

Without Borders

UK's 'Sharing Our Voices' Research Deepens

Lex Diversity

By Aminata Cairo and Rosalind Harris

Who here speaks five languages? Who used to live in Togo? Who is a dual major in anthropology and journalism? One Saturday afternoon in late January and 40 people are mingling in UK's Young Library asking each other "getting to know you" questions. There is laughter, there is excitement. During the gathering sighs of surprise are heard over and over again, as people introduce themselves — I am from Nepal, I am from Togo, I am in seminary school, I was born and raised in Kentucky, I am from Columbia, I am from Burundi, I used to live in Hawaii, I am from Iraq, I work with disabled migrant workers, I am from Mexico, I am a high school German teacher ... As different as people are at this gathering, they have one thing in common. Everybody present is interested and dedicated to addressing the needs of Lexington's newest members.

At this gathering UK students who were enrolled in a service learning course through the Department of Community and Leadership Development met their community partners who would join them in a community research effort. These community partners represented new neighbors from over eight countries, representing over sixteen different languages. Together they committed to receive training in research techniques and to go in their respective communities to learn about what it takes and what it means to adapt to living in Lexington.

Just like the majority of Lexingtonians, the majority of people at the gathering were not aware that there were people from so many different countries living within Lexington and that the number of families coming in from each country was growing. This growth reflects a change in State Department policy from sending refugees, in particular, to large metropolitan centers to sending them to small and mid-size towns and rural communities. This new trend presents these communities and their new neighbors with many challenges and opportunities.

Unlike major cities like Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, and even Louisville, these newer, smaller receiving cities lack the support, resources and infrastructure to adequately support their new neighbors. For instance, unlike the Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM) that is based in Louisville, the KRM in Lexington has far less staff and financial resources to support an ever growing influx of refugees. While support for food and housing, some language and job training is provided to refugee families for three months, after they first arrive, KRM staff admit that this is not enough to help families establish a strong foundation for making it long term. While church ministries, community organizations and individual volunteers are dedicated to supporting refugees fill in somewhat, there are still many gaps. Place this in a larger context of a harsh economy, a war on terrorism, and governmental conflict over Latino migrant issues, and one understands that there are some major challenges here. Although for Latino migrant populations many more services are in

place, a great divide remains with the mainstream culture, and the language barrier is a main part of this divide.

We directed this community-based project [Dr. Aminata Cairo and Dr. Rosalind Harris], which had the specific goal of collecting voices of the immigrant community to support incoming immigrants as well as inform social service agencies more accurately about immigrant needs. With additional support from Dr. Doug Boyd from the Louie B. Nunn Oral History Center, and Lindsay Mattingly from the Lexington Public Library trainings and meetings were facilitated.

The key to our research approach is the belief that there is knowledge within the community, and that one first has to establish community relationships, and then let the community process guide the research. This approach isn't always easy. Blake, the senior anthropology student explains: "I, like everyone else participating in this research, assumed that the research process would go smoothly. We would receive a grant that would allow our community partners to be paid, we would be able to conduct interview upon interview because everyone would be available at any time, and everyone would answer each other's phone calls and respond to emails promptly. I laugh at this now, because that is the exact opposite of what actually happened."

Indeed, there were setbacks, but these forced the researchers to be more persistent, dedicated, creative, but most of all to work together. All researchers learned about the importance of listening and connecting with people's stories. Rebecca, a junior international studies major who initially was nervous about how she was going to be received was pleasantly surprised to learn "that most of the people we met were so excited and even honored that we were genuinely interested in hearing their stories and thoughts. I think people, especially non-English speakers, often feel like their opinion is

not really that valued, whether it is because of a difference in language or even a legal status, such as being a recent immigrant or newly arrived refugee." Lisa, a community researcher from Georgetown says, "I know a lot of people with stories to share that they sometimes share with me, as their English teacher, but they don't necessarily share with a social network of people. Helping people to see how their personal story is valuable to other people is exciting." Mily, a community researcher from Colombia agrees, "I'm very excited about collaborating with this work, because I saw the passion in others, the belief and the willingness of others to do things better and easier for the new people that come to this country looking for a better future."

For Deepak, the community researcher from Nepal, engaging with other immigrants confirmed for him immigrants' patience and belief in American life, in spite of the harsh reality of the economy. It is this harsh reality that

Omar, a computer engineer and translator from Iraq, would like for the larger community to be more aware of and sensitive about. "People come here with expectations that are far different from what the harsh reality will offer them. The demands are hard, expensive, and community service organizations are often totally unaware of the needs of our community. We need to educate people more," he says.

Deepak confirms this sentiment, adding, "In my opinion, community is our family that we reside in, so one should be aware of all those



Aminata Cairo

things that constitute her. Specially, diverse community as such may serve as storage of knowledge, so, I think one should utilize the resources. Besides, everybody is scared of dark, the reason being obvious; therefore, if we make an effort to engage ourselves in the community, we should succeed in clearing our fear. We, ourselves, are the lights, and it depends upon us either we feel comfortable living in dark and hence fear, or light.”

Connecting with people’s stories and supporting each other in their learning process changes people. Whitney, a Community and Leadership Development Junior, found that she was able to sit and laugh with Mexican teens while exploring their stories of coming across the border as children. Doing so made a great impact on her appreciation of her own life and educational opportunities. Like there was laughter, so there were tears, as Adriana, and international studies junior who is fluent in Russian experienced in an interview with an African refugee. Processing emotions while doing research was an important skill for Adriana to learn as she built her confidence. Brigitte, a community researcher from Burundi, through participating in the training found the extra confidence boost she needed to pursue her nursing education. There is something humbling to have to sit through an interview while not understanding one word, as Lauren, a dual anthropology and journalism major learned as she worked alongside Christie a graduate anthropology student from Nepal. But it takes character to continue to go back to the same population



Lisa (researcher) and Elia (interviewee)

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and engage in relationships in spite of the language barrier, as Lauren was able to do.

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This research in fact has been part of our larger research and community efforts which include the development of F.A.C.E. Time (Families and Communities Educating), support programming for refugees and Latino migrant children in the Fayette County Public School System, and participation in Central Christian’s Church ESL initiative to improve English Learning classes services throughout Lexington.

Whereas the *Sharing Our Voices* project initially had the goal of developing audio and video recordings for public use, budget cuts have forced the team to now focus on putting forth a multi-lingual publication that will highlight stories of adaptation of the immigrant community. It is the hope that this information will be used to inform both immigrants and non-immigrants alike, and to help the local social service agencies to develop a better informed infrastructure. On a personal level, this work will hopefully inspire others. Mily from Colombia says, “I believe in helping each other.... So if we start as part of any movement and encourage others to



Rosalind Harris

follow, that engagement is well validated and at the end it will benefit the community to at least let them know that changes are happening and hopefully everybody will want to be part of those changes.”

To close with the words of Brigitte, “We immigrants have many different backgrounds, but have many of the same needs. We are here and we are part of the community. We need to learn more so we can give back more. We all need to learn more about each other. I believe if we use community engagement, Lexington is going to be a great place to be for all of us.” ■

On Thursday evening May 7th in the basement of the Central Library, the research team will share about their research experiences and findings from 6pm to 8pm with family and friends. This presentation is open to the public.