

Innovation Pacemaker entry

A joint submission by

- **Ball State Daily News, Ball State University**
- **Ball Bearings Magazine, Ball State University**
- **College Heights Herald, Western Kentucky University**

Immigrants in Middle America, a joint project between Ball State University and Western Kentucky University

Background: Small cities in Middle America are facing a multitude of challenges — declining population, loss of jobs and economic opportunity, and political and cultural divides that further threaten a community's future.

But some places, like Bowling Green, Kentucky, have bucked that trend because of a position the city adopted decades ago: First, establishing the city as a resettlement center for refugees fleeing wars and genocides and, then, welcoming immigrants from across the globe. The strategy has allowed Bowling Green, home to Western Kentucky University, and the surrounding county to grow from a population of 104,792 in 2011, to 134,510 in 2020 — in that growth, an 87 percent increase in the immigrant population. The city, where 1 in 6 residents was born in another country, enjoys a vibrant economy and a rich cultural diversity that has enhanced all parts of life for residents and visitors. Moreover, immigrants contribute to the local community via their own entrepreneurial businesses, through educational attainment, and money invested in home ownership.

Though wildly successful in Bowling Green, the question is: Could a similar strategy of inclusivity be adopted and help other small Midwestern cities thrive?

It was an idea worth exploring.

Project: In Fall 2022, Lisa Renze-Rhodes, director of the Unified Media Lab at Ball State University wrote and received a \$25,000 grant to fund a multi-pronged project that would look at Bowling Green's success, and compare and contrast it with the similarly-sized Muncie, Indiana, home to Ball State. Decades of economic and other challenges have resulted in a loss of population, specifically among young people; Muncie's school system has also faced problems and in 2018 was taken over by Ball State on order of state legislators.

Chuck Clark, director of WKU Student Publications at Western Kentucky University, in partnership with WKU Public Media, also received a \$25,000 grant to fund the WKU portion of the project.

The goal of the grants: to fund a storytelling partnership that would combine the efforts of Ball State student media and Ball State Public Media with WKU's College Heights Herald and WKU Public Media in an effort led by student journalists at each university to explore how Bowling Green became a successful community for resettling international refugees, which in turn led the city to welcome other immigrants, and what could be a plan for the future in Muncie.

Results: In what we believe is a first-of-its-kind partnership, the student media teams and the public media teams at the two universities have come together to create content that is shared and unique, and that does and will serve audience members in multiple markets across multiple platforms. Some content pieces have already been created and shared, others including the larger PBS documentary and some supplementary content that will be produced by the Ball State Daily News will be published/aired in Fall 2023.

Project pieces:

Ball State Daily News (Ball State University)

- From 8 to 80, by Evan Chandler
How one woman made it her mission to create a faith community for immigrants and newcomers who call Muncie, Indiana, home.
<https://www.ballstatedailynews.com/article/2023/06/ball-state-from-eight-to-80>
(Spanish language version)
<https://www.ballstatedailynews.com/article/2023/06/ball-state-de-ocho-a-80>
- It Takes the Village, by Evan Chandler
One family reflects on their move from Chicago to Muncie, Indiana, and the challenges and opportunities that change created.
<https://www.ballstatedailynews.com/article/2023/06/ball-state-university-it-takes-the-village>
(Spanish language version)
<https://www.ballstatedailynews.com/article/2023/06/ball-state-se-requiere-el-village>

Ball Bearings Magazine (Ball State University)

- Un Negocio Familiar, by Evan Chandler
The story of one immigrant family's business and connectivity to the Muncie community.
<https://ballbearingsmag.com/2023/04/27/un-negocio-familiar/>
(Spanish language version)
<https://ballbearingsmag.com/2023/04/20/un-negocio-familiar-esp/>

College Heights Herald (Western Kentucky University)

- City of Nations
The entire final issue of the College Heights Herald news magazine for Spring 2023 focused on the immigrant community in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and the varied contributions those community members have made throughout the city. Student journalists started their work on the project in October 2022 and continued throughout the spring semester. Stories included:
 - The woman who created the International Center of Kentucky and the story behind how she transformed Bowling Green into a welcoming hub for refugees fleeing wars and genocides.
 - How the refugee and immigration processes work, and how Bowling Green capitalized on the potential to remake the community.
 - Bowling Green was introduced to its refugee community through restaurants the immigrants launched, becoming successful members of a thriving local business community.

- More than 150 languages are spoken in Bowling Green’s public schools, presenting challenges as the immigrant community continues to grow.
- Western Kentucky University, the city’s largest institution, is taking steps to ensure its campus is immigrant-friendly.
- People coming to Bowling Green from other lands bring a wide variety of religions, from Islam to Buddhism to Hindu and more.
- Opportunity met challenge as Bowling Green’s health care community adapted to its changing population.
- One Kosovar’s story: Refugee, referee, custodian, father.
- Read the work:
 - <https://wkuherald.com/refugees/> (online edition)
 - <https://issuu.com/wkuherald/docs/wkuherald20230424r> (print edition)

Ball State Public Media/WKU Public Media

- Fleeing to Flyover Country
A 30 minute documentary that will air Fall 2023 about the success in Bowling Green and the opportunities that approach creates in a place like Muncie. The documentary includes student media team members from Ball State University.
- WKU Public Media is also producing a series of short-subject videos highlighting how Bowling Green’s refugee community has had an impact across all aspects of the city, from businesses to professions to education. Once completed, those videos will be collected on the web page that hosts the College Heights Herald’s City of Nations project.

Sharing content: Content produced across this project will be shared among all the partners. Student media content will be accessible to readers from each publication.