

**Nominating Statement
2019 Schwartz Prize**

Submitted by Virginia Humanities

Immigration Stories

For the past 45 years, Virginia Humanities has worked to explore the complete story of Virginia, from the arrival of the first English colonists at Jamestown in 1607 to the present day. Native peoples were present in the place we now call Virginia for at least 15,000 years before the English arrived—and they are still here. Otherwise, the story of Virginia is one of immigration, migration, and seeking refuge.

Over the past several decades, literally and metaphorically, the face of Virginia has been changing rapidly. When Virginia Humanities—then Virginia Foundation for the Humanities—began its work in 1974, the most recent census figures showed that one in every 100 people then living in Virginia had been born outside the United States. Today, that figure is closer to one in eight.

The impact of these demographic shifts can be seen and felt in communities across the state—in rural areas, small towns, inner cities, and suburban neighborhoods from Northern Virginia to the North Carolina border, the Appalachian Mountains to the Eastern Shore and everywhere in-between.

They have reshaped, and continue to reshape, Virginia’s culture, education, politics, economy, and community life, challenging an older, simpler understanding of what it means to be a Virginian, and an American.

Today, whether our roots in the state go back ten thousand years, ten generations, or ten weeks, Virginians have little choice but to travel this new road together, creating the map as we go.

So how can the work of Virginia Humanities help *all* Virginians come to terms with a diverse future that in many ways has already arrived? This question was the genesis of a year-long project—“Immigration Stories”—that has placed relationships with immigrants and refugees and their communities at the heart of our work for the foreseeable future.

Background

Until just a few years ago, most of our program energy and resources at Virginia Humanities focused on the three cultural streams, each of them complex and diverse in their own right—Native, European, and African—that had defined Virginia and shaped its identity from the early 17th century until deep into the 20th. Within the interplay of these three cultures, the weight of the Virginia story seemed to rest; and for many years the histories of Commonwealth as we knew them *seemed* to support this view.

But it's also true that our work was never totally confined within this three-part story. A grant awarded almost 25 years ago supported a documentary film on the building of a Lao Buddhist temple near Manassas. Work with refugee communities in the 1990s led to a groundbreaking series of programs in the field of violence and survival. Early folklife apprenticeships in Mexican folkloric and Indian Kathak dance, along with many other programs—some of them grant-funded, others initiated by Council staff—stand as evidence that our commitment to exploring the cultural diversity of Virginia and the lives of immigrants and immigrant *communities* in the state has always been there.

In 21st century Virginia, the “weight of history” is now matched by the weight of the present and by the need to recognize and help Virginians—all Virginians—understand and come to terms with the complex identity of the state today. We share a past—a sometimes glorious, sometimes troubled history—that reaches into and affects the lives of *all* Virginians, even those who are newly arrived. We also share a future full of the diversity of cultures and cultural perspectives that have already come to define the experience of living in Virginia.

How can the humanities—and the work of Virginia Humanities in particular—create a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the lives of immigrants and refugees and the challenges they face? We believe that *part* of the answer to this question lies far beyond the policy debates that have frozen our political discourse into sharply divided camps. We believe the answer lies in human stories and the truth they convey.



Seyoum Berhe (Ethiopia) Photo by Pat Jarrett

Immigration Stories

Beginning in February and continuing through the summer of 2018, David Bearinger, Director of Grants and Community Programs, and Pat Jarrett, Digital Media Specialist at Virginia Humanities traveled the state, recording in-depth conversations with 34 immigrants and refugees from 29 countries—all of them now living in Virginia. The shortest of these conversations was 56 minutes; the longest well over two hours. They avoided the politics surrounding current immigration issues, concentrating on the human stories instead.

The men and women who agreed to share their immigration stories with us ranged in age from 19 to 81. They have come to Virginia from Central and South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the former Soviet Republics, Ireland, and Mexico. Some arrived with advanced degrees, already fluent in English; others with little or no formal education. Still others came as children with their migrant parents or as refugees fleeing political persecution, war, and genocide.



Nhi Le (Vietnam) Photo by Pat Jarrett

They are Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Jews, and Buddhists. One is devoting her life to practicing and preserving the ancient ceremonial traditions of her native Bolivia. Another is an internationally acclaimed artist from Mongolia. Two have served in the U.S Marine Corp. One is a current state delegate; another is the current Secretary of Education for Virginia. Another is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide; one is a graduate student, born in El Salvador, now pursuing a master's degree in plant pathology.

Three work in refugee resettlement. One teaches middle school Spanish in Arlington; another, the first Latina to chair a school board in Virginia, also created the first bilingual G.E.D. program in the state.

Others include a hairstylist from Korea, a rug merchant from Afghanistan, a professional photographer from Laos, a journalist from Iran. One is the co-founder of a major cultural festival in Northern Virginia, another has established a school for poor children near the village where he grew up in Ethiopia. A married couple from Mexico and

Guatemala met when they were working in the tomato fields on the Eastern Shore.

And the list goes on. See a complete list of interviewee sketches, below.

Most of the interviews were conducted in English, but one was in Spanish and another in Arabic, both later translated into English. There was no set list of questions—these were not formal oral histories—and our goal was to create an atmosphere in which these “new Virginians” could tell their own stories in their own ways. But the ‘arc’ of each interview was similar, exploring life before immigration (or migration); the experience of leaving, and arriving; challenges of language, work, education; separation and/or reunion with loved ones; finding community; the things that matter and how the experience of immigration has made each interviewee the person he or she is today; and finally, what it means to be an American, and a Virginian.

Many of these first-generation immigrants and refugees have children or grandchildren who were born in this country and whose lives and outlooks are sometimes very different from their own, and these differences were often part of the conversations too. Like generations of immigrants and refugees before them, the people we spoke with have all had to find their own balance between holding on and letting go of pieces of their past; to create for themselves a new identity in a new place; and to come to terms with new ways of understanding “home.”

Naturally, many of these conversations dealt with common themes like family, faith, identity, hope for the future. But each one was different from the others, just as no two “immigration stories” are ever the same. The result is a complex tapestry of first-person accounts that collectively *begin* to tell the story of immigration and refuge-seeking in Virginia today. Results have far exceeded anything we imagined when we began this project, and audiences already number well into the tens-of-thousands—see below. But much more remains to be done.

Partnerships and Early Impact

The first 32 Immigration Stories interviews (with 34 people including two married couples) were funded by American Evolution/2019 Commemoration, a state commission organized to observe the 400th anniversary of several events that took place in Virginia in the year 1619. These



included arrival of the first enslaved Africans at Old Point Comfort near present-day Hampton, Virginia; arrival of the first English women at Jamestown; the first meeting of the body that would become the House of Burgesses, later the Virginia General Assembly; and observance of the first English thanksgiving at Berkeley Plantation.

American Evolution's goal is to show how the events that occurred in Virginia in 1619 continue to influence America today. The Commemoration was organized around the themes of "Democracy, Diversity, and Opportunity," and the Commission engaged a group of institutional partners, including Virginia Humanities, to help tell this story. They sought to create and support "Legacy Projects" of national and international significance that would build awareness of Virginia's role in creation of the United States. "Immigration Stories" was designated as one of these.

As a (welcome) condition of their funding for this project, American Evolution stipulated that excerpts from the interviews were to be made available to the Library of Virginia (LoV) in Richmond, which was developing—also with Commemoration funding—a major exhibit on immigration in the Commonwealth, past and present, titled "New Virginians."

It was agreed that LoV and Virginia Humanities, who have partnered together many times in the past, would work collaboratively to produce this exhibit, which opened in December, 2018, filling the Library's lobby/entrance and main gallery. Together, the entrance and gallery make up one of the largest exhibition spaces in the City of Richmond.

The exhibit itself, which will remain on display until November of 2019, [includes portrait photos of all 34 interviewees](#); items on loan from the interviewees, including an Ethiopian coffee service, a Bolivian Charango (a guitar-like stringed instrument), a Mongolian Buddhist ceremonial mask from the *Tsam* tradition, copies of The Qu'ran, and a red-covered Bible that Jacques Mushagasha from the Democratic Republic of Congo carried with him through refugee camps in Zambia to his new home in Harrisonburg, Virginia; and more than 90 excerpts from the interviews, organized thematically and running on continuous video loops.

To date, the exhibit has been seen by more than 17,000 people, and a traveling version is currently circulating to public libraries and other sites statewide.

With additional funding from American Evolution/2019 Commemoration, Virginia Humanities also organized a gathering of the interviewees, their families, and other distinguished guests to celebrate the opening of the New Virginians exhibit. Twenty-nine of the 34 interviewees attended, along with members of the state legislature and the boards of Virginia Humanities, Library of Virginia, and American Evolution/2019 Commemoration. The event included a private tour (for interviewees and their families) of items in the Library's collections pertaining to the history of immigration in Virginia and a rare public display of Virginia's original copy of the Bill of Rights.



Approximately 200 people attended the opening program. Speakers included Kirkland Cox, Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates; Sandra Treadway, Librarian of Virginia; Atif Qarni, Virginia's Secretary of Education; and Seyoum Berhe, State Resettlement Coordinator and Director of the Office of Newcomer Services for the Commonwealth of Virginia, among others. On Christmas Day, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published an Op-Ed column about the project written by the Project Director, David Bearinger, titled "Voices of Immigrants and Refugees: Why We Should Listen."

The Project Director also organized a panel discussion featuring several Immigration Stories interviewees in conjunction with a statewide teachers' institute on Immigration History sponsored by the Library of Virginia, and a second, similar program for the annual TomTom Founders Festival in Charlottesville. He was also invited to speak about Immigration Stories at the 2018 annual Virginia Social Studies (Teachers' Conference; and he and colleague Elliot

Majercyck, Producer of the weekly radio series "With Good Reason", collaborated on a half-hour feature with audio excerpts from the interviews that was broadcast statewide in January, 2019 and has been carried by partner stations nationwide.

Looking Ahead

The Immigration Stories work continues. One private donor has awarded funds to support eighteen additional interviews beyond the initial group of thirty-two; and another has donated funds to support development of a permanent web presence for the project on the Virginia Humanities website. We are working now to raise additional funds, beyond those already awarded, to support new phases of the project in 2020 and beyond. Over the next several months, we will conduct new interviews with immigrants and refugees from Syria, Somalia, India, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan, among others.

Meanwhile, the website is scheduled to be finished by December, 2019. It will include the full interviews, selected excerpts, complete translations and transcriptions, portrait photos, extended biographies of the interviewees, background articles, curricula and other resources for teachers, maps, and additional materials designed to make this a widely used digital resource we will

promote especially but not exclusively to public school teachers in Virginia and beyond: one that will continue to expand over time. We will also continue to create partnerships both externally and within Virginia Humanities—radio, folklife, fellowships, etc.—to make these Immigration Stories more widely accessible

Virginia Humanities' newly adopted strategic plan is focusing our work around the themes of Equity and Democracy; Cultures in Transition; and Amplifying Virginia's Stories. The Immigration Stories work bears a strong relationship to each of these themes, and largely through the success of this project in its first phase, Virginia Humanities is becoming known as a center for important work on the immigrant and refugee experience statewide. Each new contact opens new doors that have already produced three grants and several forthcoming applications inviting us to support immigrant and refugee communities in the work of sharing their own stories and traditions.

Conclusions

The initial (2018) phase of the Immigration Stories project resulted in more than 50 hours of recorded interviews, and it would be hard to overstate the richness and variety of this resource. But if everything contained within these conversations with immigrants and refugees were to be reduced down to a single word, we think that word would probably be “gratitude.” Gratitude for the privilege of being in this country, and for the freedom, opportunity and relative safety it affords. And with that gratitude comes a desire to give back; to contribute; to be part of the “American experiment” and of the communities where these immigrants and refugees live and work. One way or another, this desire was expressed in every single conversation we had. It's the universal theme.

And this is one reason, perhaps the most important reason, why we believe this work is so important, and so timely now.

At a recent program (organized by American Evolution/2019 Commemoration) marking the anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans in Virginia 400 years ago, all those present were invited to think of themselves as “founders” of a nation growing into its true power. Because the American story isn't finished, and neither is Virginia's; they are works-in-progress, and each of us has a role to play in shaping the state—and the nation—we will become.

Listening to these Immigration Stories has given us at Virginia Humanities—and we can confidently say, many others too—a far deeper appreciation of what it means to be an American—and a Virginian. They are powerful in themselves; but these stories also have the power to awaken, or re-awaken in others gratitude for what this country is, has been, and may be. They can rekindle a new and deeper patriotism and desire to “give back.” It's also our experience that these newest Americans have so much to teach the rest of us—not just about the present, but also about [American history, as explained here by Seyoum Berhe](#).

Hearing these stories, it's easy to remember that none of what we have in this country is a “given.” They remind us that it's our task, and our privilege, to do what we can to create a stronger and more just nation. They can inspire us to want to be better citizens.

Interviewee Sketches

[Selections from the interviews and all photos found here](#)

Karla Almendarez-Ramos (Honduras). Trained in marketing and public relations (and classical piano), she came to the U.S. in 1996 to join her husband, a native of Puerto Rico, who was then serving in the U.S. Army. Today, she is Human Services Coordinator and Manager of the Office of Multi-Cultural Affairs for the City of Richmond.

Dareen Aloudeh & Ahmad sheikh Abdulsalam (Syria). Born in Damascus and Aleppo, they fled the war in Syria after their home and Ahmed's tailoring business were destroyed in 2012. They spent three years in Egypt before they and their four children were resettled in the U.S.

Seyoum Berhe (Ethiopia). Born in a small farming village on the Eritrean border, he came to the United States during a time of political unrest to attend college. Seyoum has worked in the field of refugee resettlement for the past 25 years and is currently the state Refugee Resettlement Coordinator with Virginia's Office of Newcomer Services.

Isabel Castillo (Mexico). Came to the United States as a child. She earned a Master's Degree in Conflict Transformation from Eastern Mennonite University and was awarded an honorary doctorate for her advocacy work on behalf of immigrants' rights.

Chandra Chhetri (Bhutan). Part of the ethnic Nepali community that was exiled from Bhutan beginning in the 1970s, he and his family fled to India and then to Nepal where they lived in refugee camps for nearly 20 years before being resettled in the U.S. He currently works in service to other refugees as School Liaison with Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Richmond.

Bol Gai Deng (Sudan). Kidnapped from his village at the age of seven, he was enslaved for four years, eventually escaped, and made his way to Egypt. Resettled in Richmond, he attended V.C.U. and was inspired by stories of the founding of the United States. He is currently running for President of South Sudan.

Julia Garcia (Bolivia). Teaches Spanish at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Arlington. Born near Cochabamba in the central highlands of Bolivia, Julia is a leader in the preservation of her native Quechua language and Bolivian folk traditions, especially dance.

Jose Francisco Garcia (El Salvador). Raised on his family's farm in El Salvador, he came to the U.S. to study agriculture. He is currently a graduate student in plant pathology at Virginia Tech's Eastern Shore Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Painter, Virginia.

Farideh Goldin (Iran). Grew up in a Jewish enclave in the city of Shiraz, in southwestern Iran. She came to the U.S. seeking independence and to study American literature. She is the author

of *Leaving Iran: Between Migration and Exile*; and *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*.

Elizabeth Guzman (Peru). Arrived in the U.S. as a single parent. Her first job was in a fast-food restaurant. She currently represents the 31st District (Prince William and Fauquier Counties) in Virginia's House of Delegates.

Mohammad Hassanzada (Afghanistan). Born into a merchant family in Kabul, he fled the Taliban as a teenager, spent several years in Pakistan, and then worked with his uncle as a carpet dealer in Dubai. He had rug shops on two Coalition/U.S. military bases in Afghanistan before resettling, first in L.A., then in Roanoke where today he is the owner of Tribal Rug Gallery.

Cecilia Hernandez-Pena (Mexico). Came to the U.S. to join her husband; she is now raising their children as a single parent on the Eastern Shore. Currently, Cecilia works as a cleaner in one of the Shore's poultry processing plants and serves on the board of *Dos Santos*, which provides a range of services, primarily to Latino families, on the Shore.

Xang Mimi Ho (Laos). The daughter of Thai and Vietnamese parents, she came to Northern Virginia as a child, for medical treatment; studied photography, and now works, teaches, and travels internationally as a professional photographer.

Kika Husejnovic (Bosnia). Trained as a physician in her native Sarajevo, she stayed behind to treat the wounded while the Bosnian war raged, eventually fleeing with her husband to join their children in Germany. For the past seventeen years she has worked as a refugee resettlement coordinator with the Richmond office of Church World Service.

Sally Imran (Iraq). Fled from Baghdad to Turkey with her mother and brothers following her father's disappearance in 2007. The family was re-settled in Harrisonburg, and Sally is currently a student at Blue Ridge Community College, working two full-time jobs. She plans to continue her education and to work in the field of Human Services.

Solomon Isekeije (Nigeria). Born in Legos, the son of a Nigerian police officer who loved Shakespeare. He studied art at Obefemi Awolowo University in the city of Ile-Ife and later at Old Dominion and Norfolk State Universities in Virginia. He is currently the Director of the Division of Fine Arts at Norfolk State.

Kyung Jun (South Korea). Came to the United States with her parents and siblings when she was twelve years old, to escape tensions and the persistent threat of war in Korea. The family owned several small businesses, working long hours. Kyung earned a degree in cosmetology; is a leader in the Korean community in Northern Virginia; and has owned her own hair salon in Alexandria for the past 25 years.

Patience Kamau (Kenya). Born in Nairobi, she grew up in a rural area in central Kenya, the daughter of two physicians from the Kikuyu tribe. She came to Harrisonburg to attend Eastern Mennonite University, received her undergraduate and graduate degrees from E.M.U., and is a

member of the staff at the University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. Her passion is the well-being of the Earth's wild animals.

Pryalal Karmarkar (Bangladesh). Came to the U.S. on a "lottery visa," joined the Marine Corps and earned a Master's Degree in Computer Engineering. He is co-founder of Prio Bangla, a major cultural arts festival in Northern Virginia.

Baraka Kasongo (Rwanda). Eight years old when the Rwandan genocide began, he fled with his family to Zaire, then Congo, Burundi, and finally Zambia. After six years in refugee camps, the family was resettled in Roanoke in 2013. Today, he is a lieutenant with the Roanoke City Fire Dept. and the founder of Volatia Language Network, which provides interpretation and translation services in 200 languages to clients nationwide.

Aliaa Khidr (Egypt). Trained in Egypt as a medical doctor, she has practiced and conducted research in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Virginia. She is currently retired from medical practice, teaches Arabic at the University of Virginia and is active in the local Islamic Center (Masjid) where she co-founded a series of programs introducing Islam and the Quran to the local community.

Nhi Le (Vietnam). Escaped with two of her three children by boat from Vietnam in 1981 while undergoing cancer treatment. The boat carrying her nephew and youngest daughter sank during the escape. The children were returned to Vietnam and the family was reunited seven years later. Nhi is the founder of a Vietnamese literary society and center for the preservation of Vietnamese culture in Northern Virginia.

Chris Little (Ireland). Grew up in the city of Limerick, in northwestern Ireland. He first came to the U.S. in 1983; returned as a student at the University of Scranton, studying Computer Science; and eventually moved to Virginia where he co-founded a successful software and human resource consulting company. Two of his nine siblings also live in Virginia.

Dr. Juan Montero (Philippines). Came to the U.S. to train in general and non-cardiac thoracic surgery, practicing for 35 years in Chesapeake and the Tidewater region. He has been honored for his leadership in health care, human service and philanthropy. He is the founder of the Chesapeake Care Free Clinic and Montero Medical Missions, which provides free medical services worldwide.

Jacques Mushagasha (Democratic Republic of Congo). A former teacher in Congo and Burundi, he became a war refugee in Zambia where he worked as a U.N. interpreter. He is a leader in the Congolese community in Harrisonburg and founder and current president of the Alliance for Good Government and Peace in Africa. He is also a founding member of the Christian Coalition for Justice and Peace in Congo.

Gankhuyag (Ganna) Natsag (Mongolia). Born in Ulaanbaatar into a family of traditional craftsmen, Ganna is world renowned as a master of the ancient Buddhist ritual known as *Tsam*, and as a maker of the masks that are central to this ritual practice. He is currently working with the blessing of the Dalai Lama to build a World Peace Pagoda in Mongolia and a second, smaller version in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

Rasheed Qambari (Kurdish Iraq). Fled to avoid capture and probable execution after serving as a translator for an agency with U.S. clients, following the Persian Gulf War. Rasheed owns a carpet-cleaning business and was the first Kurdish refugee to be resettled in Harrisonburg, where he and his wife and five children still live.

Atif Qarni (Pakistan). A former middle school teacher in Prince William County, he came to the U.S. with his family at the age of ten. He served as a Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, was deployed in Iraq, and taught U.S. History, Civics, and Mathematics before being appointed Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Pedro Sanchez and Loida Tema (Mexico; Guatemala). Began life in the U.S. as migrant laborers, working the produce fields in Virginia and Florida. Pedro now builds and repairs poultry shipping crates on the Eastern Shore, and Loida is raising their four children.

Zhiyi (Joycee) Wang (China). The daughter of a Chinese dissident, Zhiyi is a 2018 graduate of South Lakes High School in Fairfax and recipient of the Fairfax County 2018 Student Peace Award for her work in training others to advocate for human rights and democracy.

David Weir (Northern Ireland, U.K.). Grew up in Belfast where he studied art and worked as a bartender. He first came to the U.S. on a tourist visa, living for a year in Colorado Springs, and later returned permanently after living for extended periods in Montreal and Dubai. Dave and his wife and their two children currently live in Reston. He works as a baker in Washington, D.C.

Elena Zimmel (Tajikistan). Trained as a physicist (in spectrometry), she and her family sought and eventually received asylum in the U.S., living in Texarkana and Nashville before settling in Charlottesville. She currently works as an Administrative Assistant in the Dept. of East Asian Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Virginia.

Brief Program Description

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The men and women who agreed to share their immigration stories with us ranged in age from 19 to 81. They have come to Virginia from Central and South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the former Soviet Republics, Ireland, and Mexico. Some arrived with advanced degrees, already fluent in English; others with little or no formal education. Still others came as children with their migrant parents or as refugees fleeing political persecution, war, and genocide.

These interviews (with 34 people including two married couples) were funded by American Evolution/2019 Commemoration, a state commission organized to observe the 400th anniversary of several events that took place in Virginia in the year 1619. As one of the main events surrounding the 2019 Commemoration, Virginia Humanities and the Library of Virginia partnered to produce an exhibit of these interviews and stories, which opened in December, 2018, filling the Library's lobby/entrance and main gallery. These and forthcoming narratives will be a part of a digital project that we will be launching later this fall.

Virginia Humanities' newly adopted strategic plan is focusing our work around the themes of Equity and Democracy; Cultures in Transition; and Amplifying Virginia's Stories. The Immigration Stories work bears a strong relationship to each of these themes, and largely through the success of this project in its first phase, Virginia Humanities is becoming known as a center for important work on the immigrant and refugee experience statewide. Each new contact opens new doors that have already produced three grants and several forthcoming applications inviting us to support immigrant and refugee communities in the work of sharing their own stories and traditions.

Images of Participants

Can be found [here on Flickr](#)