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Stories From the Field

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Beyond Brotherly Love

By Reversing a Population Decline and Enlivening City Neighborhoods, Philadelphia's Bet on Attracting and Retaining Immigrants Pays Off

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY EMMA LEE

On a warm spring afternoon, Herman Nyamunga makes his way down a dense eight-block section of Woodland Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia.

He moves quickly, ducking in and out of stores with his ready smile, quick wit and outstretched hand that people along this busy, slightly scruffy business corridor have come to depend on.

On paper, Nyamunga, who has an MBA and a background in the import-export business, is a “small-business development coordinator” for the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, a non-profit employment and referral resource for the region’s growing immigrant community.

But in the moment to moment reality in Southwest Philly, this Kenyan immigrant is more of a mentor, a trusted adviser and today, much-welcomed company.



“I’ve come to visit,” he announces playfully in one store, the mischievous glint in his eyes getting brighter.

On one block, Bain’s Halaal Market, owned by immigrants from the Ivory Coast who moved to Philadelphia about 10 years ago from New York City, sits across from Smiles Linens,

owned by Bruce Zeiger, of German descent.

Nearby, Nina’s Grocery—a one-stop shop stocking everything from African foods to clothes and soaps—faces Butcher Block Meats, one of several “legacy”

family businesses where generations work side by side.

And so it goes, up and down the avenue. Longtime business owners who've weathered multiple, sometimes seismic, economic and demographic changes make livings alongside immigrant entrepreneurs helping to revitalize one of Southwest Philadelphia's key commercial corridors.

"Parts of Woodland Avenue for a long time were just vacant space," says Nyamunga. "Now there are all kinds of businesses opening."

"This is like the U.N.," he says delightedly, glancing down the street. He bounds into another store.

Anchored by the historic Episcopal Church of St. James at 68th Street and the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia at 45th, Woodland Avenue is this neighborhood's 3-mile long commercial and residential spine.

As longtime business owners proudly point out both in conversation and on

their business association websites, Woodland Avenue is rich in history. It was part of America's first North-South highway. In the early to mid 19th century it was a popular destination for families to come and do their shopping.

Much of that early shine has worn off as centers of manufacturing declined and accompanying urban challenges, including unemployment, growing poverty and middle class flight, hastened the downward spiral. But increasingly over the last decade or so, new neighborhood stores, fueled in large part by immigration, are breathing life into the area. Inside Nina's Grocery, Nyamunga and owner Nina Williams talk business. There's not enough, declares Williams,

who is originally from Sierra Leone. Has she considered going in with other business owners on bulk items, such as rice? Nyamunga suggests. She hasn't, but tells Nyamunga she'll consider it.

A few doors down, store owner Fanta Diaby and Nyamunga exchange a few quips before he asks Fanta if she's applied for the city's storefront improvement program that Nyamunga had mentioned during a previous visit. It's a program open to both immigrant and American-born business owners; the Butcher Block's owners recently got help buying new refrigerated display cases.

"Did you fill out the paperwork?" Nyamunga asks Diaby.



Herman Nyamung of the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians leaves the shop, Suri Bana, where he visited with owner Fanta Diabi, who is originally from the Ivory Coast

Diaby, a reserved woman dressed in a colorful dress and matching orange headdress, smiles sheepishly as she shakes her head. "No, I was waiting for you to help me."

"You need a better sign," he gently chides her. "How else will people know you are here?"

"You know we are here," she jokes.

When Fanta Diaby emigrated from the Ivory Coast to New York City, there were days she wouldn't utter a word outside her home, if she even ventured that far. Often, she said she felt alone, desperate to communicate and share about her life in Africa. Standing by a wall of ornate dresses and shoes imported from Dubai, Diaby recalled her early frustrations in Philadelphia.

"I could not tell them who I was," she says, watching the cars pass outside her store's front window. "I could not tell them what I did in my country." Diaby was a grocer in her country.

Back in New York, when Diaby wasn't working at a grueling job as a nurse's aide, she'd lock herself in her apartment and watch television.

She laughs at the memory. "The television was my teacher. All the time, I watched television."

By the time Diaby moved to Philadelphia in 2001, she had picked up enough English from sitcoms and police dramas to be able to open the business on her own.

"It was very difficult," she recalls. "Everything we did, everything you see, we did everything on our own."

But then Nyamunga showed up on the avenue, and she and her husband, who runs the business with her, quickly found an invaluable friend in "the man with the answers."

To gain that trust, Nyamunga knows it takes building a rapport and a relationship with both U.S.-born and immigrant business owners who can be suspicious of each other and suspicious, too, of strangers bearing gifts.

"He comes to say hello, to help us...to bother us about the sign," she jokes while looking over her shoulder to see if Nyamunga is listening.

He isn't. He is busy leaving a message for a colleague at the Philadelphia Department of Commerce's Office of Business Services, which helps immigrant businesses gain access to city services and programs.



The Welcoming Center, where Nyamunga works, is not a city agency. However, the city's commerce

department is one of the Welcoming Center's major funders. The Welcoming Center's business outreach workers often collaborate with city officials as part of the city's lauded Global Philadelphia program.

Since its inception in 2003, the Welcoming Center, founded by Irish immigrant Anne O'Callaghan, has helped more than 10,000 immigrants from 140 countries through its programs and outreach. They provide assistance with finding jobs, learning English, getting access to legal services and small business support.

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock is the Welcoming Center's encyclopedic director of outreach and program evaluation.

"We were really born out of the very practical recognition that there was a need that wasn't being met," Bergson-Shilcock says. "None of the immigration organizations in the area were focused on employment and none of the workforce organizations in the Philadelphia area were focused on immigrants, and yet what our founder discovered was that immigrants kept coming in the door looking for jobs."

Not only were immigrants coming for jobs, but also for help in starting their own businesses. A recent study by the New York-based Fiscal Policy Institute found that between 1990 and 2010, immigrant businesses accounted for 30 percent of the nation's growth in small businesses. (Small businesses are defined as those with fewer than 100 employees.)

But beyond the economic mission of the center, Bergson-Shilcock is quick to point out that there are equally important perceptual and philosophical missions that drive the Welcoming Center's work.

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“First of all, we don’t see immigrants as needy victims. We see immigrants as talented assets and that’s the big difference. Many of our clients have survived tremendous trauma. But people are more than the worst thing that has ever happened to them. Our approach, even our location, here in the middle of Center City, is about saying that we take them and their goals seriously. It’s about showing trust and respect in our clients by saying, ‘You’ve survived enormous amounts of dislocation and sometimes hardship in your country. You’ve made your way to a new country. You’ve sometimes brought your children and others with you. But we trust that if we give you a road map, you’re going to make your way.’”



Around the same time that the Welcoming Center opened its doors, the city launched an initiative called Global Philadelphia, designed to ensure that city services were accessible to people who didn’t speak English. The initiative, which is run out of the city’s Office of the Managing Director, was part of a long evolving response to Executive Order 13166, signed in 2000 by President Bill Clinton. The order required federal agencies to improve services to people with limited English proficiency. It required the same from agencies that received federal funding. Two subsequent local mandates reinforced the order, at least in theory.

“Back in early 2000, the way that the city was responding to its immigrant population in terms of services was just piecemeal,” said David Torres, the assistant managing director who oversees Global Philadelphia. “You may have been provided services or you may have been turned away.”

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—Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, director of outreach and program evaluation, Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians

In 2008 city officials discovered that several city departments either had never drafted or had shelved their language access plans. That same year Mayor Michael Nutter signed an executive order mandating “all city departments, agencies, boards, and commissions to develop, assess and improve language access plans regardless of whether they received federal funding or were overseen by the managing director.”

Services have consistently improved, Torres said. But it’s still a work in progress.

“One of the biggest challenges is that staff oftentimes view the tools themselves as a hindrance to getting their job done—calling an interpreter takes more time,” Torres added. “So changing attitudes, changing hearts is a huge challenge. It’s also about attitudes toward immigrants, and when you have an organization that is as old as ours, you have city staff who have been here a

really long time, you have folks that have been here 20-plus years and they oftentimes forget what it means to be an immigrant in Philadelphia.”

Philadelphia’s Deputy Mayor and Managing Director Richard Negrin says the diverse cultural backgrounds of people in the city’s administration seem to help. Negrin’s family, for example, fled Cuba in the 1960s and settled in New Jersey.

“When we talk about major policy situations, and I am in the room, and others in this administration who are sensitive to those issues are in the room, it matters,” he said. “In a lot of ways, Philadelphia is going back to its roots. People once came here primarily for religious freedom. Now, it is economic opportunity that is good for them and, frankly, us.”

Subsequently, city employees developed two important practices that seem to be working well: in-person and over the phone translation, and “language access cards.” The cards—available in more than a dozen languages, including Cambodian, Bengali, Korean and Arabic—allow a person who speaks a language other than English to come into a city office, pick up the appropriate card and hand it to a city employee. The card will inform the employee of what language that person speaks and what services they need.

Cards can also be downloaded from the city’s website and instruct the user how to get access to a variety of city services.

It also helps that, for the most part, financially strapped city departments don’t have to foot the bill for the services. Citywide, Torres said, Philadelphia spends about \$500,000 on language access services yearly, with the majority covered by taxpayer dollars (from the general fund) and federal grants.

The city’s commerce department has been a leader in language access efforts. Two years ago, the department brought on six multilingual AmeriCorps VISTA workers to connect with immigrant business owners across the city. The VISTA workers accompany business owners through the complicated licensing process, teach them about the role of various government offices and introduce them to the government employees that they will need to interact with in the process of opening and operating a commercial enterprise in the city. This includes walking owners through the complicated licensing process and helping them navigate and become acquainted with the multiple city departments with which they’ll need to interact as a business owner in the city.

“We are sensitive to the immigrants of the city and that experience, but it’s just as much about sensitivity as it is about survival of the city,” says Shinjoo Cho, the technical assistance and outreach manager for

Philadelphia’s commerce department. “They are inevitably tied.”

Cho, a native of South Korea, began her career with the city as a business development liaison. Now she is in charge of recruiting, training and deploying the AmeriCorps VISTA workers. Before taking his current job at a North Philadelphia non-

profit, recent college graduate Manuel Martin was one of them.

Canvassing another of Philadelphia’s business corridors in the 9th Street Italian Market, the boyish-looking Martin talked about the challenge of building relationships with immigrants who may come from countries where they are, with good reason, fearful of government officials.

“It has to be about building a relationship first,” he said, echoing what the Welcoming Center’s Nyamunga said weeks earlier. “They don’t always know what to make of you. You can see the look in their eyes, like, ‘OK, what’s the catch?’” Martin says.



Philadelphia’s elected leaders have, in recent years, followed the proven logic that helping foster vibrant, prosperous immigrant communities will benefit everyone. In the last five years, Global Philadelphia has been strengthened by strong community and political support from the mayor and his



At the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, instructor Frances Heron teaches civics to a student who is originally from Liberia

administration, who not only seem welcoming of immigration, but keenly aware that the city depends on it.

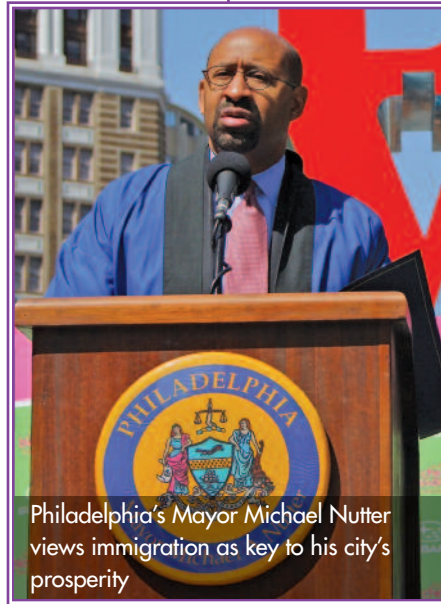
“We know from research and history that, certainly for many big cities, growth comes from an influx of immigrants,” says Mayor Nutter, who has been in office since 2008. “That’s been New York’s experience, that’s been Boston’s experience, Chicago and a number of other cities. Immigration has been an incredible part of Philadelphia’s past, but it is also a great part of our future.”

And as such, he said, the city’s approach has to be deliberate, swift and purposefully opposite those of cities and towns, from Prince William County, VA to Hazelton, PA, whose efforts to reduce their immigrant populations have led to economically disastrous results and deep fractures in the community.

But shortly after Arizona passed its notorious anti-immigration law, Mayor Nutter hosted a naturalization ceremony for new citizens on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, lined with more than 100 flags from different countries.

“That was our response to the insanity out in Arizona,” he said. “That was our message to the immigrants who built this city and the ones who would help us revitalize it.”

The city’s approach, Nutter stresses, is basic: “The first way to demonstrate that you’re an immigrant-friendly city is for the government to be immigrant-friendly,” he says. In this sense, Nutter is borrowing a



Philadelphia’s Mayor Michael Nutter views immigration as key to his city’s prosperity

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page from his former City Council colleague, James Kenney.

Back in 2000, Kenney had been a lone and controversial voice when he suggested that immigrants could reverse the city’s population slide. He even called for hearings on ways that the city could increase immigration.

“There’s a moral component to this,” Nutter says. “But there is absolutely an economic component to it too, and that’s the future of this city. Part of our survival is going to be about our continued ability to diversify and transform, and that means embracing change. You either grow or you die. You move forward or somebody’s moving ahead of you. Our survival depends on our diversity of people and economics.”

Kenney and Nutter seem to be onto something. The Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution reports that among its peer regions, metropolitan Philadelphia has the largest and fastest growing immigrant population. The region’s 500,000 immigrants make up nine percent of its population. Brookings researchers also found that between 2000 and 2006, greater Philadelphia’s immigrant population grew by 113,000, nearly as many immigrants as arrived in the 1990s.

Brookings researchers then broke down Philadelphia’s population into a diverse mix of immigrants and refugees from Asia (39 percent), Latin America and the Caribbean (28 percent), Europe (23 percent), and Africa (8 percent), with the 10 largest source countries being India, Mexico, China,

Vietnam, Korea, Italy, Ukraine, Philippines, Jamaica, and Germany.

But few numbers were quite as significant to Philadelphia as the results of the 2010 U.S. Census, which not only helped Philly keep its ranking as the fifth largest city in the country, but also reversed a 50-year population decline with growth that in large part was due to increased immigration. City officials were ecstatic.

“Today, I am proud to be the first mayor since Mayor Samuel in 1950 to announce an increase in Philadelphia’s population,” Nutter said in announcing the Census results. “It is no coincidence that the strategic investments we made have attracted new individuals to our dynamic, growing communities. We have newcomers arriving in Philadelphia from all over the region, the nation and the world. It is my great pleasure and honor to say we are back. Philadelphia is growing. Philadelphia is rising.”

But as with all change, Philadelphia’s increasing diversity has caused its share of growing pains.

In 2005, the owner of a landmark South Philadelphia cheesesteak stand in the historic 9th Street Italian Market garnered national attention when he put up signs telling customers: “This is America. WHEN ORDERING SPEAK ENGLISH.”

At the time, Joey Vento—who told reporters that his grandparents who emigrated from Sicily struggled to learn English—said he was concerned about immigration reform and an increasing number of people in the area who could not order in English.

After investigating, the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations found that Vento was not in violation of the city’s Fair Practices Ordinance.

Vento died in 2011, but his sign remains.

And in 2010, the Philadelphia School District signed a two-and-a-half year settlement with the U.S. Justice Department to address anti-Asian immigrant violence at South Philadelphia High School. The Justice Department investigation had been triggered by 26 assaults upon Asian immigrant students in 2009. After the settlement, more than 50 Asian students organized a weeklong boycott to protest what they felt was an inadequate response to what they described as years of harassment and violence. Their efforts brought attention to tensions throughout the Philadelphia public schools, and prompted the creation of a district-wide Task Force on Racial and Cultural Harmony.

“You can talk to a lot of people,” the Welcoming Center’s Bergson-Shilcock said, “and they’ll tell you that the (settlement) should have covered more than just one school.”



Federal, state and local lawmakers will likely continue to argue about immigration in the coming years. But meanwhile, cultural negotiations, ethnic change and adaptations and day-to-day life will go on at South Philadelphia’s 9th Street Italian Market, which looks just like many of the local neighborhood business corridors across this city.

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—Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter

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Iconic Italian businesses, like Ralph’s Italian Restaurant, sit next to Vietnamese poultry markets, which are surrounded by Mexican restaurants and shops. Latin music spills into the traffic-choked street.

In the past 10 years, an estimated 20,000 Mexican immigrants have settled in South Philly. One enterprising Vietnamese hair salon advertises with signs in English, Spanish and a variety of Asian languages.



Mario Rivera, originally from Mexico, at his store, Tortilleria San Roman, in south Philadelphia

enough cash to buy the small store they were standing in now.

But owning a store, Rivera explains, didn’t make opening or running a business any easier. Traditional banks are often out of reach for immigrant business owners. City inspectors were unsure of how to inspect the hulking piece of equipment in the middle of the store that Rivera uses to make tortilla chips.

At the Tortilleria San Roman, a small corner shop that makes and sells Mexican tortillas, Mario Rivera works the cash register. Manuel Martin, the VISTA worker, has dropped by to introduce himself. Stout and serious, Rivera begins telling Martin the story of his family business and the challenges he’s faced. The family started the business with a small card table right out front, Rivera tells Martin, motioning out the window. After years of saving the profits from \$1 and \$2 bags of tortilla chips, they finally had

“Running a business is hard work...But at least now we have our proper store, our proper place.”

—Mario Rivera,
Tortilleria San Roman,
Philadelphia

Rivera shakes his head at the memory of the baffled city inspectors. He smiles. Rivera mostly nods politely while Martin explains why he’s there and then starts to talk about the ways the city could assist Rivera. It’s clear that Rivera is intrigued. The two shake hands and Rivera tells Martin to come back any time.

“Running a business is hard work,” Rivera says. “But at least now we have our proper store, our proper place.”

Helen Ubiñas is a columnist at the *Philadelphia Daily News*. Before joining the *Daily News*, Helen spent 17 years as a reporter and columnist at the *Hartford Courant*. In 1999, she was a member of the *Courant’s* Pulitzer Prize-winning team for breaking news reporting.

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