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NOT JUST A GAME

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Borders offers
respite and
resources for
refugees**

BY ANNALIES WINNY





M. HOLDEN WARREN/FOR CITY PAPER

A GROUP PRACTICE SESSION FOR SOCCER WITHOUT BORDERS STUDENT ATHLETES AT VANGUARD COLLEGIATE MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Soccer Without Borders offers respite and resources for refugees

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ON THE TUESDAY AFTER President Trump's travel ban brought chaos to airports across the country, Coach Kat Sipes was doing her best to quiet a classroom full of rowdy adolescents at Vanguard Collegiate Middle School in East Baltimore. She silenced them with three swift claps, and introduced a new volunteer. "He needs to get used to being here every day, so let's make him feel welcome," she urged.

The sentiment carried extra weight that day, two days into the spring season of Soccer Without Borders (SWB), an after school sports program serving refugee, political asylee, and immigrant middle and high schoolers in Baltimore City. The students could have been forgiven for shirking the spirit of hospitality. Nevertheless, they obliged.

"Welcome!" the students shouted in unison.

Four of the seven Muslim-majority nations on Trump's ban list were represented in the room. The mother of one Iraqi student in SWB's high school program, a valid green card holder returning from her mother's funeral in Baghdad, had been detained and questioned for five hours that weekend. Ahmed and Mohammed, 12-year-old Syrian twin brothers on their second day of school as Baltimoreans, arrived just in time to avoid the mayhem. They'd spent four years in a Turkish refugee camp before coming here. Ali, their closest new friend and de facto translator, fled his native Sudan for Egypt a decade ago before relocating to Baltimore. Farah, a precocious Iraqi 12-year-old, likes to match her clothes and has an answer to every question. Aliyah, a Sudanese girl in a hijab, has impeccable manners and a knack for fractions. Spread about the room are student athletes from Nepal, Eritrea, Rwanda, Cameroon, Congo, Honduras, and Somalia.

City Paper has given pseudonyms to the SWB students in this story to protect their identities.



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SOCCER WITHOUT BORDERS STUDENT ATHLETES

SWB SESSIONS INCLUDE soccer, homework help, dinner, and a ride home. The program, now in its eighth year, generally avoids politics or other issues that might stir up traumatic memories. Instead, they focus on the present: Signs in the SWB classroom read “Safe Space,” “Try Everything,” and one core rule, “Speak English.”

SWB is staunchly apolitical but once Donald Trump’s presidency became a possibility, it wasn’t something the program could ignore. SWB coaches re-strategized during the election cycle, occasionally taking time out of the program to explain this new reality. The day after the Donald Trump won the election, the students “were terrified,” says Casey Thomas, the program’s director.

The Trump administration has brought with it a new tide of anxiety and confusion for refugees and immigrants in Baltimore. Some of these fears are tangible, like the uptick in violence against refugees and immigrants since the election, or the surge in ICE raids across the country. Others are more nebulous, anchored in uncertainty and sometimes misinformation about where foreign-born families fit into the blurry picture—all of this is compounded by language barriers. Even with valid green cards, some are apprehensive about leaving the country for fear they might not be let back in—after all, there’s a precedent for that now.

President Trump’s moves have Baltimore City, a self-proclaimed “welcoming city,”

scrambling to assist and reassure its foreign-born. But as the travel ban slogs through the courts amid a swell in immigration raids, President Trump has also pledged to cut the country’s refugee intake limit by more than half, from 110,000 to 50,000, upending a decades-old tradition of resettlement that starts with a stringent, opaque vetting system.

“How the U.S. makes these decisions [about who enters the country] is top secret,” Ruben Chandrasekar, executive director of International Rescue Committee (IRC) Maryland says.

But Chandrasekar’s sure of one thing: The United States has “the strongest security vetting system on the planet.” In a process that takes up to three years, refugees are questioned in multiple interviews, undergo biographical and biometric tests, and are screened by 12 security agencies including the FBI, CIA, and Department of Homeland Security before entering the country. Fewer than 1 percent of the world’s 20 million refugees are considered for resettlement. Trump has criticized the current system and called for a new brand of “extreme vetting.”

Baltimore is the state hub for refugees. Over the past 17 years, more than 10,000 refugees have been resettled in the Baltimore metropolitan area through the IRC and other agencies. Currently, Baltimore City absorbs around 500 refugees annually.

The first port of call for most refugees arriving in Maryland is the Baltimore Resettle-

ment Center in Highlandtown, before they find permanent homes throughout the state. SWB along with other programs like the Refugee Youth Project at Baltimore City Community College provide continued support for young newcomers. Often funded in part by federal grants and relying on a steady flow of new arrivals, resettlement agencies face an uncertain future; at organizations big and small, staff are looking into contingency plans for funding and polishing their resumes.

“It’s a wait and see at this point,” says Chandrasekar. “I do think that we will suffer.”

There have been some positives. In Baltimore and around the country, major refugee assistance organizations have seen a surge in contributions from everyday citizens while their federal funding remains at risk.

“One thing that we’ve been overwhelmed by is the outpouring of support from people in the area who want to get involved, financially or through volunteering. That’s something we haven’t really had in the past. That is one good thing that has come out of this,” says Kursten Pickup, program coordinator of the Refugee Youth Project at BCCC, which serves around 300 refugee children and young adults each year. Nearly 70 percent of its budget comes from a federal grant from Office of Refugee Resettlement.

WHILE TRUMP’S EXECUTIVE ORDERS have been swift and sweeping, they vary in plausibility, says Professor Maureen Sweeney, an immigra-

tion law specialist at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law.

Sweeney dismisses the Mexican border wall as a “symbolic gesture” and believes the travel ban is “very vulnerable. . . . It does not appear to be based on any evidence of any kind of heightened threat,” she says. “And because the whole series of statements made around it would make it very easy to conclude that it was in fact motivated by a desire to ban Muslims specifically.”

But what really concerns Sweeney is the interior enforcement order. “It essentially prioritizes removal for just about everybody. It takes what was fairly narrow removal priorities of the Obama administration and just blows them wide open,” she says, pointing out that the Obama administration deported more people than any President in history. “It goes from prioritizing people with serious criminal convictions to people with any type of criminal conviction. . . . The order also makes it the policy to deport everyone who is removable regardless of what their community ties might be and their family members, their contributions to the community. None of that is supposed to be taken into account [under Trump].”

Even as Trump’s shambolic executive order rollout comes under scrutiny, the impact of the rhetoric behind it has been felt, despite the opposing force of solidarity marches in Baltimore and elsewhere. Several Syrian refugee families, who’ve endured hellish conditions



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before landing in Baltimore, have found settling here so difficult that they've relocated to surrounding counties, often with the support of religious organizations.

Anecdotally, resettlement agencies working in Baltimore City report an uptick in hate crimes and bias incidents since the election—echoing a national trend reported by groups like Southern Poverty Law Center and the NYPD.

"Someone in our program is assaulted on a weekly basis," says Thomas, Soccer Without Borders' director. But these incidents are notoriously hard to document.

"We have been very aware of potential increases in hate crimes," says Catalina Rodriguez-Lima, who heads up the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs (MIMA). "But it's difficult to track."

So difficult that investigative journalism outlet ProPublica has launched a new site dedicated to filling in the considerable gaps in hate crime records, a chasm left by slack information sharing between jurisdictions around the country, and the FBI.

MIMA is taking steps to further educate immigrant and refugee communities on recognizing hate crimes, and how to report them.

In the wake of the election, MIMA issued a memo to foreign-born communities. "It is possible that you and your family members may be experiencing high levels of anxiety and fear," it read. It reassured them, in all caps: "DON'T PANIC," and offered up a list of

resources on how to report violence, consult legal services, and secure a green card.

They partnered with the police for an event at Patterson High School, where Commissioner Kevin Davis told attendees: "We're your Baltimore Police Department, and we don't care about your immigration status. We will not check your immigration status and we do not have a database to check your immigration status."

Central booking is another matter. Under Republican Gov. Larry Hogan, the state-run facility honors detainer requests from ICE.

But MIMA's founding *raison d'être*, which precedes the Trump administration, is hammering home the positive contributions of who they call "New Americans"—foreign-born individuals rebuilding their lives in America. If Trump's moves against immigrants and refugees are successful, they stand to disrupt the city's consorted efforts to re-populate the city, which have been squarely focused on promoting the contributions of newcomers, and encouraging more.

Thomas boasts a 100 percent high school graduation rate among the program's students. Overall, Baltimore's high school graduation rate hovers around 65-69 percent.

AT SWB, many students attribute their success to the program itself. "It helped me a lot with confidence," says Heman, a 21-year-old Nepalese refugee who's now a steady force for students in the program.

An alum and coach at Soccer Without Borders and senior at Loyola University Maryland, Heman was born in a Bhutanese refugee camp. His parents were fleeing ethnic cleansing of Nepalese in the Himalayan nation. At the refugee camp, his father operated a small business fixing watches and electronics, and his mother worked as a seamstress before the family was cleared to come to the States after "countless interviews."

Now his parents, and many Nepalese refugees he knows, work full time in apparel manufacturing. Heman has worked as an interpreter and mentor. He grows frustrated when people don't seize opportunities—including himself. "I have done better than some of my friends, but I could have done much more," he says.

Standing in goal during a recent SWB practice, chatty 13-year-old Serena, who came from embattled Eritrea four years ago, amid an often-deadly mass exodus that has drained 9 percent of the country's population in recent years. She says she was painfully shy before she joined SWB.

But she's changed fast. "I don't have to be shy meeting new people here," she says. And since joining SWB, "my grades are up" she says, convincing her father that the sports-based program is a good use of her time.

"It's easier here [at SWB], I don't know why. [Kids in school] know perfect English and sometimes they use big words so it's hard for me to keep asking them 'what's that mean,

what's that mean?'" Now, she has piles of books to give away because "I'd already read them all."

The SWB classroom is a classic picture of youthful chaos—boys and girls separate like oil and vinegar, but blend easily across cultures, taking turns playing music from their home countries on their phones. During homework time, a group of girls from Eritrea, Congo, and Syria compare notes on new vocabulary words. "Billionaire" comes easily—they've all heard of Donald Trump—but they stumble over "poverty" and "inequality." Sara, a Syrian girl who came to Baltimore via Jordan, about five months ago, consults her English-Arabic dictionary, and begins to nod her head.

Over a high-octane game of Uno later that afternoon, a gaggle of girlfriends—one Cameroonian, another Eritrean, and one Iraqi—are eager to have their say about the politics of their adopted home.

"Why can't children vote?" Serena ponders, indignant. "I'm 13, I'm smart enough to vote."

Between turns, Ayana, also Eritrean, writes "Stop Trump!" on a small white board, accompanied by a sad face, and waves it in the air.

"I want him out. Can you go to Washington and get him out?" another asks.

Who would they have voted for if they could? "Hillary!" they shout in unison.

Though, Farah adds, she would take another round of the Obamas if she could.