



# International Institute Rhode Island

## Donor Newsletter

Serving immigrants and refugees since 1921

Summer 2005

### Immigrants continue to find their Dream post 9/11

Rhode Island Council for the Humanities and the Institute partnered over 4 days to ask “What is the American Dream?” Answer: it’s individual, changes over time, and requires your support

After 9/11, what is the American Dream? It must be asked by our staff members, donors, clients, and neighbors.

From May 3-7 with support from The Rhode Island Foundation and the RI State Council for the Arts, the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities and the Institute joined to ask this question at five venues in Providence. The event began with a reading from award-winning, Dominican-born writer Junot Diaz, who assessed the Dream, post-9/11: “This country has always harbored an anti-immigrant tendency despite the fact that the U.S. absolutely needs immigrants to survive.” Since immigrants bring new vision, workers, and consumers, we ask again: “What is the American Dream?”

In addition to Diaz, the four-day event sought answers through a performance by Living Literature, a screening of the film “Teens in Between”, and a panel discussion led by state Senator Juan Pichardo, featuring immigrants Mike Chea, Institute

Director of Translating & Interpreting; Grace Diaz, state Representative and owner of a day care; and Bash Sasa, owner of Sasa Brothers, Inc., which specializes in HVAC services.



Above: Sen. Juan Pichardo and Rep. Grace Diaz credit their success to family and strive to help others realize their dream.

Each panelist stressed that the American Dream is not simply about immigrants seeking economic security.

Mike Chea, a refugee from Cambodia, saw the American Dream simply: “At 11, my Dream was to have a life without war

and killing.”

Dominican-born Rep. Diaz said that the Dream was “sacrifice and family. People ask how we can be good parents and leave our children. Because we are loving parents, we come to America. After five years, I brought my mother and children.”

Syrian-born Bash Sasa saw the American Dream as access to education. At 20, he enrolled at Johnson & Wales University, not knowing English. With hard work, he started a business, had a family, and serves on the board of the Islamic School of Rhode Island.

Each panelist and event stressed that the Dream comes with hazards: anti-immigrant prejudice, language barriers, and personal sacrifices, but with persistence (Rep. Diaz applied for a state job 84 times!), the Dream is more than a myth.

Why invest in the American Dream? For four days, the answers came: Community support and individual effort yield economic and cultural growth and a safer world.

### In this issue:

#### Page 2:

- From “enemy alien” to community leader: Profile of Board Member Joaquim Weissfeld

#### Page 3:

- Thanks to your support the 19th Annual Spring Carnival Ball raised over \$140,000 for the Institute’s programs

#### Page 4:

- Refugees + employers = a partnership of mutual gain

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## From “enemy alien” to community leader

Board member Joaquim Weissfeld remembers his pursuit of the American Dream

Today you know Joachim Weissfeld as a distinguished lawyer at Hinckley, Allen & Snyder, LLP, committed Institute Board member since 1997, and a community leader. He is part of all of us: a friend, family man, and donor.

Like so many of our Board members, he is also an immigrant and a walking American success story, a model for the Institute clients he tirelessly supports.

For today’s immigrants, he advises, “The key to success is to learn the language and to form a meaningful allegiance to your new country while remembering the culture of your native land.”

Joe speaks from the heart as things were not always so comfortable.

At age 10, Joe came to the United States in 1937 from Germany, where war was raging and the Nazi party was gaining control. Though he came as a result of his father’s job transfer to New Bedford, MA, Joe was classified an “enemy alien” and thrown into public school with only one year of prior English study.

“It was very tough at first because I only knew a few words in English. Fortunately a dedicated teacher tutored me for an hour after school each day and in one year I could speak English.”

With a strong work ethic

Weissfeld did well in school and applied to Brown University. He was accepted and was the first member of his family to attend college. As Weissfeld recalls, “My father always said by hook or crook, you’re going to college.”

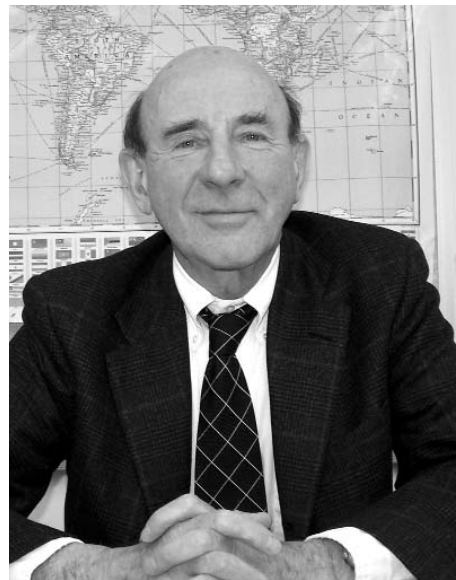
Weissfeld was told by the admissions officer that he had to join the Army. Instead he joined the Navy “because my mother had visions of me killing my German cousin who was enlisted

in the German Army at the same time.” With help from the GI Bill, Joe studied at Brown and decided to pursue a law degree.

“Many recently arrived immigrants, such as myself, have low self-confidence. When I decided to go to law school I made sure to apply to many different places.”

Joe was accepted to Harvard Law School, received a full scholarship from the Berkshire Hathaway fund, and quickly learned that his ability to speak German and English was a great asset. His bilingualism enabled him to work for the German Consulate and provide services to companies with a German presence.

Far from an enemy alien, Joe is instead a living reminder of why all of you support the mission of the Institute and believe in the promise of the United States.



Above: Joe Weissfeld emigrated from Germany in 1937. Today he serves on the Institute’s Board of Directors.

## Thanks to your support the 19th Annual Spring Carnival Ball raised over \$140,000 for the Institute's programs

The Carnival Ball confirmed its reputation as a celebration of Rhode Island's diverse communities

You danced, you laughed, you marched, and most of all, you helped raise over \$140,000 at the 19th Annual Spring Carnival Ball on April 9th at Rhodes-on-the-Pawtuxet. Proceeds help immigrants and refugees take one more step toward self-sufficiency.

Hosted for the third time by John Hazen White, Jr., President of Taco, Inc., the Ball was attended by over 900 people,

including the Institute's closest friends and many of its clients. Cambodia, India, Haiti, Mexico, and Liberia were among the many countries represented in person or as part of the opening flag procession and Buddhist blessing.

La Fuerza Brava of New York City provided the live dance music and Barbara Morse-Silva of NBC10 was the Master of Ceremonies. Big Nazo characters

and Tony Felix of Rolling Thunder Light and Sound energized the crowd. The night of international entertainment was rounded out by the Osmany Paredes Trio, who played Latin Jazz.

On this vibrant night of diverse food, sounds, and guests, we all found moments to share our common humanity.



Above: Judy Levros and daughter enjoy the Ball's international music. Photo courtesy of Lucas Foglia



Above: Katherine Keehan and friend show off their award-winning costumes.

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## Refugees + employers = a partnership of mutual gain

4th Annual May Breakfast honors R.I. employers for commitment to training and employing refugees



Above: Institute Minority Health Coordinator Baha Sadr serves food to RI employers with Joan Raphael and Phil Weinstein, RI Bar Foundation President and breakfast chef extraordinaire.

Employers take note: with careful training and patience, the world's refugees make loyal and extraordinarily productive employees. They are grateful for their safety and for their new lease on life.

On May 18, 2005, this message was delivered at the Institute's fourth annual May Breakfast. A statewide leader in worker training, Taco, Inc., was represented by Kyle Adamonis who spoke at the breakfast. Employers from Holiday Inn Express, Sunset Builders, Falvey Linen Supply and Bristol Harbor Inn were honored for their commitment to hiring refugees, providing on-the-job training, and working with Institute caseworkers to create advancement opportunities.

Adamonis set the tone for the event by reiterating Taco's commitment to worker training: "By investing in our employees, we acknowledge our role and responsibility in our community and we assume that we will have the skilled workers we need to remain an industry leader in the

high tech business environment of today and tomorrow."

This investment has been rewarded with a near 100% retention rate of its employees, resulting in reduced overhead for recruitment and orientation. Taco has set the standard for worker training with its onsite learning academies which provide English language, job, and life enrichment training opportunities for all of its employees.

As each of the honorees has discovered, investment in worker training and employment of refugees equals good business. After receiving recognition, employers listened to Burundian refugee Samy Ndisaba express his gratitude. Samy came to Providence in September 2004, ending 33 years as a refugee. Despite being separated from his pregnant wife to come to the U.S. with two daughters and despite having had to abandon his medical studies because of the Burundian Civil strife, Samy spoke optimistically of his family's future.

Thanks to special accom-

modations by Falvey Linen Supply, Samy has received much needed English language training and has begun studies to become a Certified Nursing Assistant. As he gains self-sufficiency, Samy will be able to apply for his wife's passage and pursue other education.

As Samy says, "With refugees, employers need to be patient. It's a new country, a new language, a new culture, but in the end, it's also a life without machine guns. We will always be grateful to our employers and will work extra hard to help them because we owe them our safety."

It's a simple formula: strong training and a commitment to our refugee workers leads to increased productivity, economic development for employers and employees, and perhaps a free breakfast at our expense.



Top: Samy Ndisaba stands with Refugee Resettlement Director Betty Johnson Simons.

Bottom: Mily Givens of Falvey Linen accepts award from Jessica Schweiger and Nik Peros for employing and accommodating training needs for 20 refugees including Samy Ndisaba.