

# **An Analysis of Refugee and Immigrant Craft Initiatives Throughout the US and Canada**

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“My favorite thing to do is knitting. It is a magical thing. A single thread and needle can make some fascinating pieces.... I actually was able to produce some products that were sold. When I received my first check, I was so excited. I was so blessed with the first payment, and I donated it a children’s cancer center. My son helped me donate it over the Internet.... Women from all over the world gain knowledge. The management and teachers are wonderful and supportive and make us feel like a team. I really like this place and hope we can bring more awareness and help the program grow and develop bigger.”

– Wafaa Alwan, a resettled refugee from Iraq, describing the impact of *Artisans For Hope*, a newcomer arts group in her host community of Boise, Idaho

### **Introduction and Background Information**

When I drafted and submitted my capstone thesis proposal in June of 2015, I planned to contact groups of newcomers throughout the United States who were getting together to maintain the traditional arts and crafts-making skills that they learned and practiced in their countries of origin. I broadly defined newcomers as resettled refugees as well as immigrants. I planned to contact the groups through social media and email, have them answer a few questions about their group in an online survey, and then follow up with a telephone interview to learn additional details about them. The goal of my project was to ascertain information about the groups such as how and why they initially formed, how many group members regularly participate, what activities they do, what traditional skills and crafts they sustain and preserve,

and how these groups benefit their members and the communities in which they exist. And that's just to name a few of the topics that interested me. I proposed to use the information that I gathered to create a website that helped these groups network and connect with each other to share best practices. Beyond that, I proposed that the website would generate positive awareness of these newcomer arts and crafts groups among the broader US population and generate interest in learning more about the particular ethnic and cultural traditions that I assumed newcomers were actively sustaining.

With each passing week and each new group that I interviewed, my understanding of what it meant to "sustain" something expanded and evolved. As I will describe in further detail in my analysis, I learned more about the variety of complex reasons why these groups get together and the benefits experienced by newcomers who participate in them.

In this reflection paper, I will explain my reasons for selecting this topic, my methodology for conducting my research, the results of my analysis of the information I gathered, what I learned from my literature review, and how and why I created a website to summarize it all. Additionally, I will explain how these groups benefit their members and the communities in which they exist, what they are sustaining and how it contributes to the field of cultural sustainability, and most importantly, why they deserve to be valued and supported.

I currently live in Jacksonville, Florida, and I have lived most of my life in northeast Florida between the Daytona Beach area and Jacksonville. My grandfather was a Cuban immigrant to the US who escaped the rise of Fidel Castro in the 1950's, so I have always felt that a tiny part of myself and my personality came from some faraway, tropical place, and growing up, I yearned to travel and learn more about faraway places. I completed a Bachelor's degree in Cultural

Anthropology from the University of North Florida in Jacksonville in 2009. As an undergraduate student, I started exploring volunteer opportunities available within my community. I volunteered at a homeless shelter and a food bank, but I didn't feel entirely fulfilled. I began volunteering with refugee resettlement agencies as a mentor and friend to families of newly-arrived refugees, helping them with all aspects of their new life in Jacksonville and the United States. Each family I met and visited had questions they wanted to ask, stories they wanted to tell, and mementos and treasured items they wanted to share from the places and lives they had left behind. Meeting the families made me wonder what my own grandfather's experience had been like as he left Cuba and moved to the US in the 1950's, and volunteering started me down a lifelong career path advocating for newcomers. After graduation, I worked full-time with a resettlement agency helping newcomers find their first jobs in Jacksonville. I remember the role was a challenge; although resettled refugees came with a variety of practical and hands-on skills - such as farming, construction, sewing, and weaving - the skills did not easily translate into paid employment within a service-oriented US economy.

In 2010, my husband and I moved to Thailand, where we volunteered and worked with ethnic Karen refugees from Myanmar (Burma). Nestled among jagged mountains and dense, steamy jungles, a few hundred-thousand refugees had fled ethnic persecution and were living in remote camps just inside the relative safety of the Thailand border. There, they had been waiting for years and even decades in some cases for an undetermined resolution to their situation, such as resettlement abroad to a Western country, quasi-citizenship in Thailand, or even forced repatriation back to the war-torn villages they had abandoned so many years before. It was in those refugee camps that I first watched in awe as Karen women wove by hand on backstrap

looms, turning spools of loose threads into clothing and fabrics with ornate, colorful designs. They sat on the floors of their bamboo shelters, often keeping watch over a sleeping baby or a charcoal stove out of the corner of one eye, while their hands tirelessly and methodically worked the rods of the loom back and forth to turn chaos into art, one woven line at a time. I had never seen looms or weaving up close until that experience, but I was mesmerized by both the skill and the beauty of it.

When I returned to the US in 2012, I was rehired by the same resettlement agency in Jacksonville, this time in a youth orientation role where I met with recently-resettled families to enroll their children into the public education system. I visited each family on multiple occasions, and I started to become aware of a trend that I had not fully noticed before. Resettlement agencies focused on helping adult men obtain employment outside of the home; children enrolled in schools and quickly made new friends and adapted to life in the US; but women – the older sisters, mothers, and even grandmothers – stayed at home, day after day. This was due to any combination of reasons: perhaps their English proficiency was limited, or they did not have access to transportation, or they were raising infants or young children, or culturally they were expected to remain in the home and tend to domestic chores. Whatever the reason or reasons, I noticed that women were showing signs of boredom, loneliness, homesickness, disappointment, and even resentment about their current situation and new life in the US. I felt a strong desire to help them in some way, to make them feel more welcomed, to give them an outlet for creative expression and social interaction, and to give them hope and purpose.

In 2013, I enrolled in the Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability (MACS) program at Goucher College to learn more about working alongside communities to advocate on their behalf

and help them sustain the cultural elements that are important to them. Later that year, I tried to organize a group of resettled refugee men and women in Jacksonville, primarily from Burma, who came together to maintain traditional fiber arts practices such as Karen weaving as well as knitting and crocheting. In addition, there was a Colombian family who made necklaces and jewelry out of beads and repurposed materials. The group, which we collectively named *Hope Through Common Threads*, met informally at each others' homes and apartments, usually once or twice per month. I solicited donations of raw materials from coworkers and friends, and I even applied for and received a \$1000 grant from the Awesome Foundation. The refugee resettlement agency I worked for acted as the group's fiscal sponsor to receive the grant.

Ultimately, *Hope Through Common Threads* failed and disbanded for a number of reasons, some of which I did not fully understand at the time but can appreciate now in hindsight. First of all, transportation was an issue. Jacksonville is the largest city in America when measured geographically in square miles, and resettled refugees live in neighborhoods spread throughout the city, so most group members could not attend a meeting unless I personally picked them up and drove them to it. Next, most group members did not speak English very well. The women of various ethnicities in Burma could speak to each other in the national Burmese language, but that made the Colombian family feel like outsiders. Also, a Karen woman who I had hoped would embrace her traditional Karen weaving suffered from diabetes and had pain in her arms and hands which prevented her from weaving for more than a few minutes at a time. Next, the group did not have any projects they that were working on together. Each person brought a bag of raw materials and half-completed projects to the meetings, and they sat on the floor of an apartment eating donuts and talking, but very little craft-making was ever done. Also, because I was eager

to see the group grow and thrive, I happily supplied any raw materials that any member said they needed, even if it meant that I purchased them with my own money. The \$1000 grant from the Awesome Foundation was used to purchase four identical sewing machines from a national craft store. I thought if they owned a sewing machine, they might work independently on projects at home, since there were no clear goals or projects being worked on when the group did get together. I naïvely gave the machines away to any group member who raised their hand and said they wanted one, without ever asking them if they knew how to use a sewing machine or what they intended to make with it.

The final downfall of *Hope Through Common Threads* came in the spring of 2014. Jacksonville hosted its second annual OneSpark festival downtown, which is a crowd-sourcing event. Innovators, artists, musicians, start-ups, non-profit organizations, and anyone who had an idea to share set up a display table, and for five days from early morning until late at night, tens of thousands of Jacksonville residents and visitors wandered through the event, learned about the ideas, and voted for their favorites on a phone app. Hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of cash and in-kind technical support were then allocated to individuals and groups, based on the proportional number of votes that they each received. After many months of planning, and with the generous help of a dozen family members, friends, coworkers, and volunteers, we built a replica of a bamboo shelter I had seen in the refugee camps in Thailand. Karen people set up a backstrap loom and demonstrated weaving, and the walls of the shelter were lined with handmade and traditional fabrics, such as Ethiopian dresses and Burmese woven skirts. I had business cards and brochures printed and organized shifts for resettled refugees and volunteers to be at the table to tell our story to visitors, and everything seemed to be going well.



However, at this time, one woman from Burma who was older and served as an unofficial leader and matriarch of the group was having marital issues. Her husband felt that she spent too much time with *Hope Through Common Threads* and not enough time on domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and raising their young children. He had been tolerating her participation though, because he thought it might turn into an opportunity to sell handmade items at craft shows to supplement their income. However, rather than encourage his wife to knit items to sell, he had family members in Burma send a large collection of traditional clothing and shoes to the US. These items might have been handmade, or might have been machine-made in a factory - I never found out either way. He then told me they were “samples,” and they were ready to start their business of buying items from Burma and selling them in the US at a profit. This caused conflict in the group, because group members now had differing goals and motivations for attending. I had assumed that group members were there to maintain their traditional craft-making skills, and any selling of items at a craft market would come later. When I explained this to the woman’s husband, he became angry and forbade his wife to participate in the group any further, and the couple eventually separated from each other. I even suspect he took out some of his anger on one of the sewing machines that was purchased with the Awesome Foundation grant, because their oldest son returned it to me broken and unusable one day without any explanation. Even the craft store was unable to repair it with replacement parts. Finally, throughout the entire five-day OneSpark event, *Hope Through Common Threads* received enough votes to earn approximately \$300 of the support money. However, my husband and I had spent \$500 of our own money to register for the event and set up the display, not to mention all of the hard work and time spent by group members and volunteers who assisted at the event.

As best as I can recall, *Hope Through Common Threads* never met again as a group after OneSpark.

For my capstone project, I selected the topic of researching and interviewing refugee and immigrant craft groups for many reasons, not the least of which was to find out how groups had successfully overcome the challenges that *Hope Through Common Threads* had encountered. Also, as a professional working with resettled refugees, I am interested in learning how newcomers engage in traditional arts and cultural activities after the initial needs of shelter, food, healthcare, employment, and self-sufficiency are met. As Kristin Congdon wrote in a chapter entitled “Democratizing Art Therapy” in the edited book *Putting Folklore to Use*, “traditional art helps to provide an individual with a sense of place, identity, community, and history. It functions to express values, creating stability and giving direction” (p. 142). Finally, I have recently discovered a personal interest and appreciation of fiber arts, folk arts, and hand-crafted items, and the capstone project was a great opportunity to further explore and develop this interest.

However, I cannot take credit for coming up with the actual idea of developing a website about newcomer arts groups as my capstone project. In 2014, I attended the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society (AFS) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I participated in a forum (along with two of my capstone committee members) entitled, “Common Threads: Weaving Shared Resources Into a National Collaboration,” which proposed developing an online clearinghouse website and discussion forum that featured newcomer arts groups, what activities they did, what problems and challenges they faced, and best practices for engaging the local communities to generate awareness and support. A group of folklorists, community leaders, and newcomer artisans attended the forum discussion and contributed valuable comments and suggestions, and

many of them have done similar work with groups of refugees and immigrants as well as traditional artisans for many years. Everyone agreed that an online clearinghouse website was needed and would be beneficial, because refugees are resettled to cities and towns nationwide, and resettlement agencies often have no systems in place to address newcomers' well-being. Many individuals fall through the cracks and struggle with integration into their new life in the US. It takes an entire community to address these issues, and too often, newcomers become too busy with the American way of life to engage with their cultural heritage. In describing the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) Arts for New Immigrants Program Sewing Circle, Laura Marcus Green, one of my capstone committee members, said "pockets of refugee and immigrant communities gather for cultural celebrations and social visits when they can find the time amidst the struggle to build new lives in the fast-paced grind of contemporary American life... The Sewing Circle is one way to reclaim a little piece of the community living and quiet time that was once commonplace everywhere in the world" (*In My Country* p. 5). Working with newcomers is something I want to strive to pursue as a lifelong career, but beyond just the resettlement process; I want to encourage newcomers to blend their traditional practices with the American ways of life on a regular basis, so that they can integrate on their own terms. Although the idea to create a website was not my own, I am determined to continue working toward the goals expounded at the 2014 AFS Annual Meeting and to develop this idea that has been proposed and discussed previously in different forums.

## **Methodology**

Having volunteered and worked in refugee resettlement since 2008, I saw firsthand that newcomers often feel like they are on the fringe of their host community, especially in the beginning after their initial arrival in the US. They are new to the area and living within it, but they do not know anyone and struggle to create connections with the broader community. I have grown close to many of the families I have worked with over the years, especially the women who have invited me to visit them in their apartments and homes, to eat lunch with them, and to just spend time talking and socializing. The benefits of these personal interactions are best described by Laura Marcus Green who wrote in the Fall-Winter 2006 edition of *Voices: The Journal of the New York Folklore Society*, “I worked in the field daily, which was not only a rich ethnographic and personal experience, but also the best strategy for continued access to the artists and communities” (p. 2).

Regardless of where they come from, women can find common ground and shared interests, whether it is talking about shoes or talking about hand-made items. I have seen firsthand that resettled refugee women want to hold onto something that is important to them, such as their culture, and they want to talk about it and share it. I have found that food is one of the most common cultural elements to be sustained. Newcomers quickly locate and support a variety of stores and markets within a metropolitan area that cater to their need for traditional and ethnic ingredients, and I have enjoyed countless home-cooked ethnic dishes with women while listening to their stories of the past and their dreams for the future. However, I have found that traditional arts and crafts are more difficult for newcomers to maintain on their own for a

variety of reasons. Sometimes, they feel like they do not need to maintain them, now that any functional product they need can be easily purchased at a store. Others do not have the time to dedicate to arts and crafts, or they do not have the money to buy raw materials, or they do not know where to buy them within their new community. Also, some newcomers would prefer to work in a group setting rather than alone at home, but they have not formed many connections to other newcomers within their community, so they store their traditional arts and crafts in the back of a closet with the hope of reconnecting with them at some point in the future.

In planning for my capstone project, I made a number of assumptions. First of all, I thought that all of the groups I interviewed would be sustaining some form of traditional arts and crafts. I thought that group facilitators would be there to help newcomers connect to resources throughout the community to enable them to maintain their traditional practices. I also assumed that most groups would have one or more sources of ongoing funding, even if it was a relatively small amount, to maintain operations and purchase raw materials. And finally, I assumed that newcomers would be actively involved in sales events and would hold leadership roles with decision-making authority, especially within groups that have existed for a number of years.

By the summer of 2015, when I was ready to begin my capstone project, I already knew of seven or eight refugee and immigrant craft groups that I had been following on social media for a few years. I never interacted with the groups, but I followed them on Facebook or read their websites to learn more about their activities. In September, I even attended a Google Hangout hosted by one of the groups to promote their Indiegogo fund-raising campaign. From those experiences, as well as what I learned in my Social Networks and New Media course in the MACS program, I realized how important and valuable social media could be to capturing the

attention of an audience beyond a group's local community and turning the group's activities into a cause that people could support.

To compile a list of potential groups to interview, I searched the Internet for refugee and immigrant craft groups that were maintaining traditional arts and crafts practices, with an emphasis on fiber arts. I also searched for groups that were selling traditional products online. I tried to identify groups from a variety of states and regions throughout the US and Canada. I searched for contact information such as phone numbers or email addresses on their websites or social media pages. My search produced a list of approximately forty potential groups, although I only intended to interview ten or fifteen of them. I initially contacted the groups by sending them an email that described my project and the website that would be created based on my research. I wanted the groups to know that they would also benefit from their participation, because the website would generate awareness of their activities which might in turn lead to additional funding and support. In the email, I also included a link to a survey to answer a few basic questions about their group. I created a simple survey on SurveyMonkey with questions concerning numbers of participants, ethnic backgrounds, types of activities, and funding and support. Most importantly I asked if they would agree to a phone interview to share more detailed information. It took several weeks for groups to respond to the surveys, and I had to pursue some of them by sending the introductory email multiple times. I persisted because it was important to seek responses from a wide variety of groups. I hoped to demonstrate that, while groups might share a common set of goals, they might also have many different purposes for getting together, and might engage in many different kinds of activities to achieve those goals.

As I was finalizing the list of groups to interview and preparing my questions, an unexpected event happened in my personal and professional life. My employer, one of the three refugee resettlement agencies in Jacksonville, was notified of a cut in government funding that supported its youth development program. My position was eliminated, along with those of five coworkers; so I was laid off from the job I had been doing for the past three years. Although I had some issues with the resettlement agency and some of the ways it carried out its operations, I had always been happy with the job and loved working with recently-resettled families and their children. This was a hard time for me, because I was dedicated to my work and missed my coworkers as well as the families who benefited from the services of our department. It seemed painfully ironic that I was pursuing a degree in Cultural Sustainability, and yet my own career was dependent upon outside funding sources that could be cut at a moment's notice – the very definition of unsustainable.

Although I continued to visit a few families and volunteer on the side, I was unemployed for two months and spent most of the time at home. As I look back and reflect upon the experience, this time off was extremely valuable because I was able to be flexible with every group that I interviewed. I was able to accommodate their schedule for interviews in the mornings, afternoons, or evening, regardless of their time zone. Furthermore, at a time when I felt like I had lost my own purpose, conducting these interviews helped me cope with unemployment and gave me something on which to focus. Every day, I had an agenda of interviews and capstone tasks that I needed to accomplish, and my research kept me engaged with resettled refugees, even if they were not in my own community.

I will admit that I was nervous before each interview and sometimes did not sleep well the night before. I was concerned that I would sound like I did not know what I was talking about or that the interviewee would not understand the questions. Also, I was concerned that their responses to my questions would be vague or that they would not be willing to share information about their group or spend sufficient time speaking with me. However, for most of the interviews, I felt very comfortable speaking with the people. Each interview lasted for about an hour. I did not tell them much information about myself beyond a brief explanation of the goals of the project, although one or two interviewees asked why I was interested in this topic and what experience I had with resettled refugees in order to establish a common frame of reference. I noticed that my interview skills became more efficient as the project progressed, because I developed a set of “core questions” that I asked each interviewee. I listened intently and encouraged them to talk openly, and I found that I could relate to them. Not only did I interview group facilitators and newcomer artisans participating in the groups, but I also expanded the scope of the project to interview representatives of sustainable models of other types of craft groups, representatives of organizations offering technical support, and folklorists. Although I originally intended to conduct ten to fifteen interviews, I ended up doing more than twenty. I wanted to get a broad sense of what newcomer arts groups were doing nationwide, and some groups referred me to other groups during the course of the interviews.

I did not record the interviews, although I would do so if I had a chance to do the project over again. I found that it was difficult to type my notes quickly enough while interviewees were speaking, and when I reviewed my notes after the interview had concluded, I found that I could not remember exactly what they had said or how they had phrased it, and I might have missed



important names and details. Partially for that reason, I followed up with the interviewees afterwards by email with additional questions for clarification and expanded details. In general, groups responded well to the project, although there were a few stumbling blocks along the way. For example, some groups took several weeks or months to sign and return consent forms granting me permission to use the information that I had gathered during the interviews. Also, some groups assigned interns or entry-level employees to be interviewed when they did not have sufficient historical knowledge about their group's activities and had no authority to sign the consent forms anyway.

I defined a successful interview as one in which we covered the core questions that I needed to ask in order to gain a good understanding of the group and its activities. Some of the interviewees shared information beyond my intended scope of the interview, but I encouraged them to continue because I could hear their passion. If interviewees seemed eager to share photos of their group, agreed to sign and return the consent forms, and seemed excited about the website I planned to develop by the end of the project, then I considered the interview a success.

I felt it was important to interview refugee and immigrant artisans of the groups and not just facilitators; I really wanted to hear from some members about how they benefited from their participation, why and how they originally joined, what activities they enjoyed doing, and what they did with any income they generated from selling products. In some cases, I did conference calls with both group facilitators and group members in the same call to make them feel as comfortable as possible. Group members talked passionately about the bond that they had with their group. Some expressed that they wanted to eventually start their own businesses, and their

participation in the group was a stepping stone to help them accomplish that. In general, group members whom I interviewed encouraged me to share their stories and generate awareness about their group, because they had a desire to see their group continue to grow and receive community support.

In addition to newcomer arts groups, my capstone committee also suggested that I interview representatives of other types or models of craft groups. These groups, whether their members are refugees, immigrants, Native Americans, or American descendants of newcomers from previous generations, all encounter similar challenges and must devise creative solutions and best practices to overcome those challenges. Some of the people I interviewed stated that their groups have existed for three decades or longer, so their success can serve as an inspiration to newcomer arts groups that have formed more recently. My committee members suggested some groups in which they knew key contacts personally or had worked with them in the past. Also, I wanted to interview organizations that provided technical support to newcomer arts groups, such as business trainings or assistance with marketing and selling products. I met one of the founders of a technical support model during my last residency at Goucher College. Another technical support model was suggested to me during an interview with a newcomer arts group because the organization had served as an inspirational model to them as a business incubator.

I also felt it was important to interview folklorists. Many of them are doing the same work with newcomer artisans as the group facilitators are doing, and they also have a special set of skills that make them effective at community building. The folklorists I interviewed talked about the programs that their respective states and state arts councils offered, how they help individual

artisans, and how they could help facilitators and newcomer artisans make connections to other resources that are available to them. They also talked about how they are inspired by newcomer artisans, including their perseverance and the knowledge and skills that they bring with them to the US. Most group facilitators I interviewed were unaware of what folklorists do or how they could help, so there are definitely opportunities for fostering potential partnerships.

I connected with the State Folklorist from Florida to learn what sources of support are available for newcomer artisans. I found out that there are programs in Florida that offer stipends to newcomer artisans to enable them to sustain and promote their work. Through that initial connection, I assisted a Karen husband and wife with demonstrating backstrap weaving and traditional Karen musical instruments at the Florida Folklife Festival in 2015, where they were paid for their time. Also, I made an announcement about weaving at the church where most resettled Karen refugees worship, and a middle-aged woman named Ku Mu Paw approached me afterwards and said that she was interested in continuing her weaving in Jacksonville. I helped her apply for a Florida Folklife Apprenticeship Program grant, and she was selected as one of five master artisans for 2015. She has been teaching backstrap weaving skills to a teenage girl named Eh Dow Paw. The two women are not related, but they are neighbors in the same apartment building. Together, Ku Mu Paw and I have been attending monthly meetings of the Jacksonville Weaver's Guild and recently attended the statewide Florida Tropical Weavers' Conference in March. Through these activities, Ku Mu Paw has enjoyed meeting other weavers who appreciate the art form, connecting to new sources of raw materials, and learning about the different types of looms and weaving techniques that are available. It is my hope that Ku Mu Paw and Eh Dow Paw will be able to attend the 2016 AFS Annual Meeting in Miami and demonstrate their weaving

for a national audience. From these experiences, I have definitely learned the importance of making connections and forming partnerships to learn about the resources that are available.

Returning to the capstone project, I felt that it was important for groups to be accurately represented on the website, so I wrote summaries of my notes and impressions from each interview and emailed them to the interviewees to review. The majority of them revised the summaries by adding additional details and correcting historical dates and places. This step added a bit more work to the interviews, and in some cases, the groups significantly revised their summaries. This caused an internal struggle for me, because at times I felt like I was giving away control of the project and the website content to the groups themselves. Ultimately though, I wanted the groups to be represented in the way that they wanted to be on the website, so I accepted all of their changes and revisions. Based on several classes in the MACS program, including Cultural Documentation Field Lab and Ethnographic Methods: Visual, I felt it was my responsibility and moral obligation to include the groups in each step of the research process, from the initial surveys, to the interviews, to the website summaries, and ultimately to the online discussion forums. Therefore, the capstone project became a form of collaborative ethnography, which Luke Lassiter defined in *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* as “an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process... from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process” (p. 15).

I also struggled with how much information to include in the summaries; if they were too long, visitors to the website might not read through them; and if they were not detailed enough, groups might not learn from each other. I erred on the side of writing summaries that are

definitely a bit lengthy, but I added headers of two or three sentences at the top of each group's page so that visitors can quickly get an idea of a group's activities and decide for themselves if they want to read further. And lastly, every group that I interviewed was included on the website, because I wanted to generate as much awareness of newcomer arts groups as possible and give something back to each group that agreed to participate in the project by engaging in an interview.

I was somewhat intimidated to actually create a website, but website development was a skill that I wanted to learn as part of my graduate degree, and I will likely use it again in the future. There were plenty of free options available online for making basic websites, but for the functionality that I needed with multiple pages and discussion forums, I had to pay for annual hosting with StartLogic and the use of Weebly site design software. I am glad I did though, because the software was very user-friendly, and it created a website that is colorful, simple to navigate, and easy to update in the future if necessary. It is my hope that newcomer arts groups will use [www.newcomerarts.net](http://www.newcomerarts.net) to connect with each other and share their best practices. I intend to share the website with all of the groups that are included in it as well as my personal contacts, and metatags should direct search engines such as Google to it for anyone seeking information about newcomer arts. The information will now be publicly available if newcomers in other cities are thinking about forming a group or contacting existing groups for advice, or if the broader community wants to learn more about newcomer arts groups and how to support them. Also, I hope that individuals who have been working in this field for a long time, such as folklorists and artisans, can bring their expertise to the website and discussion forums.

I see my role with the website as a moderator, creating the platform that enables connections among groups as well as between groups and various types of support. I plan to continue to moderate the forums, respond to comments, and add any new groups that express an interest in being included by gathering the relevant data and adding additional web pages as needed. As it was described in a 2013 report entitled *Building an Arts and Culture Support Network for Newcomer Artists in Central New York State*, “Having a group of artisans that are so willing to learn from each other and who are so appreciative of other cultures translates into more flexible and dynamic opportunities... It can also allow artists to find points of connection, discover what is really unique about what they do; it can serve as a powerful mental, social, and economic resource” (p. 13).

### **A Review of Relevant Literature**

Throughout the entire capstone project, I read a long list of books and articles which gave me a good foundation and historical context for my project, helped me focus my interview questions, and informed my analysis of the data that I gathered during the interviews. The readings I selected came from a wide variety of sources. Some were required readings during previous classes in the MACS program, such as my first course in cultural sustainability. Some were recommended by my capstone committee, and others were even written by my committee members themselves. Some readings I found by searching through library catalogues, and others were referenced in the bibliography sections of books and articles, which meant that my literary review became an ongoing journey of new discoveries. The readings also introduced me to a

variety of interesting topics related to my project. At times, I honestly felt overwhelmed by the variety of interrelated topics and different directions my capstone project could have gone, such as art as therapy, ethnographic marketing, fair trade, traditional folk arts, economic development, and more.

In addition, I also realized that many of these topics are not new. People have been debating and seeking answers to questions related to newcomer artisans for years, if not decades. There are no one-size-fits-all answers available, because every artisan or group of artisans has a different purpose. One observation I noticed was that there seemed to be more literature available about working with individual artisans and less information about working with groups of artisans or collectives, with the exception of international co-ops.

In total, I read nearly fifty books and articles, so I could not possibly summarize or cite them all. However, there were a few noteworthy ones that deserve to be mentioned. *Newcomer Arts: A Strategy for Successful Integration*, a publication that was revised and updated in 2007 by the Institute for Cultural Partnerships, was a comprehensive and inspiring guide for this project, as it describes how resettlement agencies can identify traditional artisans among their clientele, support and promote their work, and connect them with local and national resources. *The Art of Community*, a collaborative publication of the Institute for Cultural Partnerships and Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, as well as Pia Moriarty's publication entitled *Immigrant Participatory Arts* describe how different groups and projects throughout the US are engaging communities in participatory arts, and how those projects promote cultural expression among participants. Jon Hawkes' publication entitled *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning* describes how communities

continuously adapt and change based on the surrounding environment and also describes the need for diversity and pluralism within our communities to enhance our societal values. Written in 2003, the Urban Institute's research report entitled *Investing in Creativity: A Study of the Support Structure for U.S. Artisans* describes the various resources and support networks available to artisans to promote their work, as well as the challenges that artisans encounter. Sally Peterson's article entitled "Translating Experience and the Reading of a Story Cloth," written in 1988 for the *Journal of American Folklore*, describes how Hmong story cloths were revived in refugee camps in Thailand. The Hmong made them as a way to pass the time in the camps as well as to generate a source of much-needed income, and American missionaries aided them by marketing and selling the story cloths abroad.

I also appreciated Kathleen Mundell's publication entitled *Guide to Ethnographic Marketing*, which helped me realize how my skills as a cultural worker can be used to help groups tell their story, market their products, and educate the consumer about the intangible value of the products that they are buying. Since it is so much easier and cheaper today to buy something that is mass-produced, newcomer artisans need somehow to be able to express their story to consumers, so that the consumers realize they are supporting a local business owner or artisan who has overcome significant challenges. Also, I was inspired by the book entitled *Cultural Expression & Grassroots Development*, edited by Charles David Kley Meyer, which describes how groups work towards collective goals to achieve a shared sense of empowerment and identity. In that book, Kley Meyer deepened my understanding of how cultural movements happen by writing that "cultural expression generates cultural energy, which in turn mobilizes individuals, groups, and communities to social action... It stirs their imaginations and their longing to



transform their lives... Cultural energy helps people to reach deep down and find strength and resolve they were not sure they had” (p. 200). And finally, in *Weavings of War: Fabrics of Memory*, Ariel Cooke and Marsha MacDowell have compiled inspiring stories describing how artisans and groups have used art as a weapon to resist oppression and recount their stories of survival.

### **An Analysis of the Interviews**

When I analyzed the data that I obtained during the interviews, I noticed a number of similarities and common themes among the groups, the newcomers who participate, and the facilitators. The first common theme that I observed is that many of the groups initially formed as an extension of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and some of the original founders and facilitators were volunteers or paid teachers who observed that their students had a talent or interest in sewing, knitting, or weaving. I was surprised to learn that most of the groups were not formed as a project of a refugee resettlement agency, although many of them have since established partnerships with their local agencies whose staff regularly refer newcomers to them. Interestingly, some of the groups started in 2008 and 2009 during a financial recession in the US when unemployment was relatively high, and it was a particularly difficult time for newcomers to find jobs (as I recall from my role as an Employment Specialist during those years). Possibly for that reason, a number of the groups focus on practical job skills development, such as training group members how to sew, knit, operate a sewing machine, or make jewelry in order to obtain employment, as well as how to generate supplemental income by selling handmade products.

Therefore, most groups that I interviewed, especially if they were formed within the past few years, are not focused on incorporating traditional arts practices or traditional cultural expression into their group activities.

The facilitators I interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds, including ESL teachers and refugee resettlement volunteers as previously mentioned, as well as stay-at-home mothers, social workers, health workers, church members, and missionaries. The majority of the facilitators were women, and many of them do not get paid for their involvement with the groups. Some facilitators have other full-time or part-time jobs, but they are dedicated to the groups and expend their time and energy for free or for small stipends. During the interviews, I could hear their passion, and I could also relate to them as they described their frustration with challenges the groups encountered. In regards to the newcomers who participate in the groups, they are also primarily women, and on average they have lived in the US for less than ten years. Most of the groups are multicultural, and group members come from a diverse variety of ethnicities, nationalities, languages, religions, educational backgrounds, and skill sets. This means that practicing English and engaging in cross-cultural exchange is both a challenge and an opportunity for most groups.

Group facilitators and artisans expressed a number of common challenges that they encountered. Many of the challenges were logistical, such as where and how often to meet, how to assist group members with transportation to the meetings or sales events, how to overcome language barriers and cultural differences, and where to store raw materials when they're not in use. Not surprisingly, nearly every group mentioned a need for additional funding and community support as well as a concern for their group's long-term sustainability. For groups

that focus on selling handmade products, facilitators and artisans cited a lack of appreciation or understanding among their local communities and potential customers about the amount of time and effort that goes into making a handmade product or traditional art form. Groups that sell regularly also have the added challenges of accounting, such as tracking which artisan sold which products, how much their raw materials cost to make sure the sales are profitable, what percentage of the proceeds the artisans are entitled to, and how often to pay the artisans. And finally, some groups mentioned that a lack of commitment among artisans, volunteers, and even facilitators could cause the group to lose focus, change goals, or even stop meeting and cease to exist.

Despite all of these challenges, I learned that the groups share a number of best practices in common. First of all, most groups have mastered the challenge of keeping operating costs to a minimum by making use of donated raw materials as well as upcycled, recycled, and repurposed materials. When they solicit donations from partners within their local communities, they are specific about what they need, including the type of material, size, color, quantity, etc. Nearly all of the groups use social media to connect with their local communities and forge relationships with new support partners. This is especially true for groups that emphasize selling items, since they often include an activity calendar on their website to tell potential customers where they will be and what handmade products will be available for sale. When these groups set up booths at arts and crafts markets, it is a noted best practice for refugee and immigrant artisans to be present to share their stories so that the customers feel a deeper connection to the handmade items that they are buying and the cause they are supporting. Some groups study fashion trends and try to predict what their customers will want to buy, and they add ethnic and

traditional design elements to American clothing and accessories. Also, when group members sell items, some noted best practices are for a minimum standard of quality to be agreed upon ahead of time, seed grants to be given to artisans which are then repaid when finished products are sold, and for a fixed percentage of the proceeds from sales to go back to the group for purchasing additional raw materials. Based on my interviews, there was a significant range in the percentage of proceeds from sales that group members received and the percentage that went back to the group. At the upper end, some groups paid members 100% of the proceeds from their sales, and at the low end, some group members received only 50%, with the other 50% being retained by the group for raw materials and operating expenses.

In addition to focusing on skills development or selling handmade products, many of the groups also serve as an unofficial integration resource center for their members, with volunteers on hand to schedule medical appointments, explain utility bills, and interpret legal and tax documents. Not only do the group meetings serve as a safe space for artisans to discuss design ideas, share what projects they have been working on at home, drop off finished products, and pick up additional raw materials, but many of the groups also host classes and trainings in small business development, financial literacy, health and wellness, and more. Some groups even offer free childcare at their meetings. And finally, some groups incorporate projects that encourage self-expression among the artisans and self-reflection upon their experiences as refugees and immigrants (such as story cloths), although as previously mentioned, this type of activity tends to occur in groups that have been well-established for a number of years.

When I analyzed the data that I obtained during the interviews, I also noted a few critiques about the groups. First, most of the groups did not do any kind of assessment of what knowledge,

skills, or talents the newcomers already possessed. Some groups assumed they did not know how to sew or did not know how to design or make anything, so it was the obligation of facilitators and volunteers to “teach” them a skill. From my experience with resettled refugees, many of them already have extensive skills in sewing, knitting, or weaving, because making clothing or household items by hand was a necessity in their countries of origin. I also know that many newcomers are just happy to be included in a social group after they arrive, and they might be reluctant to tell facilitators about the skills they already possess, especially if their English proficiency is limited. On the other hand, some newcomers do not want to use their existing skills and are interested in learning new techniques.

Next, I noted that some of the groups do not provide the group members with any opportunities for decision-making or creative input. Some groups had American volunteers design the products, and newcomer artisans were given the pre-cut materials along with step-by-step instructions for assembling the finished products. Often, the facilitators of these groups described the artisans as “vulnerable” or “unemployable” or “in need of our help,” which caused me to tense up a bit. As one of Karin Tice’s interviewees said to her during her research with the Kuna people of Panama for her publication entitled *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy*, “you can tell them how to sew a fish, but do not try telling them what kind of fish to sew or you will not get back good *molas*” (p. 86). Although resettled refugees and immigrants are new to our country and certainly have their challenges and struggles, as human beings, they deserve the opportunity to be empowered to utilize the knowledge, skills, and creative talents that they possess. However, on the other hand, some groups gave their members too many handouts, such as raw materials or free sewing machines (as I once did with *Hope Through Common*

*Threads*) without any accountability or specific project goals in mind, and this can create a sense of dependency and entitlement. I also noted that one or two groups gave artisans 100% of proceeds from selling their items, which meant that these groups always needed a steady supply of donations or ongoing financial support to buy raw materials. I got the impression that some facilitators, in an honest attempt to not burden artisans with more challenges than they might already have in their life, are not transparent about the challenges that the group is facing. They might share success stories with them, but they keep information about challenges to themselves, which once again limits newcomers' opportunities to use experiences and different perspectives to address the group's challenges.

### **Recommendations**

First of all, after groups have been in existence for a number of years, I recommend that they consider implementing a democratic organizational model such as a co-operative. My literature review shaped my understanding of co-ops, and a number of the groups I interviewed are actually functioning as co-ops in some ways, even if they are not aware of that fact. According to a 2011 report by the Canadian Co-operative Association entitled *Ethno-cultural and Immigrant Co-operatives in Canada*, "co-operatives are often formed where challenging circumstances exist and a group of people with a common need agree to develop a collective solution" (CCA p. 5).

Co-ops provide an equal opportunity for members to participate in market research, business planning, quality control, and decision-making roles. Co-ops receive community support from economic development organizations, women's groups, places of worship, community

organizations, and local businesses. Government agencies also help with capital costs for machines and equipment, project monitoring and evaluation, advocacy, marketing and sales, and much more. Co-op members are able to be more effective when they sell in a group instead of individually because they equally share expenses and tasks. Normally, a portion of proceeds from all sales goes back into the co-op as well for the benefit of the entire group. As Katherine O'Donnell wrote about indigenous weaving co-ops in Mexico in *Weaving Transnational Solidarity*, co-ops are "one mechanism that women use in order to sell their artisan products to secure economic survival for themselves and their families and to sustain community and women's decision-making... Women have come together to weave with the intention of earning more money than they could by selling their items privately on the street... In the course of their work together, women share information, talk politics and, therefore, form working groups that have personal, economic, and political roots and goals" (p. 131). I feel that newcomer arts groups demonstrate some aspects of a co-op already, and as they have been in existence for a number of years, they can shift more of their group operations towards a co-op model.

I researched a number of international co-ops through my literature review, such as Kuna *mola* makers of Panama in *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy*; Chilean and Peruvian *arpillera* makers in *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love*; indigenous weaving groups in Mexico in *Weaving Transnational Solidarity*; and various women's co-ops around the world in *In Her Hands*. Within a co-op, everyone participates equally in a project and shares a common goal, which overcomes any ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic differences the members of the co-op might have. Everyone in the co-op shares an equal status, and artisans often get paid a fair hourly wage for their work. As a Chilean *arpillera* co-op member told Marjorie Agosin during an interview for

*Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love*, “In the workshops I never saw any kind of hierarchical system. There were no monitors or directors who gave instructions. The group chose the themes to work on and made all other decisions” (p. 49).

A group I wish I could have interviewed for this project is Malalay. According to a 2007 newspaper article in the *Vancouver Sun* about the history of Malalay (an Afghan women’s sewing and crafts co-operative in Canada), “with the vast majority of government-assisted refugees living on social assistance, the goal was to create a business specific to the women’s needs. To work, the job had to allow them the flexibility to continue in their traditional roles as wives and mothers, as well as provide an opportunity to contribute financially to the home, many for the first time. It also had to involve skills in which all the women – educated or not – could participate, and it had to fit a category accepted and respected by their Afghan men” (p. 2-3). This program was successful because group members felt a stronger sense of buy-in when they realized that it was designed with their specific needs in mind and was culturally relevant. The group started out making hand-tailored items and now uses industrial equipment to make custom-ordered home décor and tapestries. The group now has nearly fifty members, many of whom are single mothers who are trying to make ends meet and provide for their families.

Secondly, I recommend conducting a skills assessment of group members to gain a better understanding of the arts and crafts skills that they already possess, their motivations for joining a group, what topics they hope to cover, and the projects they want to work on. It is important that everyone who interacts with newcomer artisans appreciates all forms of education and skills they bring with them to the US, which is not just measured by the number of years of formal education received. As Javier Perez de Cuellar wrote in a report entitled *Our Creative Diversity*,



“The challenge to humanity is to adopt new ways of thinking, new ways of acting... to promote different paths of development, informed by a recognition of how cultural factors shape the way in which societies conceive their own futures... it means an open mind, an open heart, and a readiness to seek fresh definitions” (p. 11).

Next, after artisans have been in the groups for a while, I recommend that they be offered teaching positions or leadership roles if they are interested. In addition, if they are comfortable interacting with the public, I recommend that newcomers attend sales events as often as possible to tell their stories to potential customers. For groups that are actively selling at arts and crafts markets, I also recommend that they consider selling online as well to appeal to a broader audience. However, selling in a boutique store or at a market in-person is likely to be a more meaningful and mutually beneficial interaction for both the artisan and the customer. The artisan learns more about what customers are interested in buying, and they gain confidence by sharing their personal stories and describing the efforts that went into making the product. The customer gains a deeper understanding and appreciation for the product by meeting the artisan and learning about the cultural significance of the item they are purchasing.

Also, groups are always seeking new sources of funding and community support, although I would advise groups that funders tend to support projects with clearly-defined deliverables that promote professional or economic development as opposed to ongoing support for raw materials or rent for a meeting space. Therefore, I recommend that groups tailor their funding applications to the donors’ requirements and request funding for projects with clearly-defined timeframes and quantifiable deliverables.

Finally, I recommend that current and future newcomer arts groups consider enlisting the help of a cultural worker who can advocate on their behalf in a variety of ways. Since newcomer arts groups promote cultural exchange between members of the groups as well as between the groups and the broader communities in which they operate, it is beneficial to have a cultural worker who understands the cultural norms from both perspectives and can conducting marketing efforts on behalf of the artisans. As Kathleen Mundell described in the *Guide to Ethnographic Marketing*, “ethnographic marketing emphasizes building a cultural base of information through fieldwork and documentation, and developing promotional materials in collaboration with traditional artists... ethnographic marketing emphasizes documenting the cultural context in which work is created, uncovering not only the ‘how-to’s’ but the values that are so much a part of the traditional art form” (p. 2). A cultural worker can help educate the public about art forms, cultivate partnerships, write grants, connect artisans to training and development workshops, locate new markets for selling products, administer business transactions between artisans and customers, and contact local companies to solicit support and raw materials. As Patricia Wells wrote in a chapter entitled “Helping Craftsmen and Communities Survive: Folklore and Economic Development” in the edited book *Putting Folklore to Use*, “folklorists who have advocated the involvement of their profession in the marketing of folk art... broaden the market for folk arts by educating the general public regarding the forms and their aesthetic qualities and the complexity and skill required in the technical processes of object production” (p. 245). In addition, cultural workers are likely to be knowledgeable about local, regional, and national sources of support such as apprenticeship programs or arts councils.

## **Sustainability**

After analyzing the data from two dozen interviews with group facilitators, artisans, and folklorists, I now realize that it is challenging for groups of newcomers in the US to sustain traditional art forms and artistic techniques exactly as they practiced them in their countries of origin. There are a number of reasons for this, such as the difficulty in obtaining traditional raw materials, the limited market for selling traditional products, and the lack of time available to dedicate to artistic endeavors. Newcomers must continually adapt to their changing circumstances and current environment, such as a refugee camp or a new home in a busy metropolitan US city. Therefore, sustainability means that traditional art forms and artistic techniques are evolving and adapting to meet the needs of the present and not necessarily remaining static and unchanged.

However, based on my time living with and observing the Karen in refugee camps in Thailand, as well as my professional experiences working with resettled refugees from around the world, I propose that some newcomers simply want to “leave the past in the past,” especially when relocation means a significant change in most aspects of their lifestyle. Newcomers see America as the land of limitless opportunities, and I propose that it is entirely possible that newcomers do not want to be tied to their traditional ways of life from their former homelands. For example, during my time in the refugee camps, I saw that the Karen had to weave their clothing in Karen state as well as inside the refugee camps out of necessity. They needed clothing, and therefore, they needed to weave in order to make that clothing. First and foremost, their reasons for weaving were functional. Not only did they weave, but before doing so, they

also had to build the looms by hand out of wood and bamboo, grow cotton near their homes, and spin the thread from the cotton that they harvested. In the Thai refugee camps, they were able to buy the thread from Thai and Chinese sources, which eliminated their need to grow cotton and spin it themselves. However, the Karen still needed to weave the raw thread they purchased into wearable clothing. After arriving in the US, the resettled Karen refugees no longer have a compelling need to weave anything, because they have the discretionary income available to buy new clothing. If they still feel a need and desire to own and wear traditional clothing, they can now pay to have it made and shipped directly from Burma and Thailand to the US. For the Karen, the functional reasons for weaving no longer exist after resettlement to the US.

However, some Karen do continue to weave in the US, either in a group setting or within the privacy of their own home. And so, the main question at this point is, if groups of newcomer artisans are not sustaining their traditional artistic practices for the same reasons that they were doing so in their countries of origin, what exactly are they sustaining and why? What motivates them to participate in newcomer arts groups? My understanding of sustainability has evolved throughout my time in Goucher's MACS program and the course of this capstone project, and based on this new understanding as well as my interviews and literature review, I have identified four different yet interrelated aspects of sustainability - traditional art forms, economic potential, self-worth and well-being, and a sense of community. I believe that all four are equally important and beneficial to newcomers, as I will explain in additional detail in the following paragraphs.

First of all, although it is less common, a few groups are indeed focused on sustaining some aspects of traditional art forms and preserving their craft-making methods and handmade products as best as they can in a new country they now call home. Some groups adapt their

traditional art forms to the raw materials available in the US, and others add traditional elements to products that American consumers regularly buy, such as adorning modern handbags or pairs of jeans with hand-embroidered ethnic designs. As Ariel Cooke described in a chapter entitled “Common Threads: The Creation of War Textiles Around the World” in the edited book *Weavings of War*, “artists make use of whatever styles, techniques, and genres are most familiar, most integral to their experience and identity. Each culture has its own traditional forms of expression which artists employ to express their ideas, feelings, and stories. When existing modes of expression seem inadequate or inappropriate to the task of communication, artists adapt and change them. Sometimes they invent new forms” (p. 8). Some groups I interviewed have a few members who work on traditional crafts while other members learn modern sewing or knitting techniques, so traditional art forms are one activity but not the groups’ primary focus. For groups that do emphasize sustainability of traditional art forms, they might be able to generate awareness of their crafts through live demonstrations, interactive programs, cultural celebrations, panel discussions, and exhibits. These groups might also be viable candidates for applying for fellowships and apprenticeship grants to teach their traditional skills to their youth, such as my friend Ku Mu Paw teaching Karen weaving skills to her teenage neighbor Eh Doh Paw.

From my interviews with various groups, I observed something interesting. Some newcomer artisans who were actively maintaining traditional arts and crafts stated that they had lived in the US for a number of years before they started making these arts and crafts again. Therefore, their skills lapsed for an extended period of time while they focused on meeting basic survival needs for their family such as housing, employment, and more. In this regard, the sustainability of traditional arts might better be described as a resurgence of traditional arts.

Furthermore, that resurgence of traditional arts might contain equal elements of reconnecting with culture, sustaining and actively practicing the culture, teaching the culture to youth and the broader community, and even adapting and evolving the culture for future generations.

So for the remainder of the groups that are not focused on sustaining traditional art forms, what exactly are they sustaining? Some groups focus on economic development by teaching employable skills to group members, and this sustains their economic potential and enables them to generate income for themselves and support their families. Of course, if group members are relying on selling handmade products to generate income, this income stream can be unreliable from month to month, especially if groups generate most of their sales at the end of the year at holiday events. On the other hand, a group focused on sustaining economic potential empowers its group members to control their financial future, especially if they have never had a paid job outside of the home before.

However, whether the groups are focused on sustaining traditional art forms, economic development, or neither one, all groups sustain two important concepts – their members' well-being and self-worth as well as a shared sense of community. Throughout my literature review, I noticed a common theme that newcomer arts and crafts groups have a dual purpose of developing the individual artisans as well as developing the community. As Kristin Congdon pointed out, "many scholars have written about the development of camaraderie and friendship that occurs in a sewing group. Historically, the quilting bee or sewing group allowed its participants a time and a space to visit and create social bonds... a time when women engaged in the meditative activities of moving a needle in a repetitive manner, thereby creating a sense of calm, of order and control, and of working towards an attainable goal" (p. 139). Artisans work

on projects as individuals, but they also work to accomplish collective goals as well. By participating in a newcomer arts group, artisans sustain their own well-being. Since many newcomers had to leave the familiarity of their home behind, especially refugees fleeing from crisis situations, participating in a group enables them to feel that they can work on a project and accomplish something. As Amy Skillman wrote in an article entitled *For Safe Keeping: The Power of Artistic Traditions*, “folklorists and ethnographers have been interested in the role of artistic traditions as a way for people to ensure the health and well-being of an individual, family, or community. Well-being may be primarily understood as physical health, but also refers to mental, cultural, or even spiritual health” (p. 1). Every new skill learned or traditional project completed grows their confidence and helps them feel valued and empowered. They feel that they are back in control of their own fate and ready to start over and rebuild a new life in the US.

Furthermore, artisans look around at the other members of the group and realize that they are not alone in their situation. Together, they collectively create a safe place and sustain a sense of community. As Jon Hawkes described in an article entitled *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, “a shared sense of meaning and purpose is the single attitude most strongly associated with community wellbeing. The process of arriving at collective meanings is central to the health of a community... this has been recognized in the current debates through the introduction of concepts such as ‘connectedness’ and ‘belonging’... one feels an active part of an organism that is bigger than oneself” (p. 13). Group members begin to feel comfortable to reflect upon and talk about their past experiences. Even in a diversified group with artisans from around the world, group members realize that their shared experiences and commonalities outnumber their differences. They learn about each other’s culture and values. They share their hopes,

fears, goals, and dreams for their new life in the US. Acquaintances become friends. Within the broader communities in which these groups exist, newcomers become neighbors and contribute to the diversity and cultural vibrancy of America's cities and towns. Therefore, I believe that sustainability means that individuals feel they have self-worth and something of value to contribute. Furthermore, they are accepted and welcomed into a community larger than themselves – an arts group, a neighborhood, a city, and even a new country.

### **Conclusion and Future Plans**

In reflecting back upon the entire capstone process, I now realize that this topic is much more complex than I ever imagined it would be. A newcomer arts and crafts group is not a one-size-fits-all model. Every group is different, and every artisan within that group has different needs, goals, and motivations for participating. Furthermore, every community is different, and the type of funding and support that each group receives varies greatly from one community to the next. Furthermore, my initial assumption that all groups would be preserving traditional art forms, crafts, and folk art in some way was incorrect. Some groups seek a balance between traditional and modern art forms, adapting their traditional techniques to incorporate new raw materials that are available or to produce finished products that appeal to a new base of customers. Other groups do not incorporate traditional arts and crafts into their activities at all but instead focus on economic development or social interaction. Therefore, my viewpoint has been altered by this project because I now realize the importance of sustaining oneself and sustaining a sense of community. The process of making traditional arts is important, and the



finished product is important. Equally important to cultural sustainability, however, is getting together in a group, teaching, learning, interacting, exchanging ideas, making friendships, and fostering a sense of community. As Amy Skillman wrote about resettled refugee women's story groups in Pennsylvania in a 2006 publication entitled *The Art of Community*, "the Story Circles have created an almost sacred space where these women, who have to hold back in all other aspects of their lives, can say what is on their minds to other women who understand, who share the experience", and the same is true for arts and crafts groups.

Also, based upon my interviews and literature review, I have realized that sustainability does not necessarily mean that a newcomer arts and crafts group will exist forever. It serves a certain group of artisans for a period of time as they transition and integrate into life in the US. When Marjorie Agosin revisited the Chilean women many years after her initial research, she wrote that "they confess that they practically no longer make arpilleras – that it is very painful making them, that there is a scarcity of cloth, and that their sight is failing. A market for selling and distributing arpilleras also no longer exists" (*Tapestries of Hope* p. 73). Also, sustainability is not entirely about the traditional skills that newcomer artisans maintain, or the new skills that they learn, or the projects that they work on, or even the finished products that they display or sell. While all of those aspects are important, I believe that the social interaction is the most beneficial for sustaining group members' self-worth, overall well-being, and sense of communal belonging. Even when groups are selling products at arts and crafts markets or doing educational demonstrations, they are engaging in cross-cultural exchange with the broader community. When newcomers talk about their countries of origin and cultural traditions, sustain art forms, and share their skills with others, they feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. They find

common ground with others through art. Therefore, sustainability is about human connectivity. Although we express our identity and culture in different ways, we all have the same needs.

From the beginning of Goucher's MACS program, I knew that I wanted to do a project that advocated on behalf of refugees and immigrants and generated awareness of the passion and creativity that they brought with them to the US. My plan has become even more relevant within the past year, as refugees and immigrants have been portrayed by mass media and political candidates as people of questionable backgrounds and motives who might want to inflict harm upon American communities. As a society, we need to be more tolerant and globally-minded, and we need to engage in more dialogue and discourse about how to overcome differences, learn from one another, and solve problems together. We need to welcome newcomers with open hands rather than clenched fists. It is my hope that the [newcomerarts.net](http://newcomerarts.net) website not only connects groups with each other but also puts refugees and immigrants in a positive light and demonstrates the value that they add to our communities.

I have been inspired by the newcomer arts groups, folklorists, and various professionals who think that art in all of its forms can be a solution to help with integration. As Laura Marcus Green wrote in *The Art of Community*, "understandably, most social service agencies working with immigrant communities concentrate on the practical realities of basic survival: shelter, employment, language acquisition, and education – the tools of self-sufficiency and the foundation for a good life in a new country... attention to the artistic and cultural wellbeing of immigrants can support these goals. Enhanced general and mental health, English language acquisition, professional and economic development, and opportunities for cross-cultural interaction are among the benefits of incorporating the arts into the processes of resettlement

and cultural integration.” I learned so much throughout this process, and I intend to build upon all of this and do this work for the long-term if possible.

After graduation, my goal is to launch a newcomer arts and crafts group in my home city of Jacksonville. According to the Florida Department of Children and Families, “the State of Florida’s refugee program is the largest in the nation, receiving more than 27,000 refugees, asylees, and Cuban/Haitian entrants each year” (MyFLFamilies, 2014). For that reason, a newcomer arts group is desperately needed here as an outlet for creative expression and participatory arts, and I am optimistic that it would be successful. My experiences working with Jacksonville’s resettled refugees, as well as my time living abroad, has given me purpose and direction for my career as well as my life. I believe that my role as a facilitator and cultural worker would be to establish and cultivate partnerships throughout the community. I would not necessarily want the craft group to be a project controlled by a refugee resettlement agency. From my employment experiences with resettlement agencies, I understand that projects are often dependent upon grants which have strict reporting requirements and quantifiable deliverables. On the other hand, social services organizations such as resettlement agencies already have established connections within the community as well as non-profit status and a record of managing programs and projects, so it is easier for funders to select them for grants. From the ESL perspective, I understand the importance of English proficiency to be successful in the US so that newcomers can navigate the system, pursue educational opportunities, and obtain higher-paid and more fulfilling jobs. From the cultural sustainability perspective, I understand that refugees and immigrants bring a variety of knowledge, skills, and talents with them, and that they should be able to be proud of their cultural heritage and have opportunities to express it,

celebrate it, and share it. A few weeks ago, I walked into an ESL classroom early and assumed nobody would be there yet. I was surprised to see an older Cuban woman sitting quietly by herself in the back of the room and crocheting. As I watched her, I wondered what she thought about while she did it, who taught her how to crochet, what she was making, who she was making it for, and how it made her feel. Frequently, I see women doing these things individually, such as knitting at bus stops or weaving on looms within their homes, and I wonder how impactful it would be if they all got together and worked on their arts and crafts collectively as a group in Jacksonville.

I envision that a newcomer arts and crafts group would start out small and meet informally at a centralized location once or twice per month. We would need donations of raw materials as well as some dedicated volunteers, and I am currently working on these items already at the time of writing this reflection paper. I plan to have a conversation with potential community partners as well as participants to gauge their interest level. Also, I plan to do a pre-assessment of newcomers who expressed an interest in participating to find out what skills and talents they already possess, what they hope to gain by being a member of the group, and what they aspire to do. I plan to implement many of the best practices that I learned from my interviews and research, such as having professionals volunteer their time to teach personal finance or mental health therapy lessons and having group members take turns leading projects and teaching their skills to other group members. If the group successfully expanded and produced high quality arts and crafts, it will be beneficial to partner with local museums, art galleries, schools, and even coffee shops to put together exhibits or demonstrations for the public. If group members are interested in selling items, we will partner with local arts and crafts

markets to set up display tables at discounted prices. However, unlike my previous experiences with *Hope Through Common Threads*, group members will be made aware of the cost of the raw materials and marketing fees, and a percentage of the proceeds from sales will go back to the group. I like the idea of seed grants to help artisans get started, which can then be repaid as they sell their initial finished products. Furthermore, any sewing machines or raw materials that are purchased or donated will remain in a central storage place so that they are owned by the entire group and anybody can use them.

As a society, we have moved away from making things by hand. During my time in Goucher's MACS program, I have developed a keen interest and appreciation for handmade items. For myself, I know that I need to take time to sit and reflect upon each day's challenges and accomplishments, but I do not want to just sit still. I want to do things with my hands and create gifts for people, and I want to spend time interacting with other women who have done this for a large part of their lives. That is why I joined the local Jacksonville Weavers' Guild, and it is why I am drawn to resettled refugees. I am in awe of the beautiful handmade products that they create for themselves, their families, and their homes. They do not see their knowledge and skills as something special, because it is something functional they do every day. As Laura Marcus Green wrote in an article in 2006 for *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*, "in many cultures, folk and traditional arts and folklore are integrally woven into the fabric of daily life" (p. 3).

Therefore, newcomer arts and crafts groups need to be much more than just a place to sew, weave, knit, and make things by hand, because women can do those things at any time within their own home. Beyond the making of arts and crafts, newcomers can learn English, basic business skills, and American cultural norms that lead to more successful integration. They can

generate supplemental income and make connections throughout the community. They can reconnect with and sustain their cultural identity and reflect upon personal memories and experiences. They can replace feelings of isolation and depression with feelings of belonging, empowerment, and self-confidence. And of course, newcomers can engage in cross-cultural exchange, not just with each other, but also with facilitators, volunteers, and the broader community. As Kley Meyer wrote, “cultural expression also can play a role in social mediation. In the right circumstances, it can help reduce conflict by bridging sociocultural gaps between people who would otherwise have little or no contact. A form of expression as basic as a handicraft can overcome barriers of language, race, and social class to bring people together, at least momentarily, on a common ground of mutual appreciation” (p. 30). Newcomer arts and crafts groups are local community-based organizations, and if we want to live in more diverse, healthy, prosperous communities, then we should support these groups by making donations, volunteering our time or in-kind assistance, and purchasing finished products at arts and crafts markets. When newcomers feel welcomed into a community as well as accepted and appreciated for who they are, then they are more likely to buy houses, obtain jobs, start businesses, pay taxes, and revitalize neighborhoods. Resettled refugees and immigrants live within all of our communities, and as future Americans, I strongly believe that they deserve our welcome and support.

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## **Appendix A – Survey Questions**

1. First of all, what is the name and contact information for your craft group?
2. How many people participate in your group activities on a regular basis?
3. What nationalities or ethnic groups participate in your craft group?
4. What activities does your craft group do on a regular basis?
5. How would you describe the primary purpose or goals of your craft group?
6. Describe any types of funding or support your craft group receives from the local community as well as state or national funders.
7. Would you or a member of your craft group be willing to be interviewed by telephone so that I can learn a bit more about what you do?

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