

## **Immigration**

Our team immersion into immigration was a wonderful, enlightening experience! Not only did we learn so much about the topic, we all feel we made lasting friends through a common mission. Our team of 10 somehow represents a perfect blend of global perspective borne out of years living and working abroad with homegrown regional knowledge and work experience within the Richmond immigrant community.

Against the monthly LMR seminar backdrop of diversity, inclusion, history, etc., our group embarked on the immigration journey in November, pre-election. Given the volatile national dialogue and daily shift of policy that ensued, we opted early not to be distracted by the politics. Rather, we decided to build on the theme of a “nation of immigrants” and regional demographic trends through which to illuminate the stories of immigrants in our midst. Early interviews with Eric Lin (Virginia Asian Advisory Board), Michel Zajur (Hispanic Chamber), Tanya Gonzales (Sacred Heart) and Julie Bilodeau (CrossOver Ministries) ripened our interest in hearing more personal accounts of the impact policy and practice has on individual lives. Amar Bhattarai and Abu Abdelrehman from Catholic Charities made the resettlement process very real, a well-orchestrated process with specific allocations per region, quickly dispelling the misconception that vetting and becoming a refugee in this country is haphazardly handled with easy hand-outs and unearned social service benefits to the recipients. Additional exposure to the International Refugee Committee through attending films such as “Cries from Syria” and the monthly refugee dialogue sponsored by the IRC for 50+ providers or agencies working with refugees confirmed our commitment to compassionate understanding of the complexity of immigration.

Did we mention our perfect blend of talents? One of the team, Renae Townsend an ESL teacher in Goochland just happened to have a cousin who is a documentary film producer, and he had recently completed a film called “The American Dream” following the journey of four individuals who attempt to cross the southern border into the U.S. Would he be interested in a Richmond premier in March? With the generous support of LMR and University of Richmond, we sponsored the film showing and a panel discussion (expertly moderated by Martha Merritt) among our interviewees plus Imad Damaj from the Muslim Coalition that was attended by 180 folks. This was a pivotal highlight of our experience being able to educate, maybe help dispel some myths and add a very human dimension to the issue of immigration.

Our immersion does not stop here with the June LMR graduation. We are energized, seizing an idea planted by Eric Lin to explore the Nashville “My City” program model of leadership and civic

engagement for the newly arrived in Richmond. Our first meeting with a potential steering or exploratory committee made up of Jonathan Zur (Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities), Eric and Michel is May 31<sup>st</sup>. And as to the friendship part of our journey? We plan to meet monthly, dining ethnically throughout the region, expanding our cuisine and supporting the immigrant community while fostering our own friendships!

**Leadership Quest Class of 2017  
Immigration Immersion Team**

Jerry Baker  
Eva Colen  
Barbara Jacocks  
Renee Knight  
Alyssa McBride  
Martha Merritt  
Jan Nelson  
Brooke Purcell  
Linda Tisiere  
Renaë Townsend