

One Nation INDIVISIBLE

Stories From the Field

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The Reclamation Project

In Fort Wayne, Indiana, Immigrants Inspire New Hope for an Old Building in a Transformed City

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About ninety years ago, an enterprising Greek immigrant named Jim Heliotes laid claim to his American dream on the corner of South Calhoun and West Pontiac Streets in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Heliotes endeavored to fill the empty lot on this downtown block with something beautiful, something lucrative, something beloved.

And so, for several decades, Heliotes' grand Rialto Theater, with its glazed terra-cotta façade, velvet-covered seats and ornate chandeliers, drew sold-out crowds who watched Hollywood films, Vaudeville performances and concerts. With the Rialto as an anchor, this corridor of Fort Wayne's downtown kept

prospering right on through the Great Depression. By 1940, hundreds of shops, groceries and a few large

department stores filled the city's busy commercial center. During that time, the Rialto added a balcony and another 300 seats. But by the late 1960s, families began fleeing Fort Wayne in great numbers for newer developments in the suburbs. Mega movie complexes and



strip malls followed the audiences and customers out there. In 1967, the Heliotes family sold the Rialto.

For a few years, in the 1970s, the Rialto's new owners screened martial arts movies. When that failed, they tried showing Spanish-language films for the city's growing Mexican immigrant community. Neither

venture proved lucrative so they sold the place. In the 1980s, new owners started screening pornographic movies. This finally brought in money. It also invited trouble in this god-fearing town. Residents and church officials—Fort Wayne’s unofficial moniker is “A City of Churches”—picketed every day. In 1986, the county prosecutor’s office sued to seize the Rialto, charging that the theater had become a site for gambling and prostitution. After owners pled guilty to promoting prostitution, the theater closed in 1989. Fort Wayne had changed by then, too. Like other Rust Belt cities, lots of the factories had closed, including the biggest employer, International

Harvester, which had produced heavy duty trucks and provided nearly 11,000 jobs. For years to come, the formerly grand Rialto would sit on its formerly grand corner rotting, crumbling. The roof leaked. Mold spread over the concrete. Rats roamed among the velvet seats.



“Somebody needs to do something with that place,” Angie Harrison told her husband, Joe, as the couple drove by the Rialto one afternoon on their way to church.

Angie and Joe had moved to her native Fort Wayne in 2003 after living in southern California for a decade.

They’d settled close to the dilapidated theater, not far from Pontiac Street, the one neighborhood people had advised them to avoid. But Angie loved the

character and detail of old houses, which were harder to find, not to mention more expensive, in the wealthier, whiter enclaves beyond the city center. She and Joe wanted to raise their school-age son and daughter amid the racial and cultural diversity to which they’d become accustomed in California. In Fort Wayne, the Harrisons were thrilled to have Burmese, African American, Sudanese, Somali, Hispanic and white working class neighbors and as classmates for their children.

As the months wore on, Angie discovered that her pull toward the Rialto was not going away. She found herself gazing at it every time she drove past.

Then one afternoon at their church Angie and Joe started talking with fellow parishioners who had hopes of using the Rialto to stage a play about Jesus returning in modern times. That idea would evolve, “in this really natural way,” Angie recalls, into a shared desire to renovate the Rialto “in a way that benefits the city’s immigrant and refugee communities.”

Now, several years later, the Rialto, by fits and starts, is again becoming a place that helps fulfill immigrants’ aspirations and brings people together. By 2003, the nonprofit, The Reclamation Project (TRP), had raised enough money to buy the 11,000 square foot theater and begin renovations. Through volunteers,

in-kind labor and locally raised donations, by 2007, TRP had renovated about 1,000 square feet and put its modest offices in part of that space. TRP operates with a part-time staff and a shoestring budget. Angie

Angie Harrison, The Reclamation Project’s executive director



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Harrison, now the executive director, has sacrificed a salary on and off during her tenure. Somehow, though, the Project has started and sustained an array of services and programs. Its Circle of Friends program pairs longtime Fort Wayne residents with newly arrived refugees and immigrants. The longtime residents act as guides and friends to the newcomers. Reclamation Project volunteers teach English to big groups who gather in immigrants' homes. Staff members offer document translation for a nominal fee. Staff, volunteers, refugees and immigrants plant vegetable gardens. They host sewing and crafting classes for Burmese and African women. Through the Reclamation Products program, refugees and immigrants make and sell hats and mittens out of reclaimed materials. A used furniture store sits next door to the offices. Across the street, a Burmese family sells dumplings and other delicacies out of a small shop.

Reclamation Project staff members and volunteers envision the Rialto space as "The World Café and Cultural Center." The World Café of the near future, Harrison explains, will include a small restaurant and an art gallery staffed by community residents. The theater, she and her staff members hope, will again host music, dance, and films that feature the myriad cultural contributions of people who live in Fort Wayne. More than anything, Harrison and others imagine a space for Fort Wayne's American-born to

begin and deepen relationships with new immigrants—the Burmese, Sudanese, Somali, Latino and others—who have transformed the cultural landscape of this conservative Midwestern city.



Fort Wayne is home to 255,000 people and one of the largest communities of Burmese refugees in the United States. Churches and government agencies have settled more than 4,000 Burmese here in waves since the late 1980s, following uprisings, violence and persecution in Burma, which is also called Myanmar. Fort Wayne is also home to large Sudanese and Somali refugee communities and a long-standing Latino population, largely of Mexican descent. About 15 percent of the city's residents are African American and 73 percent are white. There are indeed a lot of churches in Fort Wayne, as its nickname

implies. Most are of the traditional Midwestern Christian variety: Lutheran, Catholic, and Episcopal. More recently, though, Buddhist monks from Burma have turned several otherwise ordinary ranch houses into temples on the city's south side. One, founded by members of the Mon ethnic group from Burma,

sits unceremoniously next to a gas station and convenience store. Burmese Muslims are building a new mosque on the south side too, in the middle of a historically African American neighborhood.

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According to mosque members, this is the first new Burmese mosque built anywhere in the world since the 1970s. (There are seven principal ethnic groups in Myanmar. Within the seven groups, experts identify more than 130 subgroups.)

In donated classroom space at the Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne, Kyaw Soe spends much of his Saturdays teaching the Burmese language to children who were born in Thai refugee camps or in the United States to Burmese refugee parents. Kyaw Soe fled Burma during the uprising in 1988.

“America is our home. Fort Wayne is our home,” says Kyaw Soe, who was part of the resistance movement working against the military junta in Burma. “But keeping alive our culture is important. This allows the parents to keep up good communication with their children.

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Back at the Rialto, chips of paint spread like confetti across the floors. Holes in the plaster expose crumbling bricks. Blue and red plastic letters—piles of A’s, B’s and so forth from the old marquee—sit in stacks amid wood planks and pipes. The air is damp and dusty. A big chunk of the ceiling is still torn up. But the roof has been fixed for some time now. A luminous aqua blue dome decorated with gold-colored metal stars graces part of the ceiling above the theater’s main floor. Contractors have told Angie Harrison that it would take upwards of \$1 million to fully restore the Rialto. For a small nonprofit, raising that kind of money, she acknowledges, “creates a major challenge.”

Though its staff and volunteers undoubtedly provide services, the Reclamation Project is different from a standard human service provider, and not only because it owns an interesting old theater and dreams big.

“The goal is relationship,” Angie Harrison says. “The point is reciprocity. Everyone has something to contribute. All of us can participate in giving and in receiving. We aren’t interested in becoming a human service agency. We are interested in building relationships within a community.”

The vision for the World Café and the Reclamation Products program builds on immigrants’ strengths and showcases contributions, rather than merely documenting needs and providing charity. Even English lessons are non-

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standard. A lot of community-based organizations offer English classes, usually at their offices or a library. But Reclamation Project teachers most often travel to students’ homes, where a half dozen to a dozen adults gather to learn together. The standard teacher-student boundary is purposefully fuzzy, as friendships and even family-type relationships evolve. Volunteer Rick Piatt taught English to a group of Burmese in one home for several years. Each time Piatt arrived, his hosts set out a single fresh flower and a pot of warm Burmese coffee on a table for him. One of the couples he taught adopted him as a grandfather figure for their son.

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A Reclamation Projects English class, held in the home of women who are originally from Burma

meaningful,” Piatt says. “You really do get to know each other. It’s a sharing.”

A few times a month, 20-something Megan Painter travels across town to one of Fort Wayne’s ubiquitous garden-style apartment complexes where Burmese refugees live. Inside the warm, dark apartment decorated with Southeast Asian tapestries, five women sit around a fold-out table in a small breezeway turned classroom. Pungent, sweet aromas waft into the room from the galley kitchen about 20 feet away. The women are Rohingya Muslims, historically the most persecuted of all ethnic groups in Burma and, according to the United Nations, one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world. Having fled Burma as youngsters, the women have spent most of their lives in Thai refugee camps.

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—Rick Piatt, Volunteer

Over the two years Megan has worked with the women, she’s learned a lot about their lives and histories and they have learned about her. Megan has also learned to show up to this apartment hungry. She’s fallen in love with Thai coffee, with curry and noodle soup.

“We love to see Megan,” says one of the women, Sein Tom Be. “We like to feed her, too.”

Before class begins, Ma Nige urges Megan to practice a few Burmese words. One sounds something like, “chit-tey.”

“Ah yes. I know that one,” Megan tells Ma Nige confidently. “Chit-tey. It means love. That was one of the first words you taught me.”



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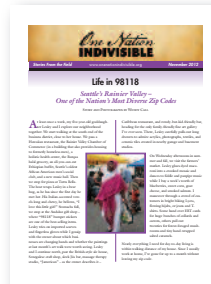
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