary enough."

Jeton admits that he slept through the whole thing. Blerina still can't believe it.

"When we buy a house the first thing I'm going to build is a shelter, I swear," she says.

Liona has disappeared around the corner to the kitchen, but returns clutching a bag of gummy bears to show to her mother. Blerina says both kids likely have non-verbal autism, so she has gotten good at reading what they need.

"Since I am here all the time I can understand almost everything that they want. They are pretty independent, you know? What they want to eat, they're going to show you," she says. "There is no problem in daily life except in conversation, of course we want to hear them talking to us."

She says both kids started speaking when they were eight months old, words like "mom" and "dad." All of a sudden, right around 13 months, they stopped.

"Landrit talks, but not what you ask him, more like gibberish or whatever he listens to on his tablet," Jeton says. "He doesn't follow directions as much, but he's getting better (than) where he was."

To the dismay of the parents, neither of the children have shown any interest

in soccer thus far. The pair want their kids to know all there is to know about their ethnic culture - including soccer - but right now, Jeton says there are more important things to work on.

"Right now I just want them to be able to talk," he says.

The kids are working with speech and occupational therapists and are both in preschool at Parker-Bennett-Curry Elementary.

"That's been very helpful," Jeton says.

He hopes that one day he can see both his kids enroll at WKU. Blerina says the kids both love school, so much so that there are days when Liona doesn't want to come home.

"She's like him," Blerina says, gesturing to her husband. "The same temper, the same everything."

Jeton just smiles. He may be busy, but he's giving his kids something he didn't have - the chance to grow up at their own pace.

"That's why I stay busy pretty much all year long, to make up a living," he says. "I hope I can provide for them until they're older than 16 like my dad did."

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RESOURCES FOR IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN BOWLING GREEN

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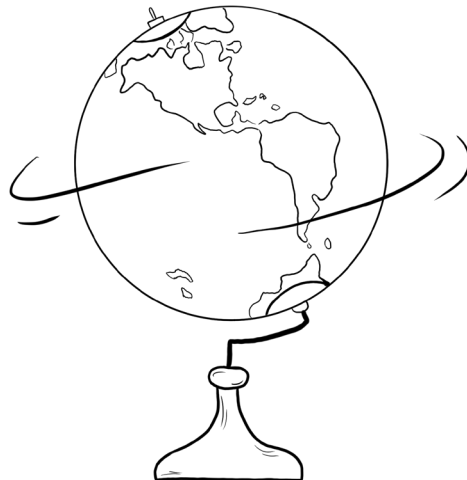
General services

- Interpretation and transportation services
- Job preparation
- Basic hygiene
- English Second language training

Refugee resettlement

- Airport pickup
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