

**Immigration Alexandria: Past, Present, and Future
Oral History Interviews, January 1, 2015 through April 30, 2016
Virginia Foundation for the Humanities
Grant Report, VFH-15-12**



*Rhoda Worku, Immigrant from Ethiopia
Owner of St. Elmo's Café
At Her Oral History Interview*

**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**

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The 2015 Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (VFH) grant to the Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) has provided the City of Alexandria the opportunity to take the first steps to fulfilling a city-wide interpretive initiative, *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present, and Future*. Immigration was a timely issue in 2015 and in the years leading up to it, often in the news and sometimes fraught with controversy. Since 2010, valuing and recognizing Alexandria's diversity has been one of seven goals of the City's Strategic Plan. The *Immigrant Alexandria* initiative will fulfill this objective by documenting and highlighting the valued contributions of the immigrant community and the people from around the world who have made Alexandria their home,

To this end, the VFH grant enabled OHA to conduct and transcribe oral history interviews of 20 immigrants to Alexandria, plus one interview of a descendant of Chinese/Taiwanese immigrants and another of a native-born American who has spent decades working for immigrant rights. Digital recordings of the interviews in audio and video are curated at the Alexandria Archaeology Museum and also backed up by the City of Alexandria Department of Information Technology. The city's website now contains transcriptions of these 22 interviews, highlighting both the hardships and triumphs inherent in the immigrant experience:
<https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/info/default.aspx?id=86067>

As of the 2010 U.S. Census, about 24% of Alexandrians, or a little over 32,000 people, were foreign-born. The oral histories funded through this grant reflect the diversity within this immigrant population. Interview subjects came from 14 countries: El Salvador, Cuba, Brazil, Ethiopia, Cyprus, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, India, China, Vietnam, Russia, Ireland, and Germany. An early challenge of the project was finding interviewees who represented this cross-section of the immigrant communities in Alexandria. The project team successfully met this challenge through a variety of outreach channels. One of the most helpful connections was the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) manager who works with immigrant students and families at the city's public schools. The team also attended a number of events to publicize the project among the city's immigrant communities, including Alexandria's International Festival, Alexandria's Moroccan Artisans Festival, International Night at John Adams Elementary School (the most diverse in the city), a John Adams Elementary School PTA meeting (where a presentation led to the interview of Zion Bequ, the first African immigrant in the city to become a PTA president), meetings with teachers and students at George Washington Middle School, and Alexandria's Citizens Day (where new immigrants took their citizenship oath). In addition, an exhibit of international flags was displayed at the Alexandria Archaeology Museum to contribute to a dialog with residents and visitors to the museum and to recruit interviewees. The resultant diversity of the interview subjects is one of the strengths of the project and provides a first step toward the City's strategic plan objective to recognize and value its immigrant population.

The *Immigrant Alexandria* project focuses on the analysis and presentation of the history of Alexandria's immigration through the exploration of the following humanities themes:

- Economic opportunity is a major motivating factor in immigration.
- War and unrest in home countries lead to mass migration to the U.S.
- Those fleeing from religious and political persecution find a welcome haven in the U.S.
- The formal development of refugee programs after World War II affects the growth and acceptance of new immigrant communities.
- American diplomatic and military expansion overseas affects the flow of immigrants to a city in the shadow of the nation's capital.
- American nativism negatively impacts the immigrant experience.
- Intercultural contact among immigrants and native-born populations, and among different immigrant communities, is important in understanding a city's social, economic, and cultural development.

The questions developed for the oral history interviews explored personal immigrant stories to shed light on how these themes are reflected in individual experiences. For most of the countries of origin of the interviewees, a timeline of the history as it relates to immigration matters was developed, primarily written by or under the direction of Dr. Krystyn Moon, the humanities scholar who contributed her expertise to the project. The resultant interviews highlight many aspects of the humanities themes and provide a variety of ways to look at the immigrant experience in Alexandria. While the sample is small, analysis could provide insight into differences and similarities based on the countries of origin, reasons for immigration, the socioeconomic status both before and after immigration, the ease of or problems with assimilation, the maintenance of links to countries of origin, and the effects of age at the time of arrival on the acculturation process and identity.

The immigrants' stories now on the City's website are rich in detail about the interviewees' lives before immigration and about the ways in which individuals and families attempt to maintain connections to their heritage through food, holidays, correspondence with relatives and sometimes trips back to their countries of origin. There are discussions of difficulties inherent in the lack of language skills, as well as some indications of disparaging and hurtful remarks. There are stories of economic success as immigrants create small businesses, especially restaurants that feature food from their countries of origin, changing and enriching the character of Alexandria's neighborhoods. The immigrants work as a university professor, a chemist, information technology specialists, educators and a PTA president, a journalist, a fashion designer and boutique owner, and activists for immigration and human rights. The interviews include two foreign-born individuals who adopt children from other countries, establishing multicultural households in the midst of the multicultural city. Photographs of some of the interview subjects, their families, and objects important to them are presented in Appendix A. The brief descriptions below highlight the reasons for immigration and the accomplishments of each interviewee:

Aida Abdul-Wadi left Ethiopia at age 8 due to the war raging in her country in 1974. She recalls the trauma of seeing “literally blood coming down the hill because they had just taken and killed so many people. [T]he Communist Party basically came into Ethiopia.... They’d just kill anybody who ...they thought was over-privileged, which was anybody that was educated.” Aida’s route to the U.S. was circuitous—from Yemen to Egypt to the U.S. Aida’s father, who was divorced from her mother, arranged for the children to go to school in Egypt, and she and her siblings spent most of their three years in Egypt living in a rented apartment with no adult supervision. By 1980, Aida’s father had gained U.S. citizenship and brought the children to the U.S. to live with their mother, who had also immigrated to America. Having received degrees in computer science, Aida now works in network administration.

Mehdi Aminrazavi first arrived in the U.S. from Iran to study urban planning in 1975 at age 18. Returning to his country in 1978, he protested against the Shah. However, when the government fell and Ayatollah Khomeini came into power, Mehdi grew fearful of what the new Iranian government would become. He renewed his student visa and returned to the U.S. to begin his doctorate. Shortly thereafter, his father died during an interrogation by the government. Mehdi planned to study urban planning and philosophy in Seattle and return home, and for many years, he considered himself an exile rather than an immigrant. He eventually received his PhD from George Washington University, and now works as a Professor of Religion and Philosophy at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Vineeta Anand first came to America from India to attend Syracuse University in 1982, at age 26. From her early childhood, Vineeta claims that she knew it was her “destiny to come to the United States.” She recounts, “So I was six years old at the time and she [my grandmother] convinced me, at the age of six, that I was going to come.... It was sort of living her dream vicariously through me.” Trained as a journalist in India, Vineeta sought work in her field in the U.S. as soon as she could and finally landed a job that would sponsor her. Vineeta worked as a financial journalist for 23 years, but quips that “journalism, as you know, has unfortunately gone the way of steel mills or textile mills;” she now works as a financial analyst.

Serdar Basegmez came to the Washington, D.C. area from Turkey at age 21 on a student visa in the early 1980s, enamored of American culture, especially rock and roll. As Serdar puts it, “the whole idea was to stay in the United States a few years and learn the language and possibly go to school or finish another major and move back. But then life happened, and after thirty-five years, I’m still here....” While the way in which Serdar received immigrant status is unclear in the interview, it is implied that he may have been sponsored as an employee of a bagel bakery. Serdar eventually became a partner in a bagel shop in Houston, then returned to Alexandria. He takes pride in the variety of small businesses he has owned, including his current operations—a catering company and 2 dry cleaners. Serdar’s advice: “[I]t just depends how much you want and how big your dream is.”

Zion Abebe Bezu came to the U.S. from Ethiopia in the early 2000s to study at a small Mennonite University in Kansas. She arrived in Alexandria around 2005 and applied for asylum on the basis of religious persecution. During the reign of Megitsu Haile Miriam, Zion’s father had been jailed in Ethiopia for his Mennonite beliefs. In addition, the government instituted a resettlement policy whereby people had to return to their areas of origin, but few provisions

existed for those of mixed origin, as was the case for Zion's family. Zion related, "[W]e have Oromo, we have Eritrean, we have Falasha—all those mix!...So, for us, especially for my parents, there's nowhere to go..." They had to leave "the city that they were born and raised [in, where]...they built [their] this business..." Since 2005, Zion has earned two master's degrees. Her parents' emphasis on education has stayed with Zion her entire life, from her own education, to that of her children, and now for students in Alexandria's public schools. She is the first African immigrant to become a PTA [Parent Teacher Association] President in the City of Alexandria.

Rodrigo Gaujardo came to the U.S. in 1980 at age 23 to escape political persecution. As a teenager, Rod, as his friends call him, began to criticize the Augusto Pinochet government. Although he was a star athlete, even winning a gold medal in the Pan American Games, Rod knew his time in Chile was coming to an end, and he fled to the U.S. His introduction to the area was harsh, including months of sleeping in a dumpster and jumping from one manual labor job to another. He volunteered with the Alexandria Police Department for 24 years and has received multiple awards from two Presidential administrations.

Margaret Holley immigrated to the United States as a result of her marriage to an American citizen in 1980. Born and raised in Kilkenny, Ireland, Maggie was trained as a nurse and volunteered with the Save the Children organization in Colombia and Honduras. She met her future husband in Honduras where he served as a Peace Corps volunteer. They have adopted two children, a son whose birthparents are Guatemalan, and a daughter from China.

Priscilla Izar was born and raised in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Her father's family moved to Brazil from Lebanon, and her mother's family had come from Italy. Priscilla won a fellowship in 1997 through the World Bank to take summer courses at the University of California-Berkeley in urban planning and returned to work on her doctorate at the International Development program at Duke University, where she met her future husband. With complications arising from the type of visa that she had (requiring her to return to Brazil after graduation to work for two years) and from the fact that she and her husband both sought jobs outside of the U.S., their life together was initially fraught with stress over where they were to settle. Eventually, they returned to the U.S. and Priscilla got her green card. However, when it came to citizenship, Priscilla was still adamant about her Brazilian identity: "[I]t wasn't an easy decision, I was like, 'But I am not giving up my citizenship. I can't do that.' So the fact that I can keep both my passports was a big thing."

Irina Kosinski first came to the U.S. from Russia in 1994 on a student visa at age 20. She went to the University of North Carolina where she immediately met her future husband. She returned to this country in 1996 to get married. Trained as a chemist, Irina now works at the National Institute of Health.

Myriam Lechuga immigrated from Cuba in 1967 at age 12. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, her father became a diplomat for the Cuban government, but her mother remained opposed to the Castro regime. Myriam's parents divorced in 1966; with the help of Myriam's father, her mother and maternal grandparents joined Miriam's uncle, who had previously immigrated and lived in Virginia. Myriam remembers that her "grandparents had to leave everything behind.

And I just say that this is one of the things that I always remember still in my mind....[The government] would seal the house and everything and they would inventory. You couldn't have lost or given away anything, because you had to have the same things they had inventoried, ...or you couldn't leave... Because ... it becomes government property.” She now works as an education program administrator. Myriam identifies as a Cuban American, and her final comments sum up her positive immigration experience: “All the refugees—... what they came here looking for is freedom. So I would say, that was my family. There were hardships. I'm getting emotional. Even with all the hardships that was worth it to me. I am very grateful to be here and not be over there.”

Jon Liss, while not an immigrant himself, has spent decades working for immigrants', tenants', and workers' rights in Alexandria. In 1987, he organized the community and protested at City Council to prevent displacement of immigrants and others from an apartment complex scheduled for redevelopment in Arlandria (on the boundary between Alexandria City and Arlington County). His work resulted in the formation of Tenants and Workers United. The organization obtained the right for the residents in the community to own their own homes. Currently, he also serves as Co-Executive Director of the New Virginia Majority which focuses on organizing minority voters in Virginia, who will soon outnumber American-born Caucasians in our state.

Barbara Lunati met her future husband Chuck when he was stationed in Aschaffenberg, Germany, as a US Army officer in 1987. They dated for three years before marrying in 1990 and coming to the U.S. On September 11, 2001, Barbara was on an airplane that flew past the burning World Trade Center and her husband was in the Pentagon during the attacks. As a couple, they decided that starting a family was more important than earning money and started the process of adopting their daughter Mia from China. **Mia Lunati**, now 12, in her short interview after her mother's, expresses interest in her multicultural heritage: “My mom always makes sure that I'm practicing my German and I watch German TV during the week so, I am quite fluent...I definitely want to visit China and learn more about the culture and stuff.”

Afghani **Narges Maududi** came to America at age 12. Her family left Afghanistan for Pakistan in 1989 to escape the civil war that was raging after the Soviets left. They arrived in Alexandria as refugees in 1991, and she recounts that “the first few months were really tough. I didn't have any friends because I couldn't communicate with people...” She was given a chance to work at an NGO in the mental health field, finished her B.A. in psychology, and is now getting a graduate degree.

German Mejia left El Salvador for the U.S. in 1981 at age 14, fleeing from the war that overtook his country and seeking economic opportunity. German recounted the reasons why he and so many of his relatives and friends fled: “Kids had to leave home before sixteen, because the army was catching everyone.... [E]verybody runs before that time, because you might be a target... Very sad, because you lose a lot of friends.” In his first attempt to sneak across the Mexican border, German was caught and spent six months in prison, but he succeeded in making it to Houston on his second try, and later to Washington D.C. German was lucky to be sponsored by La Plaza, a restaurant in Adams Morgan, a Latin American neighborhood in Washington. He now owns Los Tios, his own restaurant in Alexandria's Delray community,

After the Vietnam War, **Tu-Ahn Nguyen's** family became refugees, engaged in agriculture as they hid from the Communist regime. They left Vietnam on a boat (possibly in 1977?), and her family reunited in New Orleans in 1982, coming to Alexandria two years later. Tu-Ahn recounts that her extended family lived "in a small government housing condo in Fairfax...about a thousand square foot and we--at one point, we had about fifteen people in the house." Tu-Ahn graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology and owns a boutique in Old Town Alexandria.

Nora Partlow, a Cuban immigrant, arrived in the U.S. in 1956 at age 7. Her family left Cuba for political and economic reasons. As Nora put it, "My dad actually supported Castro at first because ... when he left [for the U.S.]... Batista was in power, and he really was for the rich." Nora moved to Alexandria for a job, and eventually she and a business partner opened St. Elmo's Café in the Delray section of Alexandria, now a thriving neighborhood with a commercial center. Nora takes pride in helping to turn the Delray community around, as well as in her personal journey: "This is my life. And I've been able to pay myself enough that I can send all my kids through college, you know, bought a house, and supported myself through St. Elmo's. That's it..."

American-born **June Shih** became a lawyer and speech-writer. Her parents immigrated from China and Taiwan in the 1960s, her mother to North Carolina and her father first to a medical residency in Canada, because his visa to the U. S. was rejected. June talks about how her friends' parents in particular would make racist remarks about Asians or minorities in general without remembering that she was present. Her parents emphasized assimilation, but as she grew up, she embraced her Chinese roots, noting that "they [were] horrified that I would try to emphasize any sort of Chineseness."

Evelin Urrutia came to the U.S. from El Salvador in 1993 at age 16, joining her mother who had immigrated four years earlier to escape the war in which her father had been killed. "I thought it was going to be like a family reunion, but it was... really tough and she [my mother] had to work day and night." Evelin works on social justice issues for the Latin American immigrant community.

Vaso Volioti is a Greek Cypriot who arrived with her family in 1969 at age 12. Originally a planned visit of only a few years, their trip has now stretched into "like five decades" as a result of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. "So, what happened was, the rest of the family came here. So, there are about three hundred of us around, in Old Town" While trained as a cosmetologist, Vaso almost immediately joined the family business: "All this family that we had here, they all owned restaurants." On March 23, 2006, she purchased the Dixie Pig barbecue, a 1940s landmark that now serves her Mediterranean cuisine.

Afornia Wendemagegn's parents brought her to American from Ethiopia in 2004 when the family was lucky enough to be chosen in the immigration lottery. Afornia's parents wanted her to have a good education and opportunities to grow. She is now 18 years old and off to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA, possibly to major in neuroscience and take pre-med courses.

When Hailie Seassie's government fell in 1974, **Rhoda Worku's** family was greatly affected, because her parents, as well as her uncles, were part of his cabinet. In the early 1980s, Rhoda arrived in California on a tourist visa, thanks to a Presbyterian minister and teacher whom she had known in Ethiopia. She received asylum and later settled in Alexandria in 1983. Rhoda opened Caboose Café Restaurant in the Delray neighborhood of Alexandria, and began serving Ethiopian food at the request of her customers.

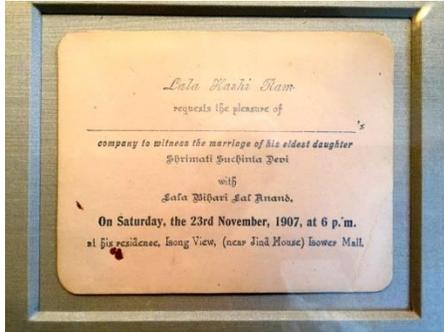
The immigrants' stories illustrate the complexity of the immigration process and the immigrant experience. Many came as a result of war and political persecution. Some came on student visas, but stayed for economic reasons or because they had met their future spouses. Other student visas led to petitions for asylum as conditions in countries of origin worsened, causing at least one of the interviewees to feel like an exile rather than an immigrant. Recurrent themes include the importance of education and maintenance of connections to one's heritage. Whether it's *dor wat*, a chicken stew from Ethiopia, or *lechón asado*, roasted pig from Cuba, food from their countries of origin remain a significant part of most immigrants' lives as they settle in a new place. Despite some hardships and loneliness, the stories reflect strength and perseverance. The immigrants' accomplishments speak for themselves.

The oral history project is ongoing at the present time. There are at least five more transcriptions in various states of completion, including three translated from Vietnamese and several from international artists working in the Torpedo Factory Art Center. A list of potential interview subjects continues to be maintained and updated. The timelines on immigration history served as an extremely valuable and necessary tool for the interviewers and should be continued throughout the project. In addition, interviewers should be given more training in the immigration process, perhaps from an immigration attorney, to allow for follow-up questions that could elucidate the complexities inherent in the process and the ways in which the interviewees actually get to remain in the U.S.

The current project has produced about 25 hours of video footage. OHA has submitted a 2016 grant application to produce a film from these recordings to make the immigrant Alexandria stories more accessible. It is hoped that VFH will continue to fund this initiative. In addition, interesting future projects might set out to explore the Ethiopian and Latin American communities in Alexandria in greater depth and to develop an oral history curriculum for the public schools to encourage the students who are immigrants in the city's public schools to share their stories, hoping to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging.

Appendix A
Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future
Images, Oral History Project

Images: Vineeta Anand Family



Marriage document



Food preparation



Gift to Vineeta's father



Skirt from India



Vineeta with dress

Images: Serdar Basegmez



Serdar with oral history papers



Serdar at his dry cleaning store

Image: Rodrigo Guajardo



Award

Images: Priscilla Izar



Necklace-gift from family



Carved bird made by sister Patricia



Virgin Mary—gift from mother



During interview with Holly

Images: Irina Koskinski



Church

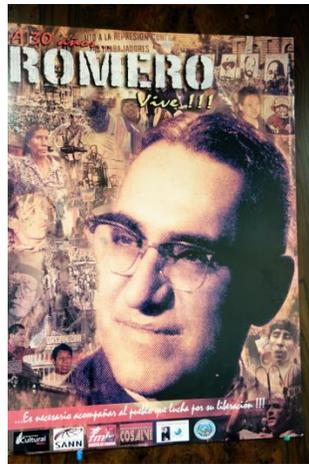


Family

Images: Jon Liss



Jon at work



Romero poster with close-up of Jon



Mural-Corner of 3801 Mount Vernon Ave.

Image: Barbara and Mia Lunati



Images: Tu-Ahn Nguyen



Images: June Shih and Family



June's mother and grandmother



June's mother and father



June's mother holding her

Images: Violotti Family



Early 1960s



Easter, 2015, Northern Virginia

Images: Rhoda Worku



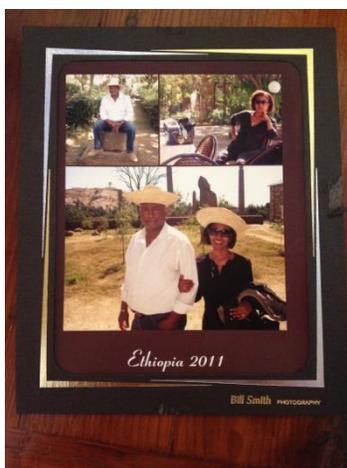
At her oral history interview



With sibling



Rhoda's parents



On vacation