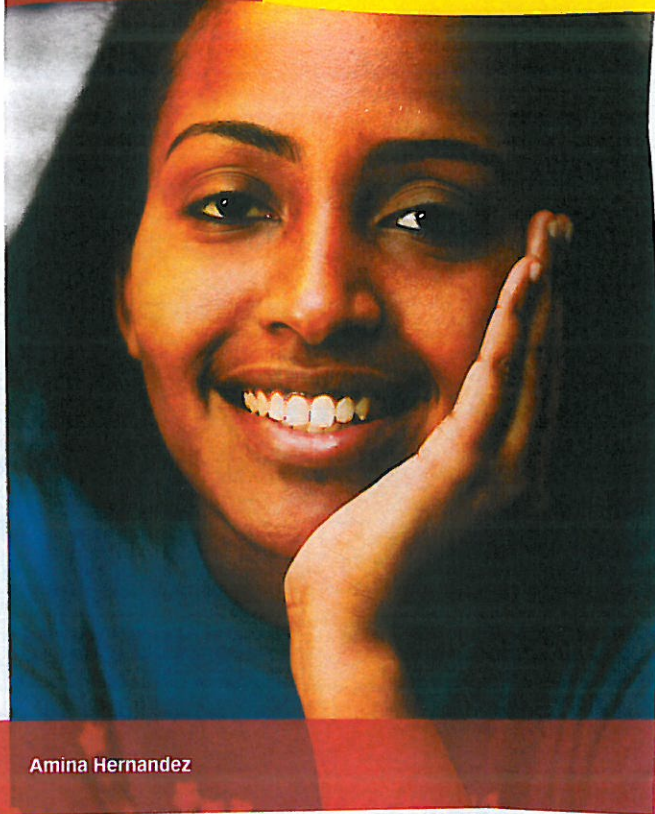


NEW ARRIVALS IN BUFFALO:



Amina Hernandez

THE FACES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

BY LAURA SILVERMAN; PHOTOS BY KC KRATT

Buffalo has always been a city of immigrants, but back in the seventies, when I was growing up here, that meant Italians, Poles, Germans, and Irish. You had to get a last name to know whose family came from where, because we all looked roughly alike. Though the city was diverse in its way, you could hardly call it a melting pot.

Moving back in 2010, I'm finding a whole new Buffalo, a city whose streets and markets are plied by Burmese, Sudanese, Iraqis, Vietnamese, Somalians, Bhutanese, and people from dozens of other nations. Even at my little suburban elementary school, a bastion of whiteness thirty years ago, seventeen different languages are now spoken in the hallways.

When did Buffalo become so diverse? Institutions like UB and Roswell Park have long been magnets for international talent, but the big change in recent years is in the number of refugees. Since 2004, Erie County, led by Buffalo, has been the number one resettlement location in New York State. Last year alone we welcomed almost 1,400 new refugees, and we're on course to match or exceed that number in 2010.

There are obvious ways in which a large foreign-born community enriches a city. "They bring cultural diversity,"

says Zoëann Murphy of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants in Washington, D.C. "Through refugees coming into our communities, we connect with the world."

Several community initiatives have sprung up in Buffalo to help foster that connection, like the annual Taste of Diversity festival, which celebrates the cultural richness of the West Side through music, dancing, handicrafts, and, most of all, food. "We've had as many as nineteen different nationalities represented in food," says committee chairman Gary Welborn, who's aiming to get 3,000 people at this year's event, to be held June 5.

In July comes the grand opening of the West Side Bazaar, where everything from Puerto Rican pastelillos and Peruvian chocolate to handmade Burmese jewelry and baskets woven by refugee women in Darfur will be for sale, all under one roof. There will also be music and dancing, and, in the summer, outdoor tables. "We're looking for it to be a really fun, unique place to go shopping in Buffalo," says Bonnie Smith of the Westminster Economic Development Initiative.

Of course we have more than festivals and interesting food to thank the refugee community for; in Welborn's words, they are "a key part of the future of the city." Eva Hassett, executive director of the International Institute of Buffalo (one of four refugee resettlement agencies in the city), agrees: "Refugees are one of the sizable populations coming to Buffalo. Most people are leaving. It presents an opportunity for us." Adds Meghann Rumpf, refugee services coordinator at Journey's End Refugee Services, "There are a lot more houses that would be empty and falling apart if it weren't for refugees. They keep these neighborhoods going." Rumpf also maintains that refugees, having gone through so



Steven Sanyu

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much to get here, make "awesome employees."

But perhaps most importantly for Buffalo's future, refugees are fearlessly optimistic entrepreneurs. "They bring creativity, energy, and a fresh outlook, and that's the real fodder for entrepreneurial spirit," says Bob Franke of the Grant-Ferry Association. "The new business we're seeing is mostly coming out of the refugee community."

One of these new businesses is Somali Star, a hybrid Somali/Hispanic restaurant on Grant Street. The owner, a twenty-three-year-old Somali refugee named Amina Hernandez, is surprisingly young to be a successful entrepreneur. "Nobody can ever believe I own this place," says Hernandez.

Her dream—to own a family business where her father and four sisters could help out (they all do)—must have felt

rather improbable when she came here at the age of nine, having never attended school in her life. In war-torn Somalia, she says, "There was always bombing in the schools, so we weren't allowed to go." When her mother passed away, her father, determined to get an education for his girls, moved the family to a refugee camp in Kenya. They stayed in the camp for a couple of years before being resettled in Buffalo. "I didn't speak a word [of English]. Nothing," recalls Hernandez.

Hernandez became fluent in two years, eventually graduating from Grover Cleveland High School, and then attending ECC. While in college she waitressed at a Puerto Rican restaurant, and there she met her future husband, Hector Hernandez, the brother of the owner. It turns out Hector's sister also owned a restaurant—on Grant Street—and when she decided to retire last November, Amina, who had just graduated in May, jumped at the opportunity to take it over.

In just a few short months, says Hernandez, Somali Star is doing a brisk business, mainly through word of mouth in the neighborhood. "Everyone who works here comes in," she says. "Puerto Ricans, Somalians, African Americans, whites." As she says this, two college-age white hipsters stride in and take a table, while an older black gentleman peruses the takeout counter. "It's making the community happy," she adds, before getting up to take their orders.

One might expect a Somali restaurant to be owned by a Somali. One probably would not expect a supermarket sushi bar to be owned by a Burmese. And not just one of them; most of them. "Eighty-five percent of the sushi business in the United States is Burmese," explains Steven Sanyu, a thirty-nine-year-old Burmese refugee who owns the franchise at the Losson Road Wegmans. "It's like Italians with pizza."

Back in 1990, when Burma's military regime refused to cede power to the democratically elected Aung San Suu Kyi, and then put her under house arrest, nineteen-year-old Sanyu was a youth leader in Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party. Along with thousands of other student activists, he fled his village and took up arms. Despite the imprisonment of his father, cousin, and friends, and threats to arrest his mother and younger siblings, Sanyu fought the totalitarian regime for six years, rising to Second Commander of his regiment. But the student army's situation became increasingly desperate against the well-armed Burmese military, and at the end of 1996, realizing that he could have more impact advocating for his homeland from abroad, Sanyu laid down his arms and crossed the border into Thailand. He stayed in Bangkok for a couple of years, met and married a Thai woman, and then applied for refugee status.

The Burmese community, with upwards of 2,000 people, is currently the fastest-growing segment of Buffalo's refugee population. When Sanyu arrived ten years ago, he recalls, there were maybe three or four others. He was truly a pioneer. Fortunately his English was good, and the International Institute quickly found him a job in a plastics company. But within three months he had tapped into the Burmese sushi pipeline; he quit plastics and never looked back.

Though Sanyu misses his country, as he says, "there is no freedom in Burma." When he talks on the phone with his

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father, the regime listens in, sometimes interrupting to warn, “You speak carefully!” Last year, when his mother fell ill, the embassy refused to issue him a visa. The day after they denied his request, maintaining he was still a danger to the state, she died.

But he has made a good life in Buffalo. He lives in a four-bedroom house on the West Side with his wife, Phanit, and their two daughters, ages one and seven. They own two cars and a flat-screen TV, and take family vacations to Thailand. He worries about the newer refugees, many of whom arrive with no English and unable to read or write. On the other hand, he says, “Everyone is busy—working, living, going to school.” He obviously has faith in the community, as he’s hired several Burmese refugees himself. “They’re good workers,” he says. ☺

Freelance writer Laura Silverman recently moved back to Buffalo from Mumbai, where she was group managing editor for *Vogue India* and *GQ India*.