NEW MARKET

Converting Cultural Assets into Economic Opportunities

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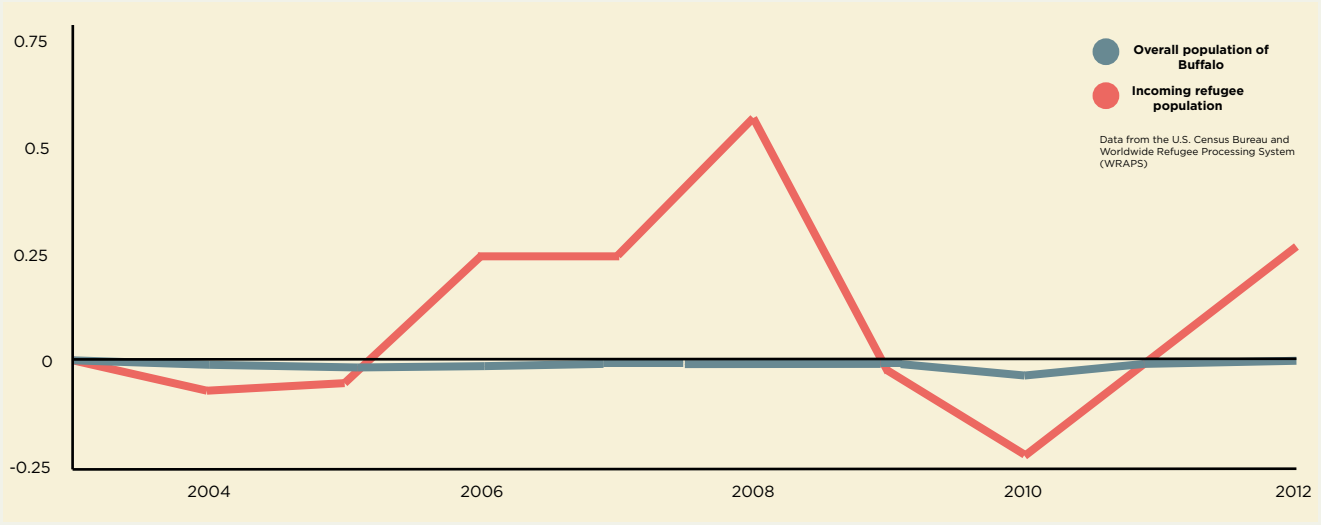
Design for Social Innovation
MFA Thesis 2014

Population Changes in Buffalo 2003-2013



Over the last decade Buffalo lost

8.9%

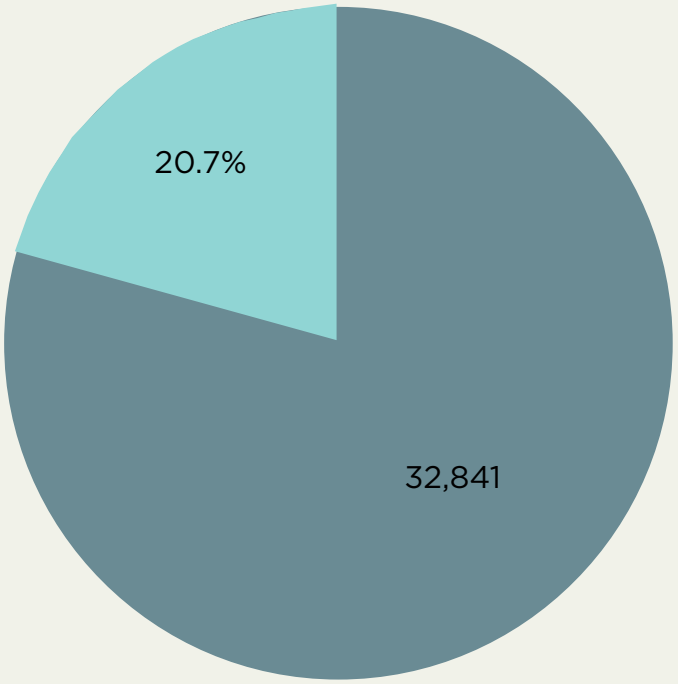
of its overall population

Refugee arrivals increased by

52%

over the last decade

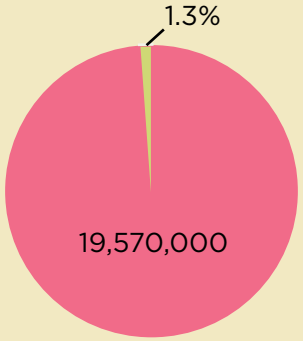
Refugees Resettled in New York State 2003-2013



Refugees in Buffalo

All refugees in NYS

Population of Buffalo within NYS in 2013



Population of Buffalo

Population of NYS

Designing a Better Employment System for Buffalo's Refugees

A worker-owned marketplace where refugees convert their talents and cultural assets into economic opportunities

Before coming to SVA to pursue my MFA in Design for Social Innovation, I worked in Buffalo, NY resettling refugees from around the world. For three years I struggled to help refugees coming to the city restart their lives from within an intensely bureaucratic and fragile system. Funding at our agency was never secure or enough, we had more cases to handle than we had time to handle them in, and the help we could offer came in the form of government-issued checklists. Any incentive-based systems were for resource-starved resettlement agencies to put as many refugees through the system as possible in exchange for funding. Success was often measured purely by how many people were severed.

My colleagues and I worked every day devising ways to squeeze every resource, to find donations for new families, to connect refugees to people who could do what we could not. We innovated within our constraints as much as we could, often at the expense of our personal time. But no matter how hard we worked, we'd end up with the same clients again and again, helping the same refugee after he was laid off of his temp job for the fourth time in a year. During the employment program intake interview you ask a refugee his or her dreams and goals. Then you tell him or her that job isn't available.

Last year, over 1,300 international refugees from countries like Burma, Bhutan, and Iraq, moved to Buffalo. The international resettlement agencies place refugees in cities where the cost of living is low-cities like Buffalo where housing is cheap because everyone else has left and the market has gone down. The number is not unusual for Buffalo, which over the last 10 years brought in more than 8,000 refugees, but it is a growing number, and those numbers are leading to new communities and new opportunities. Buffalo, like a lot of rust belt cities, needs help, and its newest residents could be a profound resource toward revitalization.

One of the harsh realities of the federal resettlement policy is that most refugees are resettled into poverty. Funding for resettlement makes up less than 1 percent of the overall federal budget, and each family receives only a modest amount upon arrival to get their lives started in the U.S.

Refugee families also receive welfare assistance during their resettlement period, but that can last less than a year, and some argue that the money isn't enough to break a cycle of dependence that begins in refugee camps.

It's a bad start for the refugees and for the organizations that are supposed to help transition them into independence. Refugees, like the waves of immigrants before them, often find themselves working unskilled jobs in factories, processing plants, hotels, and restaurants. It's not a sector where the wages are good, and yet refugees are often pushed into these jobs because they don't speak great English, or because the skills they acquired in their home country go unrecognized.

It's tough for anyone to make a living on a minimum wage job. And often, even when there's work, refugees have a hard time getting enough hours to support themselves and their families. Refugees aren't familiar with their rights in the U.S. and they are often taken advantage of as workers. So despite the tireless efforts of resettlement workers, many refugees remain dependent on the welfare system long after their resettlement period.

My clients didn't have much, but they would often refuse to let me leave their houses after home visits without staying for dinner first. As a result, I got to experience the hidden cornucopia of delectable foods coming into Buffalo along with our new neighbors. Word quickly spread that I was interested in the cultural traditions folks were bringing with them and that I would come to their house and eat just about anything. Soon I was feasting on incredible curries at Nepali weddings, gobbling up spicy, garlicky noodles at Burmese festivals, and partaking in ceremonial porridges at Eritrean baby showers. I became a regular at the dinner tables of refugees from across the globe. It was incredible.

By sitting around the dinner table with my clients, I was able to discover more about their cultures, lives, and talents than many of my colleagues. As labor leader and civil rights activist Cesar Chavez famously said, "If you really want to make a friend, go to someone's house and eat with him...the people who give you food give you their heart".

My thesis work has revolved around helping refugees break out of the systemic poverty and the grips of learned helplessness developed over years of living within aid and welfare systems. By using the talents and cultural assets refugees bring to Buffalo, they can create economic opportunities for themselves. A revitalization movement is underway in the city and part of that includes a new interest in food and unfamiliar cuisine. Buffalo's new foodies would be ecstatic if they discovered the treasure trove of gastronomical goodness that has been hiding in the city. For my thesis I've designed a marketplace where refugees can make livelihoods for themselves by helping Buffalo's hungry denizens do just that.

Setting the stage. And the table.

Historically, Buffalo's food fame has been largely limited to the iconic Chicken Wing, known, incorrectly, as the "Buffalo wing" to those outside the area. There are a few other foodstuffs Buffalo is known for, namely a small variety of greasy junk foods and condiments. But in recent years Buffalonians, both native and transplanted, have begun to reclaim the city and to create and demand the delicious food found in other cities.

A decade ago I remember what a treat it was to get a sandwich in Buffalo that included something other than iceberg lettuce and fried insert-meat-of-choice-here. As a vegetarian I would often find myself out to dinner and getting stuck eating a lackluster salad or french fries. But in the last few years the city has seen an explosion of restaurants, bakeries, and food trucks. Buffalo now boasts fine dining, toast cafes, and gastro pubs. Which one of the city's popular food trucks will be parked outside has become an important marketing strategy for cultural events. Even the dive bars are trying to step up their game, with local favorites like the Essex Street Pub remodeling to open a kitchen and serve bar food's more slightly more refined relative. Buffalonians now feast on everything from upscale sushi to Creole-inspired cuisine to locally sourced,

Bidwell Park Farmers Market
Buffalo, NY

Five Points Bakery on Buffalo's west side uses locally-sourced ingredients for its baked goods and boasts Buffalo's only toast bar.

whole grain cinnamon rolls.

Several local publications have sections devoted entirely to food culture in Buffalo. Edible Buffalo , a division of Edible Communities Publications, has become quite popular. Buffalo's food scene has recently been featured on renowned chef Anthony Bourdain's show No Reservations and journalist and comedian Mo Rocca's new Cooking Channel show My Grandmother's Ravioli. Buffalo was also recently featured in Lucky Peach, a gorgeous quarterly journal of food writing.

The precedent has already been set for imported cuisine in Buffalo. Kevin Lin, who came to Buffalo as a refugee from Burma, owns and operates a Burmese restaurant in the Black Rock neighborhood. Sun Restaurant has grown from a tiny market with two tables in the back to an ever-expanding restaurant that now has two dining rooms and a sushi and black rice bar. A small handful of other refugee and immigrant restaurants are starting up in the non-profit small business incubator space called the West Side Bazaar. The menus are still limited and the hours are a little inconvenient, but they hold promise as they draw in a growing number of Buffalonians from all over the city.

Everyone from Margaret Mead to M.F.K. Fischer to Michael Pollen has written about how food brings people together and facilitates sharing of culture. We all eat food. No matter what country you're from or what language you speak. In this case, refugees that have few economic opportunities and little interaction with the larger Buffalo community can not only showcase their cultures and preserve traditions through food, but they can earn a living doing so.

Prototype I

An exercise in co-creation with Buffalo's refugee communities

Burmese Dinner

Photos by Julian Montague

When I worked in the refugee resettlement system I was often frustrated at the lack of agency refugees had in their lives in the U.S. Because they are new to the country and don't know the cultural expectations, language, or geography, refugees spend much of their first six months in Buffalo being told what to do. It's with the best intentions, for sure. Resettlement agency workers are trying to help. They are the experts in this case. But the truth is that the resettlement process was designed for refugees by people who have never been refugees. There are no feedback loops and refugees are rarely asked their opinions about the process and how it works for them.

As I set out to design a better way of getting refugees to work, I knew I didn't want to design something for refugees. I wanted to design with them. Since I was thinking about food and using food as a way for refugees to create economic opportunities, I decided to go to Buffalo and call up a bunch of refugee community leaders, resettlement employment program specialists, and experts in workforce development and invite them to dinner.

We met at the West Side Bazaar, the small business incubator space on Buffalo's west side, where my friend Soe Maung Maung has his nascent restaurant, Kyel Sein Hein Burmese Cuisine. Soe is now 26 and came with his mother and father to Buffalo from Burma via Thailand ten years ago. His parents owned a successful store in Burma before having to flee for their safety. Soe worked as a mechanic for a few years while he saved money to open a restaurant with his mother. Soe, his mother and his father now work in the restaurant together and since doing so have become economically independent. They have also become proud of their work again. They have been quite successful in the incubator space and are on the lookout for an affordable restaurant space they can expand to. The small café tables in front of Kyel Sein Hein's stall were crowded with Burmese men and women of all ages, sipping tea and eating noodles. I wanted to highlight a refugee-brought cuisine for the night and Soe had agreed to make our main dish as well as a light soup course for the evening.

I pushed a few of the café tables together as people began to arrive. I had been very intentional about who I had invited. Some folks were talented and skilled people who came as refugees and have been chronically underemployed since coming to Buffalo. Some were strong leaders of their respective communities. Some had expert knowledge of employment services and workforce development. Many were a combination of these things. Guests included Gabriel Shalamba, a Congolese man who came as a refugee several years ago. He was studying to become a priest before having to flee his home in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He's a leader of the Congolese community and works at a resettlement agency first as a case manager, now as an employment specialist. Bishnu and Chitra Adhikari came and brought their nephew, Chandra. Bishnu was a teacher in his home country of Bhutan and then in the refugee camp in Nepal. After a year or two of unsuccessful attempts, he is now an employment specialist at a resettlement agency. His wife, Chitra, works a low-wage job at a printing company running the machines. A fantastic cook, her dream is to own her own restaurant one day. Their nephew, Chandra, is young, smart, speaks great English, and is underemployed. Lamin and Hema Tamang are also from Bhutan by way of Nepal. Hema is a talented seamstress. Her husband, Lamin, was a yoga and reki master in their home country in addition to being a really talented musician. Both of them are smart, thoughtful, and articulate people. And both of them have been stuck in a cycle of getting laid off every few months from unskilled jobs with terrible hours and little pay. Eh Knyaw is a leader of the Karen (pronounced Ka-REN) community, an ethnic group from Burma. Many of the refugees who come to Buffalo from Burma are ethnically Karen. Eh Knyaw works at a resettlement agency as an employment specialist as well as supporting the high school education program run by the agency. Briana Popek is from Buffalo and worked as an employment specialist at a resettlement agency for many years. She became frustrated with the system and how

ineffective it was and decided to leave the job. Holly Hutchinson is working with the expanding Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus on workforce development in poor neighborhoods.

The theme of the evening was Burmese cuisine, as none of our guests happened to be Burmese. (Eh Knyaw, while being from Burma, doesn't cook and wasn't very familiar with our selected dishes for the evening.) Our first course we made together. I brought the ingredients to make a green papaya salad, a popular dish in Burma and surrounding Southeast Asia. None of the guests knew how to make the salad and those that at least knew how to cook, didn't know how to read a recipe or standard measurements, both important skills for cooking professionally. We learned to make the salad together, the various tasks of peeling, chopping, measuring, and mixing divided among the guests. Making something together was both an exercise in skill-building and a symbolic gesture of building something together. While they all seemed a little skeptical at first, everyone really got into making the salad and delighted in the act of having made something to share together.

As we finished up our salad, Soe and his father came out from the shared kitchen at the West Side Bazaar carrying trays of a delicate cabbage soup. The broth was a translucent pinkish-orange color and bits of sliced cabbage and shallots were settled at the bottom. As we sipped our soups we talked about what refugee communities really need to break out of a cycle of poverty. We talked about what parts of the resettlement employment services system worked and what parts didn't. We talked about skill sets

people needed to be successful. We talked about what success looks like. The conversation was animated; many were practically bursting with ideas. It wasn't that they didn't have opinions or ideas. They had just never had an outlet for them.

Soe and his father reappeared with a large silver tray of garlic rice noodles. The noodles were soft but not mushy and smothered in a pleasantly potent garlic oil, cilantro leaves and green onions sprinkled throughout. As we noshed on the noodles we continued our conversation.

Those from the refugee communities really liked the idea of using food as an intervention point. To them, sharing food was already a really important and special part of their lives. They were excited at the idea of sharing food and culture with the larger Buffalo community. They liked the idea of using a skill set many were already good at and having an opportunity to develop those skills and create jobs for themselves with them. It was hard to get a job at a factory or as a house cleaner. While they are unskilled jobs, they use a lot of technology and products that many refugees are unfamiliar with. The English vocabulary and skills involved in those jobs also aren't very practical or useful in other situations, like navigating everyday life. Getting a job using a skill they already have would allow them to focus on building other skills sets that would be useful in the world-skills like interacting with customers, dealing with money, and reading and writing. They liked the idea of having the learning and skill-building aspects become part of the project. We talked about having these things become classes for employees or on-the-job training. Sharing food and skills they exclusively brought to Buffalo, they said, would make them feel proud.

We also talked about what refugee communities need to be happy. Substance abuse and depression are not uncommon in refugee communities. Unemployment rates are high and layoffs and temp jobs are common. I had a goal of having refugees co-create a place

that they could not only work at, but also use and enjoy. Gabriel, my Congolese friend, had a really great point: refugees don't go out at night or on the weekend. They sometimes get together at each other's houses but they don't have a place to go out to. Refugees like to go out and listen to music and dance, have a beer with their friends and grab a bite to eat, he noted. Just like anyone else. But they don't have a place where they feel comfortable doing that. They feel awkward and excluded from American bars, restaurants, and arts and culture institutions. Moreover, they wouldn't know where to go even if they felt comfortable venturing out.

Refugees feel pretty disconnected from the larger Buffalo community in other ways as well. They are often on the receiving end of systems of services. These interactions are more often than not one-way and limited. Refugees don't have social capital outside of their respective communities and since no one really has tremendous social capital in refugee communities in Buffalo, that doesn't go very far. When I explained the idea of social capital to my dinner guests, they lit up. They knew that knowing people was important as they come from cultures that are community-based, not individualistic like American society. The knew that with increased social capital would come more opportunities. They agreed that nothing brings people together like a meal.

I presented my idea to my dinner guests as taking the form of a restaurant that would rotate to a new culture-as-theme every few months. We could change the menu, décor, and music played. We could feature a different refugee culture each time. But my guests didn't want to wait. Why not do it all at once, they unanimously suggested. So I suggested a market, the type of market that almost every other culture has but the U.S. has gotten away from. The type of market that is bustling with vendors of all kinds of foods. The type of market that foodies from across the globe would flock to not only for delicious eats but for the cultural experience of being surrounded by smells and sights and sounds unique to the space itself. A site-specific experience for all the senses.

We would build an amazing place to work. A job that paid a living wage, had reasonable hours, and offered the skill-building training refugees need to be successful. Holly, the woman working on workforce development, suggested I look into worker-owned models of business. The model fit my design criteria of having strong feedback loops in place so refugees working at the space would constantly be driving the learning end of things. She noted that they were gaining popularity and that a new worker-owned bakery was about to open up in Buffalo.

Everyone stuck around after dinner to help do dishes and take out the trash. We continued to chat excitedly about our new marketplace and all the great things we could accomplish. They already felt a part of what I was designing. What we were designing together.

BURMESE GARLIC RICE NOODLES

INGREDIENTS

- 10 oz rice vermicelli noodles, cooked according to package directions and strained
- 1/4 olive oil
- 10 pieces of garlic, sliced thinly
- 2 tsp tamarind juice
- 2 tsp fish sauce
- 3 scallions, thinly slice into rings (white and green parts)
- 1/4 cup cilantro, chopped, plus a few sprigs reserved for garnish
- black pepper to taste
- 2 hardboiled eggs, scliced in half lengthwise

This recipe is courtesy of chef Soe Maung Maung at Kyel Sein Hein Burmese Cuisine in Buffalo. Soe made this as the main course for our first dinner. Soe came to Buffalo as a refugee a decade ago as a teenager. He opened his restaruant a few years ago and says it was the thing that helped his family achieve economic independence.

1. Heat the oil in a small sauce pan. Once oil is hot, add garlic and sautee until garlic is golden. Remove from heat and let cool.

2. Place dried noodles in a large bowl. Add garlic oil, tamarind juice, fish sauce, scallions, cilantro, and black pepper. Mix well.

3. Garnish with half an egg and reserved cilantro sprigs. Serve noodles at room temperature.

“The shared meal elevates eating from a mechanical process of fueling the body to a ritual of family and community, from the mere animal biology to an act of culture.”

Michael Pollan, In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto

Prototype II

Dinner with the Larger Buffalo Community

Nepalese Dinner and Performance

Photos by Julian Montague and Chelsea Wagner

After digesting the conversations and feedback from the first dinner, I wanted to try out some of the concepts and ideas that had emerged. I made a plan to travel back to Buffalo and to throw another dinner. But this time I wanted to create that multisensory experience that enriches culture, and our marketplace, so much. And I wanted to invite people from Buffalo who weren't familiar with the city's refugee communities or the amazing food they are bringing to the area.

I also wanted to test out the worker-owned way of doing business. I decided to stick with one cultural theme for the evening for simplicity's sake. This time I went with Bhutanese/Nepalese. I asked my friend Chitra, the woman who was at the last dinner that has aspirations of being a chef, to cook our food. I asked her husband, Bishnu, and their nephew, Chandra, both also at the last dinner, to help out as waiters. I asked my friend Lamin, another guest from the last dinner, to play music. I asked them all to volunteer their time; that would be their buy-in. I told them I planned to ask guests to bring donations and that 100% of that money would be divided among them-profit share. They all eagerly agreed. Chandra brought on a friend as another waiter and Lamin asked his friend Dill to accompany him on guitar. Social capital in action.

I invited a handful of friends and asked them to bring a guest I didn't know well, if possible. A man at a local coffee shop overheard me describing the project to a friend and asked if he could come. We ended up with 18 dinner guests in total. Some were restaurateurs, others entrepreneurs. Some were culture-makers, others were foodies. All were excited to be part of something you can't get anywhere else in Buffalo.

I had a suspicion that the appetizers I requested Chitra make, a spiced cabbage dumpling called momo, and accompanying hot sauce, were going to be popular. They're a favorite of mine. So I went to Chitra and Bishnu's home the morning of the dinner to help make them. Chitra, like many refugees who cook, has never used a written recipe to make food. But it's an important skill set to have if one is going to cook professionally. One of the things I wanted to test this time

around was how to get Chitra to create a recipe in English using standard measurements.

We were making momo for a large group of people. I wanted a recipe for four to six people. Chitra had a hard time trying to describe to me how much we would use for that many people so I had her separate out the amount of each ingredient into piles. I then took a variety of measuring spoons and cups and put the piles of ingredients into them. We looked at how each ingredient was sliced, chopped, or diced. We went over the vocabulary around cooking. We timed how long it took us to steam the dumplings. Together Chitra and I wrote the recipe for the momo and hot sauce.

That evening the dinner was held at a local art gallery called El Museo, a space dedicated to showcasing the work of artists of color and immigrant background. The gallery's owner was so excited by the project that she donated the space and everything in it for the entire weekend.

As guests entered the gallery they were greeted with a glass of

arrived we all took our seats at the table. I introduced myself and the project, and my collaborators. I talked

main course featured two types of vegetable curry, a traditional lentil dish called dal, a cucumber and herb salad, and rice. For dessert we had

was set for 24 so our performers, chef, and wait staff would have a chance to mingle with the guests.

After everyone had arrived we all took our seats at the table. I introduced myself and the project, and my collaborators. I talked about Buffalo's refugees and the incredible assets they bring to the city. Looks of delighted surprise spread across the table as guests heard about what Buffalo's newest neighbors were bringing with them. Then we began the feast. The three-course meal featured a sampling of Nepalese cuisine. Our first course, the momo, were a huge hit. Our main course featured two types of vegetable curry, a traditional lentil dish called dal, a cucumber and herb salad, and rice. For dessert we had two types of sweets made from coconut and honey, as well as Nepalese tea called chia, made from Assam tea, milk, sugar, and a few other spices.

Audible manifestations of satisfaction pushed their way out of the lips of full mouths throughout the meal. Guests were eagerly asking questions about every dish, asking if Chitra could bottle and sell the hot sauce and if I could email them recipes. They were excited about trying vegetables they had never seen before, like bitter gourd, something Nepalese refugees and Indian immigrants are bringing

to Buffalo. Even the experience of the curry, something they had all tried before, was different and intriguing.

After dessert Lamin and Dill performed a few more songs. First they played a song they had written together. They closed with a Nepalese favorite-a song about freedom and cultural pride. When they reached the first chorus all the Nepali-speakers in the room burst into song and Chandra and his friend started to cheer and dance. The celebratory mood was instantly contagious. The American guests began to move with their Nepali counterparts and couldn't wait to hear what the song was about after it had ended.

We lingered in the gallery after the performance, sipping wine and mingling. One of the guests was a professional musician and exchanged information with Lamin and Dill in the hopes of collaborating. (After seeing a video of the performance, the gallery owner asked them to come back and play as well.) Chitra was approached by a woman whose company was planning to throw a large event and was in need of a caterer. She was hired on the spot for the job. Chandra, one of our waiters, got to chatting with our evening's photographer. It turned out Chandra is really interested in photography but didn't really know how to approach learning. They exchanged information and Julian, our photographer, offered to help Chandra learn his way around a camera.

The donations totaled over $200. It was a modest reward once divided between everyone, but when I handed out the cash to those involved, they all refused to take it. The experience was enough for them, they insisted. They said had all received opportunities they didn't dream they would ever receive and that was the biggest reward. They felt proud

about having excited so many people with their culture and food. They felt hopeful about what our marketplace could be. I reminded them of the worker-owned model we were testing. At my instance they accepted the money.
I followed up with guests after the event and the response was overwhelming. Everyone wanted to see more-more foods, more cultures, more hidden treasures. Guests asked to be "on the list" for future dinner events. They wanted to know more about refugees in Buffalo. They wanted to know what culture the next dinner would highlight. They wanted to know when the market was expected to open. They wanted recipes. They really wanted to know where they could get those dumplings and hot sauce.

NEPALESE MOMO AND HOT SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

Momo
1 package roti wraps, about the size of your palm
1 head cabbage, chopped
2 onions, chopped
3 tsp mustard powder
2 Tbsp soy sauce
1 cup cilantro, chopped
2 tsp mustard oil

Hot Sauce
2-3 small tomatoes
1 tsp cumin powder
1 tsp sesame seeds
1 onion, chopped
1-2 hot Thai chili peppers, chopped
2 tsp cilantro
2 tsp mustard powder
pinch of salt

1. Take all ingredients for momo (except roti) and put in a large bowl. Mix well.

2. Take about a tablespoon of mixture and put in the center of a roti. Fold roti in half around mixtureand pinch sides together to seal dumpling. Use a bit of water on your fingertip to help roti stick together. Place sealed momo in steamer baskets.

3. Put water int he bottom of steamer and boil. When water is boiling place baskets of momo on steamer and cover. Steam momo for about 10 minutes. Remove momo from steamer.

4. To make sauce: Place all ingredients in a food proccessor and pulse until smooth.

Serve hot momo with a spoonful of sauce.

Co-Creating a New Market

Scaling Up Our Dream

Most refugees end up working in factories or as housekeepers in hotels. Many are chronically underemployed or totally unemployed. But refugees can use the talents and cultural assets they bring to Buffalo to create economic opportunities for themselves. The dinner parties I threw got people excited. But that experience can be bigger and farther-reaching. The desire to experience the cultures refugees are bringing to the city is there. The only thing missing is a way for the larger Buffalo community to access those cultures. By creating a marketplace that serves as a cultural and commercial hub, refugees can turn their delicious traditions into a way to pay their bills. By creating a worker-owned marketplace for refugees to proudly sell their food and share their cultures, refugees will be invested in and can shape the system they work in. Our marketplace will have built-in on-the-job training to help refugees improve their skills sets in a practical setting while earning enough money to live on. What I am proposing is more than a restaurant. It is an asset-based, worker-driven workplace where refugees can do more than just survive in Buffalo-they can flourish.

I envision our marketplace to start small, with a handful of refugees from a variety of cultures selling scrumptious foods, a few tables, and a festive atmosphere. But I see it growing quickly. It can grow to include more food vendors, become a place that hosts music and dance performances. It will be more than a place to eat-it will be a vibrant cultural center with food and multi-sensory experiences you can't get anywhere else in Buffalo. Most importantly, it will be a place where some of our new neighbors can feel proud again, and break out of a cycle of poverty and become economically independent. In a city that has suffered from a lack of jobs for decades, what better way to find great employment than to create it.