

Caught in the Divide: In The Age of Trump, St. Louis Refugees See the Door Closing Behind Them

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November 20, 2019

Angerus "Angelo" Imaniriho made it to St. Louis just in time.

After living nearly all of the first twenty years of his life in Congolese refugee camps in the central African country of Rwanda, he had been admitted in 2016 to the United States with his mother, brother, sister and young niece. They arrived with little, but with the help of the International Institute of St. Louis, they have begun to build lives in their adopted country.

On a recent morning, Imaniriho is up early to take the bus from the family's three-bedroom apartment in Bevo Mill to St. Louis Community College-Forest Park, where he is studying to be a nurse. His mother, after working the second shift at a Moscow Mills cookie factory, makes porridge and tea with lots of honey and powdered milk for visitors while his now six-year-old niece sleepily gets ready for school.

"I like St. Louis," Imaniriho, now 23, says. "For me, it's a safe place. I think my life started over here."

But even as he and his family settle into their adopted country, they worry about the door closing behind them. The same year they arrived, Donald Trump was barnstorming across the country, goading crowds into chants of "Build the wall!" and painting refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants as terrorists, rapist and gang members.

Trump has since presided over a crackdown on the immigration system at large. Refugees have proven a particularly easy target, given that they don't have to be deported or caged in controversial camps on U.S. soil — they can

be blocked before they ever get here simply by denying visas or setting restrictions unattainably high.

Since taking office, Trump's administration has slashed the cap for refugees each year, driving it down to the lowest levels in four decades. The maximum for 2020 is even lower.

"President Donald Trump has made it almost impossible to get into the U.S., unlike before, where it could be hard and take the longest process, but possible," Imaniriho says.

It is something he pays attention to because he has dozens of friends and relatives, including his father and stepbrother, who still live in the camps and hope to someday move to the United States. Life in the camps is "miserable" and dangerous, Imaniriho says. He describes tents riddled with holes and the struggle to find food.

"Sometimes, they don't have enough," he says. "In the rain times, it's too hard."

They survived by banding together. Even now, he and his family in St. Louis send as much money as they can spare to aid those languishing on the other side of the world, money that would stay here if the recipients were allowed to come to the United States and start working.

"We believe in groups," he explains. "In a group, when you help somebody you do great, but when you are alone, you can only do a few things."

Anna Crosslin, president and CEO of the International Institute, prefers to take the long view of this moment in history.

It is a good time for that. Just this week, the institute turned 100 years old, which invites a certain amount of contextualizing. The nonprofit, now the largest resettlement center in the state with facilities in St. Louis and Springfield, was started on November 19, 1919 by a group of young St. Louis women led by philanthropist Ruth Holliday Watkins, who modeled it after

the original International Institute created eight years earlier by the YWCA in New York City. Those early founders sought to help women and children who had fled war and in Europe, and they operated in an era of particular hostility toward immigrants, Crosslin notes.

"The issue of the 'other' isn't new," she says. "It has gone on and on and on."

Over the years, the International Institute has grown into a hub of activity, not just for refugees but immigrants arriving from across the globe. In a former Catholic girls school in Tower Grove East that serves as the institute's headquarters, people stream in and out for language classes, help with the citizenship process and a variety of programs that assist new arrivals find work and set up small businesses. As a result, people from all corners of the world have settled in St. Louis. They celebrate every year with a huge party called the Festival of Nations, attracting 100,000 visitors to Tower Grove park for food and performances.

Crosslin has led the institute for 40 years. In that time, she has learned that attitudes toward newcomers from foreign lands are not so much a linear progression as a cycle. The fear and animosity rises and falls and rises again. When she was hired as the executive director in 1978, the Vietnam War had ended just three years before, and beleaguered Vietnamese were fleeing their country in ramshackle boats, chancing dangerous, pirate-infested waters of the South China Sea in hopes of escaping destroyed landscapes, extreme poverty and unresolved conflicts.

The majority of U.S. citizens polled on the subject were not eager for an influx of Vietnamese refugees. In Missouri, resettlement wasn't even an option. Under then-Governor Kit Bond, Missouri had become the only state in the nation to drop out of the federal refugee program, Crosslin notes in an article she penned for the Missouri Historical Society.

Truth be told, resettling refugees has almost always been contentious. A review by Pew Research of public polls during various humanitarian crises found the majority of Americans were at least initially opposed at the time. Two-thirds of the country wanted to keep out Germans and Austrians in the

late 1930s. In the 1950s, 55 percent opposed resettling Hungarians who had fled the Soviets. The idea of admitting thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians was similarly unpopular in the 1970s.

Over the years, that has left the fate of millions of desperate people in the hands of U.S. presidents tasked with balancing hostile public sentiment and U.S. resources with humanitarian need and this country's self image as a nation that welcomes the tired, the poor and the "huddled masses." Faced with the dilemma posed by the "Vietnamese boat people," then-President Jimmy Carter ultimately chose to double the numbers allowed into the United States to 14,000 people each month. It was wildly unpopular. A CBS/New York Times poll conducted in 1979, a month after he announced his decision, found 62 percent of Americans surveyed thought it was the wrong move, but Carter persisted.

"Let me remind you that the United States is a country of immigrants," Carter told a skeptical town hall audience in 1979 in Iowa. "We are a country of refugees."

Through the efforts of Crosslin and others, Missouri eventually reopened the state to refugees. The International Institute has resettled more than 4,000 Vietnamese refugees over the years. Today, there are third and fourth generations of those early arrivals living in St. Louis, so thoroughly integrated into the landscape that it is hard to remember the controversy of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

St. Louis has a similarly short memory for the angst caused by the arrival of Bosnian refugees in the 1990s and early 2000s. The International Institute and Catholic Charities resettled about 10,000 people who escaped genocide, and that number multiplied as Bosnians originally placed in other parts of the country made their way to the Midwest to join the community here. The numbers have since dwindled as families found their feet and dispersed to the suburbs and beyond, but an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Bosnians, including American-born children, filled south city at one point.

With the benefit of time, St. Louisans have come to see the influx as a boon to struggling neighborhoods, particularly Bevo Mill, and the city as a whole. The Bosnians built businesses, rehabbed houses and generally injected life and commerce into a city that had battled decades of declining population. But Crosslin remembers tense neighborhood meetings in the beginning and a flood of calls to the International Institute from native-born St. Louisans who complained about their new neighbors, everything from fast-driving Bosnian teens to backyard smokehouses. At their height, the gripes descended into urban legends of neighborhood pets barbecued on spits and alleyways running red with the blood of butchered dogs. The Bosnians and the International Institute weathered the bogus stories and venom in what has become a familiar pattern throughout this country's history.

"In the end," Crosslin says of the fear of refugees and immigrants, "it's all about concern that these newcomers are somehow going to destroy the idea of the American way of life."

If Jimmy Carter saw widespread hostility toward refugees and immigrants as something to overcome, Donald Trump has treated it as possibly his most powerful political weapon.

Along the campaign trail, Trump began performing dramatic readings of a poem called "The Snake" to illustrate the way he saw the issue.

The poem — bizarrely, it was written in the 1960s by a black social activist singer and had nothing to do with immigration — has been twisted by Trump into a warning on the dangers of allowing foreign-born people into the United States.

"I thought of it having to do with our borders and people coming in," he told a crowd in 2017 by way of an introduction. "And we know what we're going to have — we're going to have problems."

The story is about a woman who finds a snake freezing in the cold. She saves his life by bringing him into her home. Once revived, the snake turns on his host, viciously biting her. The stunned woman, now doomed to

death, cries out for an explanation. Trump always gets louder as he reaches the punchline, reading the part of the snake: "'Oh shut up, silly woman,' said the reptile with a grin. 'You knew damn well I was a snake before you took me in.'"

He will often shrug or hold his hands at his sides, palms up, at this point, as if the lesson is obvious and indisputable — the United States is the generous woman, and the refugees and immigrants are the dangerous, ungrateful snake.

That worldview has played out in long-running court battles to ban refugees from Muslim-majority countries, crackdowns on families crossing into the United States from Mexico in search of asylum, and a preference for the applications for entry of people from European countries. Recently, the state department has tried to justify the ever-shrinking cap on refugees by claiming it needs to divert resources toward a crisis along the southern border.

But the scarcity-of-resources argument seems like a diversion to Crosslin. All across the country, resettlement centers are finding themselves with excess capacity in the age of Trump. President Obama set the cap for the 2017 fiscal year at 110,000 refugees as he left office, but Trump slashed it to 50,000 during his first year in the White House, followed by 45,000 in 2018 and 30,000 in fiscal year 2019, the lowest total since Congress passed the United States Refugee Act of 1980, creating the country's modern refugee resettlement program. The Trump administration has dropped the ceiling ever further — to 18,000 refugees — for 2020.

In St. Louis, the effects have been drastic. The International Institute resettled more than 1,100 refugees in 2016 during Obama's last year in office. In 2018, that number was just 177. To keep up with the shift, the institute has reduced the staff dedicated to refugee resettlement to the equivalent of five full-time positions from more than 22 three years ago. Crosslin says they have cut the number of English classes and are considering other ways to reconfigure their offerings if the trend continues. But smaller providers with less variety in their services are starting to drop

away and others won't last much longer. The effect has been a rapid eroding of the infrastructure, both in the United States and abroad.

"The bottom line is this," Crosslin says at a conference for immigration researchers. "The purpose is they want to squeeze the immigration program."

In the apartment off of Gravois, Imaniriho tells of four families who were supposed to come in October to the United States — three to St. Louis and the fourth to Arizona. They had made it through the final steps of the process, paying for medical treatments and vaccinations and moving out of the camps, only to be told the United States was not ready to receive them. Now, they're in limbo, left with few options beyond renting temporary housing with money they don't have.

Trump didn't sign the presidential determination — the annual order that sets cap on refugees each fiscal year, ending in September — until November 1, which delayed any refugees who planned to move to the U.S. in October. Crosslin expects any refugees affected to be rescheduled for the coming months, provided that their security clearances don't expire during the delay.

But Imaniriho and his family don't know what to think. The delay puts an extra burden on those in the United States, who feel responsible to send money to their loved ones.

"Life in the camp is miserable, painful, and as a relative who experienced it, I cannot avoid helping," Imaniriho explains.

The longer their friends and relatives are stuck in limbo, the longer it keeps families on both sides of the ocean waiting. One of Imaniriho's neighbors, 53-year-old Peruth Kadari, came to the United States in 2016 after living in a camp in Uganda. She works and takes care of her four children, while also sending money back to Africa to help family there. She is grateful for the support of the United States and her new life here, but it is difficult.

She suffers from diabetes, which she says affects her physically and mentally, because of the added stress. She still has a daughter living in the camp, whom she thought would finally be able to join her a year ago. But after going through the majority of the years-long process, the daughter was ultimately sent back the camp, Kadari says.

"I send \$100 every month to sustain them," she says. "Considering the situation in the camp, the money I send to them is not enough. I am optimistic that she will be allowed to travel someday."

As she talks, she and Imaniriho's mother, 62-year-old Devote Murasira, peel giant white yams and sort pinto beans into a giant pot. Their families in the camps are dependent on them, and both women say everyone — their relatives and the United States — will be better off once those who are stuck in the camps are able to move here and start working. For now, Murasira sends \$500 a month (\$700 if it's a month she has to pay tuition) to sustain about 50 family members in Uganda and Rwanda. It's not just the money, but also worry over their health.

"Sometimes, I don't eat, because of their concerns coming to me, whenever they are troubled with hardship, hunger and poverty," she says.

They are frustrated with Trump, but they also know that he could unclog the pathways for refugees again — if he chooses.

"I'm pleading with President Donald Trump to enable the refugees to travel to the country of peace and employment," Murasira says. "This could help them work toward self-reliance and sustainability. They are suffering and living in harsh conditions."

Increasingly, Americans are on the side of people like Murasira. As Trump has choked the resettlement program, polls show more and more support for the refugees. In the latest Pew Research poll on the subject, released last week, 73 percent of those surveyed said taking in refugees who were fleeing war or violence was an important goal.

Imaniriho echoes the pleas of his mother and neighbors, and he adds a line that maybe Trump would appreciate.

"All of us," he says, "we do something to help this country be great."

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