

‘Baltimore Without Borders’

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) November 27, 2019



In the course of my consulting career, I came increasingly to see the impacts that immigrants and refugees were having on our cities and metropolitan areas. I became immersed in that understanding in the prior decade when, in the course of an assignment for the Atlanta Regional Commission, I developed a series of brochures documenting the experiences of 20 different immigrant or refugee communities.

My team, including graduate students recruited from Georgia State University’s anthropology department, assembled information on the traumatic events, both man-made and natural disasters, that brought these newcomers to greater Atlanta. We learned about their challenges, their fears, and, in many cases, their successes as they navigated their way in their new place in America.

A few years ago, I undertook a consulting project for the city of Buffalo. Buffalo, a legacy industrial city built by immigrant waves in the 19th century and early 20th century, had been losing population for many decades. However, one group now showing growth was the collective New Americans, including Burmese, Bhutanese, Somalis, Iraqis and many more.

Buffalo’s celebration

I was reminded of that work in Buffalo by an email recently received by one of the four refugee resettlement agencies operating in the city, the International Institute of Buffalo. The institute headlined its upcoming festivities in this fashion:

“The International Institute of Buffalo will celebrate our city’s diversity with a party only the Institute can throw!”

IIB was referring to its annual celebration as a city that welcomes New Americans and the vibrancy that these newcomers lend the wider community. Buffalo Without Borders is an event that features the contributions of the Buffalo region’s immigrant and refugee communities and the offerings of 24 ethnic restaurants.

The event also showcases artisans and entertainers from all over the world, from nearby Canada to far-flung Burma. The participating vendors, all located in Western New York, highlight the

diversity that can be found in the Buffalo area. Food sampling, the opportunity to shop for unique craft items and to enjoy the entertainment round out the evening's activities.

The Buffalo News anticipating the event in October, describes what can be expected:

"The menu stretches from the Burmese cuisine of Sun Restaurants, with coconut curry chicken noodle soup, the Jamaican stylings of Kalypso's chicken curry and the Greek rice pudding dished up by Mythos.

"The evening includes an extensive array of arts and crafts vendors, and live entertainment. It raises money to support the activities of the International Institute of Buffalo, which has been helping immigrants grow into thriving members of their new communities for 101 years."

What Baltimore can do

Baltimore has had its share of events that recognize the contributions of immigrants to our area, but they have been sporadic. For a number of years, the city sponsored a weekend of festivities, featuring food booths, crafts for sale and a soccer tournament at the Baltimore Polytechnic athletic field in North Baltimore. That event is no longer held, and I was not able to learn what led to its demise.

Speaking with Mark Losha in the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs, the only celebratory events noted were some associated with Hispanic Heritage Month, including the presentation of awards made in City Hall to individuals with notable achievements.

Perhaps the closest thing that we have had in bringing our immigrant and refugee groups to a larger stage is the World Refugee Day programming organized by the Creative Alliance. This is an annual program that has in the past included partnerships with the BCCC Refugee Youth Project, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration Refugee Service, Soccer Without Borders, World Relief, and the Mayor's Office.

This festival, including local leaders and representatives of immigrant communities, is a wonderful way to appreciate the art, culture and cuisines of the various immigrant groups that are now part of Baltimore. But it attracts only a narrow slice of the community.

So, the thought came to me: Our community should have its own Baltimore Without Borders celebration! Built on the Buffalo model it would involve major corporate sponsors and bring broader swaths of the community into the process. In Buffalo that corporate and philanthropic support has included M&T Bank, a local family foundation, some of its region's major health facilities and many other "friends," such as the Buffalo Bills NFL team. This higher-profile event would make it clear that our community functions as a result of the many talents and the hard work of people who have come from around the world to make Baltimore their new home.

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