

An education on immigration Students learn firsthand during summer break

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When students hear the words "summer job," they usually think about bagging groceries or flipping burgers. However, a summer job can also mean a unique learning opportunity and a chance to become involved in the community. Five high school students and five University of Massachusetts Lowell graduate students had just such an opportunity this summer, working on two projects. This is the 10th summer that UML has engaged students in learning more about Lowell and community development.

This summer our tasks involved assisting two UML professors with their project collecting immigrant oral histories and helping to create a "Best Practices" guide to identify ways for the university and its students to become involved in the downtown area. We will discuss what we learned about the downtown in a column in October.

Our team's unique makeup helped us approach the immigrant stories project. Although we come from different places and have different traditions, we have one thing in common; we are students in Lowell, and have first-hand experience with downtown Lowell and its rich diversity.

We spoke with 25 recent immigrants to Lowell. So much has been written about Lowell as an "immigrant city." There is no shortage of histories about how immigrants adapted to Lowell, while adding their own unique culture to the city's rich tapestry. Our time at the Center for Lowell History taught us that.

We took a look at the contemporary story by speaking with people from Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and several African countries. We learned why people chose to come to Lowell, how they adapted to life in the city, how their culture is maintained here, and how it will be passed on to future generations.

By early fall, we will combine the stories we collected with photos documenting immigrants' lives and make it available as a digital story on the team's Web site:
www.uml.edu/centers/cfwc.

Why come to Lowell?

Through our conversations, we realized that many people left their native countries for the same reasons as some of the members of our team. Some people came here to escape political violence. Solomon, an immigrant from Sierra Leone stated, "I got away from Sierra Leone, because I wanted to be free, to say what I want to say, be heard and respected. I got in trouble for that in Sierra Leone."

Other people came for the university education or job opportunities available to them. Chia, from Taiwan, came here to further his education. He said "I came here just to continue to get my Ph.D. degree to start my research here."

Many people we talked to had a part of their extended family living in Greater Lowell. Sarah, originally from Ghana, said "I had my family in Lowell, I had my two brothers, a sister, and three children already living here."

Two things were common to most of the stories we heard. First, soon after arriving, each person and their family became a part of the complex mosaic of our exceptionally diverse city. Second, everyone wanted to make a better life for his or her children. Taking care of the next generation unites us all.

The challenges

Many team members came to Lowell from other countries. We, as well as the people we spoke with, faced a series of challenges upon arriving here. We all had to adapt to a new way of life, that's for sure.

Major challenges centered on education and job-related issues. It is not so easy today to find a first job, as it was when there were thousands of textile mill jobs available in Greater Lowell.

According to one Kenyan business owner who arrived here without credit or references, the initial obstacles were "fairly basic." While many immigrants were professionals in their home countries, it was not possible for them to enter the work force here at the same level without passing a variety of licensing requirements.

Along with opening hundreds of small stores, travel agencies, insurance companies, restaurants and food markets all over Lowell, new arrivals often resorted to taking jobs that did not measure up to the education they had received in their home country. For example, one person was a doctor in the Dominican Republic, but needed to repeat his medical training to work in the health field in the U.S. Several team members, from West Africa and Southeast Asia, were also required to repeat a year or more of school when they entered the Lowell public schools, as their home country's education system was considered insufficient.

These testimonies raise an important question: Why do immigrants often struggle to succeed in the American job market despite their prior educational and professional expertise? One possible answer to this question was offered by a project director at UML's Center for Family, Work and Community, who admitted that "as an immigrant, (he) is sure that there are people who may resent (him) in (his) role or would probably think that 'oh, why is this immigrant in this kind of position; it should be me instead.'" Earlier immigrant groups faced similar discrimination upon arriving, such as the signs on local business establishments that read "no Irish need apply." Many of these issues exist today.

While there is a substantial Cambodian community in Lowell and several cultural events to acknowledge their traditions, many other ethnic groups we spoke with, such as Africans and Russians, wished that their own cultures could be better represented here, and that there could be forums to help unite different ethnicities within the city. An African evangelist believes that community forums would be useful. He told us the following. "It goes beyond art and dance and food... there are a lot of issues that need to be addressed as there are African people without a voice." A Russian Ph.D. student at UML claims there is no representation of his culture here, and that "even in Greater Lowell I may find 10 to 15 (Russian) people, that's it."

People mentioned the positive elements of diversity in the city. One member of the West African community in Lowell feels proud that his country's flag, along with flags from other countries, is displayed in City Hall Plaza. This sort of public display is just one of many ways the city highlights its diversity. Schools in the area are doing the same thing; displaying flags of enrolled students.

Despite discrimination, lack of representation, and other challenges immigrants face as they adapt to American life, the majority of people we spoke with feel that Lowell is home, and they appreciate what it has to offer. Lowell has double the national average percentage of foreign-born residents. Each day, these courageous and determined individuals work hard to improve the quality of life for themselves and their families, and make Lowell their own.

Festivals of diversity

The recent Folk Festival reflects the city's diversity. The music, entertainment, foods, and crafts all capture the rich diversity: African drummers, Irish singers and dancers, Polish, Armenian, and Brazilian music, and a traditional Cambodian wedding ceremony were just part of the festival's rich tapestry. The Folk Festival rightfully gets much of the attention, yet smaller, but no less important, cultural events take place across the city all year long. The African Festival and Puerto Rican Festival are two that we visited during the summer that are clear standouts.

At the start of the summer one woman told us that Lowell's African Festival was important because it "educates kids on their culture and family here."

"I look forward to the African Festival every year just to meet people I haven't seen in years and get a chance to experience African life," said team member Beatrice Donkoh.

Lowell is a World City

Along with its historic mill buildings and canals, Lowell was once defined, and still is today, by its rich history of immigration. Lowell is like a giant and yet intricate quilt; it is the struggles of many different people who work to carve out a better life for their children that make Lowell such a great and interesting place to live, work, and go to school. Our team, with its members originating from four continents, is representative of this diversity.

Thanks to the many individuals who contributed to this project, we learned a tremendous amount about the struggles, heartaches, and happiness that come with starting anew in another place. Looking past our differences in culture and traditions, we discovered that most people, no matter their background, strive for the same thing: a better life and a bright future for the next generation.

The Team is a summer job opportunity that brings together high school and graduate students on projects that will benefit the city and the students. It is headquartered at UML's Center for Family, Work and Community in the Wannalancit Mills Building. For more information, contact Patty Coffey at Patricia_Coffey@uml.edu.