

# **The World in Worcester**

A Major Qualifying Project Report

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By

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### **Abstract**

This project is a journalism portfolio consisting of a compilation of articles focused on ethnic organizations within the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. Each article focuses on one individual or organization that was directly contacted and all information was provided by the subjects themselves. The resulting articles were published online by *Worcester Magazine*, Worcester Polytechnic Institute's student newspaper, *The Towers*, and posted on an independent blog where additional information regarding the subjects can be found.

### Special Thanks

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## **I. Introduction and Purpose**

“The World in Worcester” is a journalism project based on immigrant and refugee oriented programs within the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. The focus of this project is to both learn about the services that various ethnic organizations provide as well as to establish a credible journalism portfolio. In order to ensure that both goals of the project were met, different non-profit organizations were contacted as well as local area publications willing to accept student works. The end result of is a series of articles on different organizations as well as community leaders that were published by the Worcester Magazine’s online page on a once a week basis. Every article is based off of a personal interview and discussion with a representative from the subject organization, or in the case of personal profiles, with the person himself or herself.

## **II. Methodology**

In order to begin the project, ethnic organizations within the city needed to be contacted and interview times and locations established. Contact information for different individuals and organizations were provided by Worcester City Mayor Joseph O’Brien as well as Congressman James P. McGovern’s offices. Once all the necessary contact information was collected, a list of names to speak with directly was devised. After that, each name on the list was contacted personally via telephone, and in some cases, a follow-up via email was also used. Once an organization or individual was contacted, interview times and locations were established. For organizations with their own offices interviews were conducted on location, for others interviews were conducted in neutral environments such as coffee shops. If interviews could not be conducted in person, then they were conducted via telephone. With the exception of one article and individual, all other meetings were held in person and on location. Notes were taken down throughout interviews as well as after, with special markings for certain quotes. After an interview was completed an article was written within the week regarding the organization or individual interviewed and

submitted to Doreen Manning, editor of Worcester Magazine electronically via E-mail. Each article was also posted on an open blog along with any contact information regarding the organizations so as to provide an easy location where any parties interested in the project, or the individual organizations themselves, would find more information. Any necessary follow-ups for interested parties in regards to the publications themselves were followed upon via E-mail.

### III. Portfolio Pieces

#### Article 1:

#### Cultural and Artistic Expression

##### **Profile:** *Jasmine Shah*

Originally hailing from Bombay, India, Jasmine Shah had plans to become a pre-school teacher, but when life brought her to the United States, she reassessed her situation and found herself as a different type of teacher: a dance teacher. Shah started the Aangikam Dance Academy in 1982 to teach children Indian Classical and Folk dance.

Shah grew up in an artistic environment, with both mother and aunt being classically trained dancers and actors. Her mother introduced her to classical dancing at the age of three years, and Shah “started loving it.” Her father had plans for her to become doctor and study science, but as she recalls, “the day I’m ready to submit my papers to study science, my aunt comes and says, ‘Why? Are you crazy? If you study science you will be studying all the time, no time for dance or drama’ so I switched out of that.” Shah holds a bachelor’s in education and a master’s degree in business from Bombay University. Shah specializes in Bharatnatyam, Manipuri, and Indian folk dancing. Bharatnatyam is a classical dance from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India. It was originally performed in Hindu Temples where dancers would use the art form to tell mythological stories about the gods. Manipuri hails from the eastern region of Manipur, and traditionally centers on telling stories about the Hindu Lord Krishna and his consort Radha. Indian folk dance can range from Bollywood dancing to regional folk dancing.

When Shah first arrived in Nashua, New Hampshire, she was not legally allowed to work but she was looking to find a way to fill her time. “Friends approached me, friends who had daughters, and they wanted them to learn dance. I mean I taught before in India...” Now, Shah has over two hundred students and teaches classes in Worcester, Medway, Charlton, Nashua, and other towns around New England. Her dance academy holds an annual rehearsal at the start of every summer, and most of her dance groups perform at local cultural programs and competitions held by Indian communities in the area, such as the

India Society of Worcester, the Gurjar Association. Aside from teaching dance, Shah also runs a small business in lending dance costumes to other teachers and groups in the area.

If asked what her favorite aspect of teaching dance is, she replies, “Choreographing the dances” and she will easily say that there is “nothing I don’t like [about dance].” She loves teaching children of all ages but she says that either the very young students, or the much older students are perhaps the most enjoyable to work with since “the children listen to everything you say, and the older girls if they don’t listen I can still do a lot more with them, more choreography and steps.” As to why there are more girls than boys learning to dance, Shah says, “You know I don’t know actually. Lord Shiva is a male dancer, my teacher was a man. You know, initially I think in India boys used to think it was a girls’ thing. But I think boys are more likely to choose other things, like sports instead of dance.”

Dance, Shah says, is “especially good for physical and mental health. And staying in this country, children get to learn more about art and culture, which I think is important. They also make friends and cherish their friendship.” Shah plans to continue teaching for as long as possible, though recently she has started to train some of her older students to be teachers themselves. “I will not stop actually, but gradually slow down and still continue to teach.”



**Article 2:****To Practice What You Preach****Profile:** *Reverend Sarai Rivera*

For Reverend Sarai Rivera and her Christian Community Church, the long-term goal is to see youth, especially those from more marginalized populations within Worcester, “thrive rather than survive,” as she explains while she quickly catches up on a small breakfast before she must attend a training session at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. The Reverend works from the Christian Community Church but has been active in social work in Worcester since 1988. She was brought up in Worcester and considers it home. A therapist by profession, she has a doctorate, has been ordained as a minister, and is the proud mother of six sons. She and her husband are members of various boards throughout the city, such as the Latino Education Board, Youth and Development, Worcester Police, and many others. In short, she stays actively involved in whatever way she can, and she maintains a very tight schedule doing so.

Currently, most of Rev. Rivera’s work focuses on running youth development programs and working with refugees. The Christian Community Church runs a youth program for children ages 6-19 years old and even includes older youth. “I think they can all survive and get by day-to-day” but “thriving” is different she says. Thriving means they can become active members of the community, and that “they will be [ok] when they’re 80.” Most of the youth she works with are Latino, and she wants them to have “something to look towards.” They are a “fast growing minority” but currently there are no Latinos in any political positions around Worcester, nor are there many leadership roles with minorities in charge.

Aside from youth, Reverend Rivera also work with refugees and immigrants. This began when she worked as a clinician and focused on trauma cases. “If someone had depression [due to them being] evicted, I had to help with the eviction,” she says. Such a chain of events has led her to becoming one of the go-to people in the city for immigrant and refugee works. When a fire displaced a group of Iraqi

families, Reverend Rivera was one of the first contacted to help them adjust to their situation, and to help them recover. She also became a liaison to collect any donations raised for them.

If asked what the best way the Christian Community Church makes people aware of its work to help people in need is, she says it is to “participate.” She recounts that her church used to belong to a larger, more evangelical church and that when it first separated from its parent group, she and the rest of the church community would take part in various neighborhood events. Participation in other group’s events and programs allows others to be aware of the Church, their work, and fosters relationships between the Church and other groups that will help them to work together in the future. Nowadays the Christian Community Church is often working on service projects with a local Lutheran Church as well as All Saints Church.

Recently, the Reverend was active in establishing the Shalom Neighborhood Center through which her youth programs are held. She also works with various non-profit organizations throughout the city to help refugees settle. She and others at the center often help to establish connections so that those looking to settle can make a smooth transition. They often search for the right ESL classes so that those who don’t know English can learn it and have an easier experience finding a job and maintaining it. They also help with other education opportunities. For example, one high school student the Reverend works with is interested in becoming an engineer, so the Reverend has been meeting with college counselors so that the student can be set on the appropriate academic track to achieve his ambition.

In discussing why such active work should be done, the Reverend quotes St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.” In other words, “you have to do more than walk the walk.”

**Article 3:****Pride and Mainstream Success****Profile:** *Southeast Asian Coalition*

Southeast Asians are the fastest growing population in Worcester, and currently there are more than 8,900 Southeast Asian residents in the city, which is why the Southeast Asian Coalition (SEAC) was established as a support structure to serve to this growing community.<sup>[1]</sup> SEAC was formed in 1999 when a young group of teenagers of Southeast Asian ethnicity living in Worcester joined together to create a program for people who share their common ethnic background. By 2001 the organization officially became a non-profit, and in 2002 they were granted a plot grant from the city and were able to set up offices. They are currently located on Chandler Street next to the Chandler Community Elementary School.

SEAC works to serve the needs of Southeast Asians from all backgrounds. Approximately 60% of their clients are Vietnamese, but many are Laotian, Cambodian, Burmese or from other Southeast Asian countries. Their offices are open Monday-Friday from nine o'clock in the morning until five o'clock in the evening, though their director, Thuha Le, says that most days they are open until about eight or nine o'clock. SEAC's objective is to help their clients "successfully integrate into the mainstream society while maintaining their unique cultural identity."<sup>[2]</sup> In order to accomplish a successful mainstreaming of their population, SEAC runs three sessions of English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. As Thuha Le mentions, learning English is the first step in working towards finding an adequate job. Currently, SEAC has over 140 students for their ESL classes, and more than 40 people on an ever-growing waiting list.

Apart from ESL classes, SEAC tries to help members of the Southeast Asian community in other ways to help them establish themselves. They help fill out forms and applications for health insurance, provide assistance in searching for housing, and advocate for job searches and promote strong civic engagement within their community. They also help immigrants and refugees achieve citizenship by walking them through the process. If someone in need of assistance cannot find transportation to go to

SEAC, then SEAC representatives meet with the person at his or her home. SEAC also encourages their members to become registered voters. They are partnered with the Worcester Human Rights Division, and the Worcester Viet Vote Program. Together, they provide members with information on political stances and opinions of candidates, especially at the local level, so that each member can make his or her own informed choice on who to vote for.

While SEAC works to help immigrants and refugees settle into American society comfortably, they also aim for the youth to be proud of their own culture and heritage. They have a youth program that runs afterschool from 2-6pm. According to Ms. Le, the youth group often have the issue of not fitting in with the mainstream and not fitting in with people from their land so they feel they don't belong or are "lost." Yet, having them participate in activities at SEAC, they have a chance to be proud of their culture, so that they "have no shame" and will not resort to "hiding". On the contrary, with the youth group, they can be eager to share their culture, "because they are part of the mainstream as well!" One such way in which the youth can show their pride in their culture is through the Lion Dance they perform every year at the Asian Festival, organized by the SEAC for the past 8 years now. Due to lack of space, the youth group often has to practice in the parking lot behind the SEAC office. If they can, they hold practice the YMCA or YWCA.

As of late, the SEAC finds that more people are in need of their services and that their resources are being strained. They are looking to either rent or buy larger office space, where they can provide larger ESL classes, and have a place for the Lion Dance group to practice. However in order for these expansions to prevail, the SEAC is looking for funding. As a small non-profit they do not currently qualify for federal and state funding, so their monetary expenses are covered by individual donations or from private organizations. However, Ms. Le remains positive about SEAC's work and hopes that as they grow, they will find more resources they can use to help members of the Southeast Asian community.

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[1] <http://www.seacma.org/programs.htm>

[2] Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts, Brochure.

**Article 4:****Basic Support****Profile:** *East African Community Outreach (E.A.C.O)*

Situated within a small room sharing office space with other organizations on the second floor of the Denholm Building on 484 Main Street is the East African Community Outreach. A small organization run by four volunteers that serves more than 400 immigrants and refugees in the city of Worcester. Led by Fatima Mohammed, the non-profit organization strives to “provide support and advocacy to new arrivals from East African countries who have resettled in the Worcester Area.”<sup>1</sup> E.A.C.O. provides Level I and Level II English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, through the support of the Worcester Public School system, as well as translation and interpretation services. E.A.C.O. encourages refugees to achieve status as U.S. citizens and provides classes to do so in both English and Somali. The organization also runs monthly workshops on various issues particular to refugees, such as housing, individual rights, public transportation, and even personal issues such as domestic violence, something according to Mohammed, that is prevalent in refugee families. Beginning this June, E.A.C.O. will be receiving funding to provide sewing classes to women who are interested.

Mohammed describes E.A.C.O. as an organization that intends to support and help refugees from a more social and supportive angle than a standard agency that tries to help them with settlement. Mohammed herself has a history of service work. An immigrant to the United States, she has worked with refugees in Uganda, other African countries, and upon her arrival to Worcester, she has worked with Lutheran Social Services. She remains connected to other refugee organizations in the city such as the LSS and A.C.E. (African Community Education). She describes service work as her passion. When she realized that she could set up an organization dedicated to such work, she along with others founded E.A.C.O. She managed to secure funding to establish E.A.C.O. as a non-profit, and through the Worcester Community Action Council found the office from which they work through, an office provided to them for free through various donations.

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<sup>1</sup> E.A.C.O. Organization brochure

E.A.C.O., as Mohammed says, provides various types of assistance to refugees. People are allowed to walk into E.A.C.O.'s office without having to set up appointments. Should there be a question on how to fill out applications and forms, they can walk in and seek assistance. E.A.C.O. encourages refugees and immigrants who do not understand any kind of paperwork to come to them first to help them fill out their information properly so as to ensure that future problems can be prevented. They also help with job placement. In order to help refugee families find a means with which to secure themselves financially, E.A.C.O. remains fairly well connected to job placements programs throughout Worcester and when they find openings, they let their constituents know and advocate on their behalf. Aside from formal work, E.A.C.O. also provides social support. For families seeking advice on personal issues, Mohammed and the other volunteers make time to meet with them personally. E.A.C.O. also helps refugees to understand the workings of the government. An example being, a recently-passed governmental legislation gave free cell phones with prepaid minutes to some living in low-income neighborhoods. Some of E.A.C.O.'s constituents received free cell phones through this legislation, but did not realize the phones were meant for their use and threw them away. When Mohammed and the other's realized this, they began to explain to the community that the cell phones are for their use and should not be tossed away. E.A.C.O. also provides support by accompanying refugees to court should they find themselves in trouble with the law.

When asked what she would like to see for the future, Mohammed says "bigger space for confidentiality." Currently the office they have is one large room with two cubicles, phones, and one round table for people to sit around and hold discussions. Yet, this set-up provides for difficult situations when people want to speak about personal matters in a private manner. Mohammed recalls one incident where a group of people came to speak to her about a private matter regarding another party only to have the other party overhear their conversation and lead to a fight. She regards the whole incident as "embarrassing" and would eventually like to see E.A.C.O. have a larger space to work out of. Of course this would also require E.A.C.O. to secure more funding for the future. Currently, E.A.C.O. is interested in working with more volunteers, especially those who know African languages and web design.

Mohammed states that amongst the organization they speak Somali (native to Somalia), Burundian, and languages native to Uganda and Ethiopia as well. Mohammed herself can also speak in Arabic. E.A.C.O has its own organizational website but would like to update it and be able to use it as a reference for anyone interested in learning more about the organization.

For a small organization that runs for free and strives to serve the East African community, Mohammed is quick to point out that E.A.C.O. is willing to work with refugees regardless of their country of origin. In fact, E.A.C.O. works with more Iraqi refugees than East African refugees. She recalls that through word of mouth a group of Iraqi refugees heard of the organization and sought help. As such, E.A.C.O. aims to work with whoever is in need. “If you see them, they are in need, how can you say, ‘no, [I] can’t help you, [go to your agency]’?”

## Article 5

### Fundamental Education

**Profile:** *James A. Caradonio New Citizen's Center*

Here in the United States, the education system generally begins in elementary school. The first day of kindergarten begins with lunchbox in hand and eventually students find themselves leaving high school ready to pursue college or careers. For those who started and completed every year of school from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, a basic education and knowledge base has already been created. However, for those outside of the country whose education did not begin in such a clear-cut manner and for those who have missed years of schooling, coming to the United States and beginning in the middle of the system can leave them far behind.

These are the students that the James A. Caradonio New Citizen's Center School aims to help. The NCC—as it is called for short—resides where New Ludlow Elementary school used to be in Worcester, and is a part of the Worcester Public School system. Since attending school is a requirement by law in the United States, families from foreign countries with school-aged children are required to sign their children to school. Here in Worcester, if they choose for their children to be a part of the public school system, the children take a language exam which evaluates how well they know English. Aside from the language exam, each child's previous academic record is reviewed. If his or her academic record states that the child has had no gap in his or her previous education then the child is admitted to a local school and assigned to a particular number of hours of ESL (English as a Second Language) there. However for students who have more than three years of education missing prior to attending school here, they qualify to attend the NCC.

At New Citizen's Center, students are assigned to grade levels based on their previous educational experience. As a result classrooms can have students of various ages all learning at the same level. Currently the NCC has six classrooms with a total of 128 students. The student body represents 33 different countries worldwide, and the teacher to student ratio is ideally 1:20 but realistically more about 1:25 or 1:30. Per mandatory education requirements, these students have to take the MEPA exam twice a



year to measure their grasp on the English language. Based off of the MEPA results each student is assigned to a certain number of ESL hours per week. As students progress, they are required to take less hours of ESL. The eventual goal of the New Citizen's Center is to integrate their students into the regular school system as fast as possible or work on their job placement.

education at the NCC is not solely about knowledge. For many students who have not had extensive or regular schooling, the daily attitudes and behaviors of school are foreign to them. The NCC aims to create a "structured academic environment" where "students can sit for 45 minutes and [be able] to take notes [in class]," says administrator, Steven Alzamora.

In order to keep up with the students' progress, NCC staff meets with their parents once a month. Often they have to visit the parents personally at local churches or YMCA, or youth centers. Alzamora believes that by "keep[ing] parents, caseworkers and everyone involved about the students" important because "as students progress, parents get left behind. They'll say because of homework I can be out until ten tonight, or I have to watch this video for homework." However, by keeping parents interested in their children's education allows for all parties to understand the progress of the students and gives teachers and staff members an idea of the student's home environment. Alzamora says that many of the students attending NCC come from such diverse backgrounds that the staff always try to remain sensitive to each individual student's needs. Most of the student body at the NCC comes from foreign countries, some are even refugees.

For students who are ready to move out of the NCC, Alzamora organizes them to shadow local public schools. The students often tour the schools that they will be attending once they leave the NCC and then follow students (sometimes former NCC students) and allow them to become acquainted with the newer environment. After a student moves on to a regular school, the NCC still keeps contact with him or her. If the student seems to be showing signs of difficulty adjusting to the different environment, Alzamora might go to visit the child at his or her school and speak with them personally to try and help them to become more comfortable with the new surroundings.

While some students move on to regular schooling, Alzamora, claims that the older students who arrive at the NCC often worry about providing for their families rather than on education. Refugees, in particular, receive 15 months of financial support from the government upon their arrival in Massachusetts and after the 15 months, all financial support is cut off. As a result, many of the older students at the NCC worry about supporting their families and are no longer interested in pursuing education. As a result, the NCC works with Workforce Central, Worcester Technical High School, and other job placement programs in Worcester to help these students find jobs. Alzamora also indicates that in the future, he would like to see some type of “apprenticeship program such as an auto mechanic or baker” being established at the NCC so that students can develop a kind of skill or trade that they can use to provide for themselves and their families.

While the NCC works on creating a welcoming environment where students from all different backgrounds have the opportunity to make up and join the regular system of education here, it also actively strives to not repress any student’s culture. The NCC tries to keep an environment where students have room to grow. One such example is a cultural show. This year will be the first year that the NCC will host their own cultural show where students will work on organizing performance pieces and music for the show. Last year the NCC held an international lunch where everyone was able to try different foods. For Alzamora specifically, working at the New Citizen’s Center has made him “more aware of” the many cultures in the world.

In terms of having more support, Alzamora says that there is always a need for more funding, but that the Worcester Public Schools do provide a lot and are very supportive. However, what he could really use help with are finding translators. “I always make a plug for translators and interpreters.” In order to set up meetings with parents and students, Alzamora has to go through various forms and request meeting dates. He also has to schedule these meetings often months ahead of time. However, for emergency situations, he is left with minimal modes of communication. He currently has a small network of volunteers through which he can spread word if necessary but having professional and paid interpreters

“to communicate with parents, and advocate for the school” would help him greatly. “If they’re paid then you know parents can contact them, advocate for the school, and the translation will be word for word.”

As of last year, the New Citizen’s Center had five graduating seniors, three of whom received full scholarships to attend college. For a small school that has only been functioning for three years, this is one sign of success.

## Article 6

### Supporting Education, Ensuring Success

#### **Profile:** *African Community Education (ACE)*

For most students, five days of school seems to be more than enough, and when the weekend finally arrives, homework is the last item of business they wish to complete. The students attending African Community Education however, look forward to Saturdays as a sixth day of school. African Community Education, or ACE as it is usually called, is a 501c3 non-profit organization that aims to enhance and supplement the educational needs of students belonging to the African immigrant and refugee community in Worcester. ACE has a small tutoring session Monday through Fridays afterschool but primarily focuses on its full day Saturday program. Program director Julia Kilgore is quick to recall a Friday evening this past winter when it was forecasted to snow the following morning. Thinking that the weather would be too much, she chose to cancel ACE's program the next day and called the students individually to notify them. Every student was disappointed, and when the forecasted snow did not appear the following morning, Kilgore recalls checking her messages and hearing one student say, "There's no snow...Are you sure you want to cancel [today]?"

Founded in 2006, ACE began as an idea by its co-founder Kaska Yawo. Yawo noticed that many students within the African community arrive to the United States from countries disrupted by political turmoil and war, causing many of the students to have never received the proper educational backgrounds they need to thrive in their schooling here. Beginning within his own community, the Liberians, Yawo began to develop a tutoring program where students could meet and complete their schoolwork with extra help so as not to struggle in class. Currently, ACE has expanded its Saturday program to have approximately 85 students, and a network of approximately 100 volunteers. While originally established as a tutoring program, ACE has developed into a mentoring program with each student being assigned to an individual mentor. ACE has also constructed a course list for its students on Saturdays so that when they arrive at nine o'clock in the morning they have a strict schedule to follow.

Every Saturday, the students of ACE, all within grades 5-12, arrive at Elm Park Community School to begin their day. Through the Worcester Public School System, ACE is allowed to use the cafeteria, gym, and several classrooms on Saturdays. Elm Park also allows ACE to have office space within the building. Once the students arrive, breakfast is served in the cafeteria. After breakfast students begin their classes. Each student at ACE is provided their own binder with course schedule and school supplies including pencils and rulers. Depending on their schedules, each student begins with a remedial math or a remedial English course taught by a volunteer teacher. Teachers and their respective classrooms are provided with their own bag of supplies so as not to use any of the school's supplies. By 12 o'clock lunch is served in the cafeteria and classes resume at one o'clock. Afternoon classes include individualized mentoring and tutoring, physical education classes, cooking classes, dance classes, art classes, and a special session called "express yourself" where students are put in small groups based on age and gender, and discussions are held on social and personal matters so as to accommodate the students in a non-academic method. Volunteers at ACE include college students, school teachers, Worcester Public School staff members, and other members of the Worcester community. Aside from their Saturday program, ACE also runs a weekday program afterschool from three o'clock to six o'clock. Snack and tutoring is provided. Currently the afterschool program includes about twenty students and is also held at Elm Park Community School.

In order to ensure that their students are making academic progress, ACE contacts individual teachers at each of the students' respective schools. They speak with them and see if the student is struggling in any particular area or if they need to focus more in one area of study than another. Then on Saturday the mentor is notified of the teacher's message and can work with the student individually on the academic issue. To maintain the relationship between student and mentor, ACE looks for mentors who are available during the academic year. As Kilgore says, they prefer "the quality [of the] volunteers rather than quantity." They prefer not to build too strong of a personal relationship between mentors and students so each year different mentors are assigned to students but as Michael K., ACE's volunteer behavior specialist, mentions many of the students at ACE are used to having people come and go but

having a sense of stability is also necessary. While ACE began with mainly Liberian students, today ACE has students from Burundi, Tanzania, Sudan, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Somalia and other African countries.

ACE is not actively seeking students, though Kilgore mentions that most current ACE students heard about the program via word of mouth. The program does have a long waiting list. However, Kilgore says that in the future with enough funding ACE has room to expand in size with both students and volunteers. She also sees the program moving towards a more case work based method as well as an academic initiative. ACE has its own outreach department where they attempt to connect with the families of students and help them understand the educational needs of their children. ACE also provides some English as a Second Language courses for parents and also refers to parents and families of students to other organizations in the area that can help them with other needs. ACE is however looking for more volunteers to mentor and to teach small classes, however, they prefer that these volunteers be available throughout the academic school year so as to provide consistency for the students they work with.

Aside from academics, ACE strives to provide a warm environment for its students and a place where they can spend time and learn with others with similar backgrounds. Some of ACE's current mentors are past ACE students themselves and are currently pursuing higher education or working. According to Kilgore, having former students come back to work with ACE provides role models to those currently in the program. Mentors, role models, and students work together every year to coordinate and perform in the annual Spring Festival. The annual festival is a time for students to showcase their artistic talents such as traditional dancing, and provides a time for various students to share their past experiences with the audience. Along with the Spring Festival, students also work to create and publish the ACE Magazine which is filled with information about the program, student works, and individual profiles on students. The magazine is entirely student-written with a brief introduction and "about" section written by Yawo and Kilgore. ACE strives to reinforce structure while maintaining a laid back attitude and use it to motivate and enable their students to achieve a proper education, the final intention being to have every ACE student graduating from high school. Last year ACE had eight graduating seniors all of whom are

currently enrolled in colleges. Kilgore describes it as, “Balanc[ing] compassion [and] at the same time teaching them what they need to know.”

#### IV. Reflection

When the terms of this project were first finalized it seemed a daunting task to contact people from various organizations and then find angles on which to write about their work. However, as the project continued, certain topics arose throughout the many conversations held, and certain observations were made regarding the people and the organizations with whom they work for. These characteristics deserve to be noted, even if they are more inclined towards opinion rather than fact.

All the organizations contacted work with ethnic populations outside of the mainstream culture. A good number of the organizations contacted work with both immigrant and refugee populations. Among the repeating themes that appeared throughout the different people spoken with, one was the difference in mentality between the immigrant and refugee populations. When meeting with immigration attorney Randy Feldman, he directly said, “You know, I think that immigrants come to this country with a skill that they want to use. They have a sense of upward mobility, they want to work to set up a good life for their families. They bring skills to aspire, but refugees. I don’t think they come with that mindset. I think they come here with just a sense of survival.” As Feldman continued, he mentioned that he finds refugees living in low income neighborhoods but without that mentality “to aspire” he believes that, “American urban culture is weak and can eat up [the children].” Falling victims to that American urban culture leads refugee families to have more difficulty working to break their socioeconomic barriers. It is important to note that this is merely a point of thought, and no real set of statistics can support this claim. In meeting with SEAC program director Thuha Le, a similar sentiment arose, but she claims that there is no real significant difference between the two populations. SEAC works with both immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asian countries, and Le herself was a refugee from Vietnam. Le finds the main problems for her organization’s members are language barriers and jobs. Since most of them do not come from English speaking countries they do not know how to establish themselves here, and are left confused. As such she finds that through ESL classes and job placement are the two best ways to begin to help her members properly. ACE program director Julia Kilgore did not directly mention seeing a difference between



immigrant and refugee mindsets, but she did state that she began to observe a hierarchal structure developing within the African communities ACE works with. Kilgore distinguished between Burundian families and Liberian families. She found that since most of the Liberian population had arrived in the 1990's they have had time to settle and acclimate to American life. However, the Burundian community has only recently begun to arrive to the United States and as such are not accustomed to life here. Although the Liberian population is still primarily low-income they generally understand English better than the Burundian community living in the United States, and they are usually working or looking for work whereas the Burundian families are not as financially stable yet. Kilgore notes that most of the ACE families are refugees or displaced people from countries facing political and war-torn strife, that upon their arrival here they began to develop as a larger African community, and that within this community a hierarchy is in place. Perhaps an alternative aspect to consider when discussing immigrants and refugees is to consider studying middle-class immigrant populations. Most of the Indian community in Worcester and the surrounding area, and perhaps the Chinese immigrant population as well, have families who strive to work towards a better life. Many reward their children with the best education they can afford through private schools and tutoring. Businesses, such as Kumon, exist and cater to primarily these groups of people. Many from both populations come well-educated, or at least understand English once they are here, a characteristic that already puts them at an advantage over many other populations. Perhaps it is socio-economic status that dictates the mentality of "upward mobility" that Feldman mentioned.

Another recurring theme from discussions with these organizations is uncertainty of future, higher demand of services, and lack of funding to improve both characteristics. Most of the programs, regardless of how well-established they are, are still in need of increased funding, and most are unsure as how they will survive into the upcoming fiscal year. E.A.C.O. is an entirely four-man volunteer-run organization. They apply for funding when they can and with what they manage to make they work with over 400 refugees in Worcester. The Ethiopian Dream Center is another small organization, headed by Mesfin Beshir. Beshir, himself an Ethiopian, organized the Dream Center in hopes that no others would have to endure the hardships that he faced. His organization is run by him and a handful of volunteers

who collect clothing and money to give to others. They work with as many people as they can, and help with finding discounted apartments, jobs, and they run a small store selling Ethiopian clothes and items from which all proceeds go to their organization. ACE is perhaps the most structured organization that has been contacted so far, and even Kilgore admits that funding is uncertain and how they will proceed to exist in upcoming years is unknown. ACE is also entirely volunteer run with no employees save but Kilgore who technically remains as an employee to the Worcester Public School system not to the program itself. When speaking with other coordinators at ACE such as Kim and Amy (arranged through Kilgore), they admit that they are need of more volunteers, but also in need of more staff to coordinate the volunteers. They currently have one dedicated staff member to managing about 100 volunteers and the work can become quite daunting. Thuha Le of SEAC admits that she would love to see the SEAC have a building or office of their own. The SEAC does not qualify for any state or federal funding since it caters to too small a minority population. As a result their donations are almost entirely private donations. Le recalls that at least having a larger venue would allow for more seats in the ESL classes, shorter waiting lists, and the dance group can practice indoors rather than in the parking lot of their current venue. Having more funding also allows them to expand their options. In fact most of the non-profit organizations indicate (some directly, others indirectly) that they have tired staff members, volunteers, and are in need of expanding to accommodate the growing needs for their services.

Having been raised in an immigrant family but barely ever having left New England, and then working on a project where I could meet and speak with others from all different parts of the world has awakened a sense of curiosity in me to learn more about other cultures and to find ways to perhaps help the cultures that exist here in Worcester. “The World in Worcester” seems to remain in continuation even as this MQP draws to a close. Other organizations have been contacted, more interviews set-up, and *Worcester Magazine* has indicated it would like to continue publishing articles for now. A website, titled “SeltzerPost” has been set up to provide interested readers about these organizations and their contact information. When discussing this work with the city Mayor’s office, talk of establishing a round-table discussion where various directors from these organizations could meet with one another and learn about

one another was raised. In such a discussion organization directors might be able to help one another with their respective needs, almost similar to a cooperative, and work together to help their respective clientele as well. Despite being non-profits, these organizations do seem to have a certain sense of competition established within themselves. Whereas in most cases companies and businesses fight to gain more profits, here it seems that non-profits fight to gain more recognition. All this being said, plans to have a roundtable discussion are currently in talks and no such appointment will be ready until the end of May, 2011.

## V. Contact Information and Website

The following is a list of contacts available to the public to learn more about the organizations contacted through the course of this project.

### **African Community Education (ACE)**

23 N. Ashland Street  
Worcester, MA 01609  
Phone: 508-799-3564  
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Website: <http://www.acechildren.org>

### **East African Community Outreach**

484 Main Street, Room 203  
Worcester, MA 01608-1810  
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Cell phone: 508-318-3430  
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Website: <http://www.eastafricancommunityoutreach.com>

### **Ethiopian Dream Center**

Phone: 774-823-9358  
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### **Attorney Randy Feldman**

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### **Southeast Asian Coalition**

120 Chandler Street 1st Floor  
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The blog established exclusively for this project can be found at <http://www.seltzerpost.wordpress.com>